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Seductive
SADIST

VENGEFUL VILLAINS BOOK SIX

SEDUCTIVE SADIST

VENGEFUL VILLAINS: BOOK SIX

KRISTEN LUCIANI

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IMPORTANT NOTE TO READERS

This is a dark romance that contains very triggering situations such as graphic violence and gore, graphic murder, graphic language, dub con, kidnapping, and explicit sexual situations, including anal sex, meant for an 18+ audience.

PROLOGUE

ZAK

I dart back through the tunnel, headed toward the locker room. Flashbacks from last night pelt me like paint gun bullets as I tear down the corridor. With my one free hand, I fist my hair.

I can't think about that right now.

Kylian, my best friend, is always the first one out of the tunnel when we play at home. And tonight is homecoming. Coach Reeves pulled us aside yesterday after practice to let us know that scouts from Ohio State and Ole Miss would be here to watch us stomp the shit out of our rivals from Boca Raton.

I rub the back of my head, trying to shut out the image of Skyla's deflated expression when I mentioned the scouts to her last night.

Last night.

Fuck.

What the hell was I thinking?

Blurting the news was basically my dickhead way of pushing her out of my life and decimating any expectations she might have.

Because there's no future for me and my best friend's sister, no matter what I've made her believe over the past few months.

Her life is charmed, filled with promise.

My life is the exact opposite. Being raised as the second to youngest sibling in a Russian mafia family with a group of brothers and sisters who could single-handedly hold off most small armies makes me different than everyone around me.

Because I'm a target... for more enemies than I care to count.

Most people I know don't wear bull's-eyes on their backs. But mine's

like a homing device, flashing bright red for the biggest scumbags in South Florida.

And I'm destined to be hunted down by the same motherfuckers who killed Dad and Dima, and almost killed Luka, my oldest brother and the boss of our organization.

Unless I shine like a super fucking nova tonight for those scouts.

They're my ticket outta Miami, far away from this life.

Far away from Skyla.

And far away from all the shit that dragged me deep into the pits of hell last night when I should have been resting up for the big game. Shit that nobody can ever know about, especially my best friend.

I push open the black double doors. "Ky, what the hell are you still doing in here?"

Kylian slowly turns away from his locker. His shoulders square, his eyes glow with fury.

"What's wrong?"

He walks toward me, glaring at me with such disdain that I stumble backward into the wooden bench behind me. I don't like that look on his face.

"It's our night." I try again. "Why do you look so pissed off?"

"Are you fucking kidding me?" He bares his teeth, fists clenched at his sides. "You really have to ask?"

A chill slips down my spine.

He gives me a hard shove, catching me off guard. "I know exactly what happened last night." His voice is tight with anger. "You fucking cocksucker."

Shiiiiit.

"You think you can have everything, don't you? Free ride to college, NFL glory, every fucking pussy on the planet screaming for your cock." He shoves me again.

"What the fuck?" I shove him back with a grunt, my pulse exploding against my neck. How the hell did he find out? "Kickoff is in three minutes. We need to get the hell into the tunnel. We'll talk later."

"No more talking." He creeps closer to me. "You don't scare me. Neither does your fucking thug-ass family. You don't get to just take what you want because of your last name." He shakes his head and lets out a sharp laugh. "Always so fucking entitled because people kiss your ass wherever you go."

But Skyla's different. She's better than you. You don't deserve her."

"That's none of your goddamn business." I grit my teeth, gripping my own helmet tight. But I let out the breath I'd been holding. He knows... about Skyla.

And he's right. She is better than me.

That's why last night never should have happened.

Skyla and I both have goals.

Hers is becoming a surgeon.

Mine is making it to twenty-five without a hole blown through my skull because of shit my family has done. Things I've done. Things that haunt me like persistent little fucker demons who make sure I never forget they're there, lurking in the dark corners of my mind. Little voices that remind me of my past, always looping through my mind.

I need to get the hell away from this place or else I'll end up just like the rest of my brothers. Last night locked my future in place, and football is the only thing that'll break me free.

"You would ruin her. I know who and what you are, Zak. I know what you do. And I'm telling you right now to stay the hell away from my sister. I might not have guns or knives or fucking rocket launchers or whatever the hell else your family keeps stocked in their underground arsenal. But I have the power to crush you... when you least expect it."

"You're nothing without me." A rush of anger floods my insides. "Before I came around, you had nobody. I gave you a life, fuckhead. I put you on the goddamn map. I worked your ass off on the field to make you the player you are. I'm the reason why the scouts are looking for you to be their newest rookie left tackle. Don't you forget it, Ky. I made you."

My blood boils, my insides on the verge of combusting.

"You're an arrogant son of a bitch who doesn't give a damn about anyone but yourself."

I suck in a breath. "Nice to finally know what my best friend really thinks of me."

"Best friend, my ass. Your ego is choking me to death right now." His eyes narrow. "Maybe someone needs to *prick* it."

He pushes past me and shoves the double doors open so hard, they slam on either side of the wall. Without a look back, he stalks in the direction of the tunnel.

I scrub a hand down the front of my face.

He wouldn't get this angry if we were just talking about Skylia.

The next few minutes fly by in a blur. I run toward the tunnel and take my spot up front. Kylian usually runs out next to me.

Tonight, he's at the back of the line, his eyes dark with hatred.

I stick my helmet on my head and lead the charge onto the green turf field. A surge of electricity usually surges through me at this point before a game—a mix of excitement, anticipation, and an insatiable thirst for glory.

But tonight, the audience's screams are muffled by Ky's caustic words. My own knee-jerk response echoes between my ears. Those words were like the sharpest weapons. I can't ever pull them back. I didn't even mean them. They flew out before I could suck them back in.

The damage has been done. So much more than anyone knows.

And judging by the hatred twisting Ky's expression, I don't think it can be fixed.

I violated the code. Crossed a line.

Worse, I broke his trust.

I go to the center of the field with the opposing team's quarterback, my mind in overdrive. I stare at the coin as the referee flips it into the air. When it lands on the back of his hand, he looks at me and points.

Home team ball.

I stand there, staring at him until Coach Reeves gives me a shove.

"Let's go, Zak. It's all you tonight. Do what I know you can do." He slaps me on the shoulder pad and looks at me. "It's all waiting for you. All you gotta do is take it."

We kick off the ball. It goes deep into the end zone. One of the receivers runs the ball out like an asshole and is tackled at the five-yard line. I lead the offensive line to the field and get into position to call the play.

The ball comes flying at me. On the first play, the running back is stuffed behind the line and we lose two yards. My jaw tightens and I bite down hard on my mouth guard.

"Did you really think you were gonna get away with it?"

I push the ominous voice to the back of my mind and call the second play. Fucking guy gets stuffed again and we lose another two yards.

Third down and thirteen yards to go.

A bloody and bruised face flashes in front of my eyes. I blink fast to clear my vision, but the toxic memories assault my brain.

"You picked the wrong people to fuck over."

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch Coach Reeves screaming from the sidelines. I can't hear him, but his face and the tips of his ears are bright red.

If looks could kill... fuck. We'd all be screwed.

I take a deep breath.

"You know what we do to scumbags like you? Scumbags who are stupid enough to think they can beat us?"

I call a shotgun pass in the end zone, my voice loud and strong. But it's not enough to drown out the other voices in my head.

The ball is snapped. My head jerks right, fingers digging into the ball. Nobody is open. All of my receivers are covered.

I twist left, and the one thing I see before the defensive tackle blasts me is Kylian's face.

My best friend.

The guy who's supposed to have my blind side.

The same guy who just let the defensive tackle pummel me to the ground.

"You made your bed."

A rush of breath explodes from my lungs as he drives his chest into me. My body flies sideways, airborne before I crash headfirst into the turf. Sounds fade to white noise around me. Bright lights blur into blobs of color, flashing in front of my eyes. I stare up at the dusky night sky, into the panicked faces of my teammates, seeing their lips move but not hearing a damn thing.

"Now you're gonna die in it."

CHAPTER I

SKYLA

TEN MONTHS LATER

“Cheers, bitches. Tonight is our last night together before we go back to school. Let’s make it count!”

Tequila splashes over the rim of my shot glass when Riley clinks my glass a little bit too hard. I force my lips to form a tight smile before glancing down at the top of my dress. A big wet blotch sits right on top of my boobs.

“Sorry about that, Sky. I guess I got a little overeager.” Riley flashes me the fakest smile. My fist itches to crack her in the jaw.

She is seriously such an asshole. I don’t know why my sister Laney picked her, of all people, to be friends with.

Laney puts her hands on my shoulders and turns me toward her. With a critical eye, she checks out the damage. “Luckily, we didn’t go for the Jägermeister shots. Tequila is clear. It’ll dry in no time.” With a bright smile, she gives my arms a squeeze. “You’re still gorgeous. And if anything, it’ll draw the guys’ eyes to your fabulous boobs.”

She always looks for the silver lining. It’s one of the many reasons why she’s so amazing.

My sister is the exact opposite of Riley. She always has sweet, encouraging words, a warm smile, and the kind of electric aura that pulls guys like a magnet to steel. Not to mention that she’s stunningly beautiful and smart as a whip.

Laney is perfect.

And it’s been hard as hell growing up in her shadow. But all of that is about to change. I’m finally ready to start a brand-new life where I’m the only St. James around. There won’t be anyone to compare me to. I’ll be on my own for the first time in my life with nobody measuring me against my sparkling sister.

Laney is a year older than me, but even after she left for college, her reputation remained. Teachers loved her, students worshipped her. She was president of the student council, an honor student, and an all-star cheerleader. Needless to say, I’ve been pretty much invisible to everyone in her wake.

Except for that one night months ago when I thought things were about to change for me... where everything I’d been wishing for was on the brink of

becoming my reality.

But just as quickly as the hope flared in my heart, it fizzled faster than an open can of soda.

My lips twist when the image of his sexy, cocky smirk flickers in front of my eyes.

The bastard completely fucked me. I'd been secretly in love with him for years, and he used it against me.

And Zak Malikov still has me on a leash, to this day, because I know all too well what he'll do if I say a word about what happened.

He doesn't know that I went to the hospital after he'd been taken off the football field during the homecoming game. He has no clue that I pretended to be one of his sisters just so I could get through the emergency room doors to see him.

Karma totally came back to bite him in the ass the next night, though.

My gut clenches. I'll never forget the expression on his face when I peeked into his room. It was defeat—painful and agonizing defeat, something completely foreign to the most popular guy in the senior class.

And dammit, I hated myself for caring after what he did to me.

I grit my teeth. For years, he treated me like I was invisible, like he couldn't even be bothered with acknowledging me. It made sense. I was nothing like the girls he usually dated. I was the quiet, studious, messy bun type who preferred to do *The New York Times* crossword puzzle and practice my suturing on grape skins than go to parties on Saturday nights. I always got a pity invite because of my twin brother, Kylian.

But I never fit and Zak knew it. He played on that knowledge to get what he wanted.

I've always been the square peg searching for the right hole. Here's hoping I'll find it in a few short weeks when I start school at Brown University.

I pull my eyes away from my dress, daring to scout the darkened bar as the memory of Zak Malikov snakes through my mind. I wrap my fingers tight around my shot glass, my pulse picking up speed in anticipation of what my gaze might find. Blood bubbles in my veins at the thought of seeing him and clawing his eyes out of his gorgeous skull.

"You looking for something, Sky?" Riley asks.

I snap my gaze back to the group. "No." Definitely, most certainly, absolutely *no*.

“Don’t be intimidated,” she continues in her bitchy tone. “I know you’re not used to being out in this kind of place.”

I narrow my eyes at her. Laney is laughing with one of the other girls we’re standing with so she doesn’t hear Riley goading me. Not that I need anyone jumping to my defense. I’m more than capable of handling myself. And even though I am a little intimidated, there’s no way I’d ever give Riley the satisfaction of knowing it.

“Do you see any guys you like? I mean, we’d never be scoping out the same type, of course, but I’m just curious to see who gets your panties in a twist.” She sidles closer and drops her voice. “I mean, you do like guys, right? I never could tell for sure. I’ve definitely never seen you with one.”

If I squeeze my glass any harder, it will shatter in my hand. I only wish it were Riley’s neck.

I cock my head to the side. “It’s funny you ask me that because I’ve always thought you look like the type who’d be right at home with her face buried between a girl’s legs.”

Riley’s eyes widen the slightest bit and her fake smile is back in force. “If they’re properly shaved, why not? I’m game. Although, I’m not really there for the *natural* look. That’s more your thing, isn’t it? No makeup, hair always up in a bun, grungy clothes. You probably don’t care too much about trivial things like waxing.”

I didn’t think I could hate this bitch any more than I did before we rolled in here tonight.

“Get your hands off me!”

I whirl around at the sound of Laney’s angry voice. It’s not one I hear often.

Tyson Van Dyne leers at her, his hazel eyes glassy. I want to smack that lecherous smirk right off his chiseled face. It’s not fair that such a pompous douchebag should be blessed with the looks of a Greek god.

“Screw off, Tyson,” I growl, giving him a shove backward. He moves his menacing gaze to me, his lips curling into a nasty smirk.

“This has nothing to do with you, Myla. This is about me and Laney.”

“My name is *Skyla*,” I seethe, moving between him and my sister. His dipshit friends surround us, a sea of dumbass trust fund kids with not a single functioning brain cell between them. “And she told you to piss off.”

His eyes flash. “You’re mine, Laney. Everyone knows it. When are you gonna stop fighting it?”

Laney flips him off. “I’m not a fucking prize cow. I don’t care what you think you were promised, but it is never, ever happening.”

Tyson lets out a chuckle. “Never say never, sweetheart. I always win and you know it.” He reaches around her back and pulls her close to his chest. “This is far from over. I’ll get what I want or nobody will.”

With all of my might, I slam my fist down on his arm, but he’s too wasted to even blink an eye. Then the king of the idiots turns and walks away, his court following close behind.

I pull Laney away from our group. “What the hell was he talking about?” I ask my sister, whose expression has gone from relaxed and carefree to pinched with panic.

She shakes her head, long blonde curls catching the light and glowing like a halo around her face. “It’s nothing. You know he’s always talking out of his ass.”

That’s true enough. Our fathers have been in business together for too many years to count and as he’s gotten hotter and hotter, his demeanor has become insanely toxic to the point where breathing in the same air might actually be lethal to people around him.

“Then why do you look so rattled?”

Laney waves her hand. “I was just surprised to see him here. I figured he’d have gone back to Princeton by now.”

I let out a snort of laughter. “Princeton, what a joke. I think Daddy Van Dyne must’ve had to buy half the campus for him to get admitted.”

Laney giggles and loops her arm through mine. “Come on. It’s our last night. Let’s not waste time or breath on that jackass.”

“Okay. I’m going to run to the ladies’ room real quick to check out my mess of a dress.”

“It’s already dry.” Laney winks at me. “But fine, don’t take my word for it.”

I watch her walk back to the group. A deep sigh slips from my lips. She is definitely hiding something about Tyson. Laney never gets angry, and she definitely doesn’t flip people off, especially the son of her father’s longtime business partner.

I walk through the crowded dance floor toward the ladies’ lounge. The hairs on my arms prickle. If that jerk did anything to her—

My back wrenches as my foot slides out from under me. Arms flailing, I desperately try to avoid face-planting into the giant puddle of what I’m

hoping is only booze on the floor. I do what feels like a full three-sixty before I collapse into a strong set of arms.

I choke back a gasp when I finally look up and see the face I spent way too many months pining for... followed by a boatload of months where I wished him dead.

“I should have let you fall so you know how it feels to hit rock bottom.” His deep blue eyes glitter with disdain, but his arms are still snaked around my waist, tight enough where my face is practically pressed against his thick, muscled chest. His familiar cologne invades my nostrils, and even though I try like hell to resist dragging his sultry scent into my lungs, he manages to consume me.

Just like he always did.

I push away from him, but his grip is too firm.

“Like I don’t know already?” I smack him hard across the face. “Or maybe you don’t remember what you did to me?”

His jaw tightens and he grabs both of my wrists and flips me around so my back is against a wall. He leans into me. A rush of breath catches in my throat before my shocked yelp hits the air.

“You knew exactly what you were getting into. I never made you any promises.”

My jaw drops. “But you sure as hell made sure you got what you wanted.”

“I wasn’t the only one who ‘wanted.’ Let’s not bullshit one another.”

I can’t argue. I’d fantasized about my brother’s best friend from the second he walked into our home years ago. Not that he ever noticed me. Until one day something changed between us. Or so I thought. But it wasn’t real. His feelings weren’t real. How could they be? I could never be his type.

Unfortunately, my feelings were very freaking real, and my heart was very much broken when he turned his back and walked out on me.

“Get the hell away from me. I never want to see you again, you sadistic cocksucker.”

“If memory serves, it wasn’t me sucking cock that night.”

My own rage casts a shadow over his rage. He digs his fingertips deep into my wrists, making me wince.

And fuck me if heat doesn’t pool between my thighs as his hard cock presses against my stomach.

My knees wobble as they always did when he flew into my airspace.

With a brutal war waging between my body and my mind, I am caught in the middle, dangling over the edge of sanity as all the filthy, dirty things he did that night come back to pummel me like paintball pellets.

I hate him. Hate him!

But oh my God, I want him. So badly!

The corners of his lips lift into a sinister smile. “You can run to Rhode Island for school, but you’ll never escape.”

“Fuck you.” My voice quivers, heart thrashing in my chest.

“Nothing can change what you did. What we did. I own you, Skylia.”

Then he lets go of me and takes a step backward, malice glimmering in his gaze as it drinks me in. The eye raping leaves me aching and sore, it was so vicious.

He is pure evil.

“You deserve what you got.” I spit out the words, my lungs quaking. Shivers assault my body under his murderous stare.

But he doesn’t say a word. He just turns and walks away.

My jaw drags on the floor, my mind unable to comprehend what just happened. I’d pushed what happened to the dark corners of my mind, hoping that the threat would just disappear.

Except he’s very much alive and well.

“Sky.” Laney runs over, her high heels clunking on the shiny lacquered dance floor. My throat clenches at the alarmed expression on her face.

Please tell me she didn’t see that...

She jerks her head left and right, grabs me by the hand, and pulls me along behind her. “We have to leave. Now.”

“What’s wrong?” I ask, out of breath from our sudden sprint to the exit. I tug on her hand to get her to slow down.

Laney turns to me and my breath hitches. “Riley is waiting outside with the car.” Her eyes brim with panic. I hug her shivering body against me. But she doesn’t answer my question.

“Tell me what’s going on. Was Tyson bothering you again? We can go to security. They’ll kick his ass out.”

Laney just shakes her head, her big eyes wet with tears. “I just need to go. Please. Don’t ask any more questions, okay? We need to get away from here.”

She clasps my hand and drags me out the back door and we climb into Riley’s Mercedes. “Maybe I should drive. I only had that one shot, and Riley

—”

Riley peels out of the parking lot. “Oh, calm the fuck down. I’m fine.”

I grab my seat belt and clip myself into the back seat, a silent prayer to get home safely looping through my mind.

She pulls onto the main road. The car lurches forward. I grip the edge of the seat, my pulse punching a hole in my throat.

Riley rambles about some guy whose number she got just as a blinding white light flashes in my periphery. I choke on a stilted breath and grasp the side of the door. Her words are drowned out by blaring horns and the sickening crush of metal against metal.

The oncoming car plows into the passenger side door, shoving us into the center of the road. My body jerks at the impact, head slamming against the side window. Screams fill the car, the sounds muffled by shattering glass. Sharp shards fly at me, slicing at my skin. My vision blurs, breaths get shallow.

One final thought echoes between my ears before I fall forward into a pit of blackness.

God didn’t listen.

My prayers didn’t work.

Maybe karma is coming back to bite *me* in the ass.

CHAPTER 2

ZAK

PRESENT DAY

A sharp pang assaults my chest. I walk down the hallway, picking up speed. Gunshots explode, petrified screams echo in the massive front hall. Wedding guests dive to the floor, the polished marble tile now streaked with blood of the people who couldn't get out of the line of fire fast enough.

Just like Dad and Dima.

I tug at the collar of my black dress shirt, the fabric choking me harder and harder as the seconds pass. The top button is open because I'm so claustrophobic that I can't have anything too close to my throat, but still it chokes me, just like the memories of that day.

Val's almost wedding.

Of course my jackass clients had to pick The Surf Club for this meeting tonight. Like I need more stress right now.

A low din of voices is like white noise between my ears. I walk toward the dining room, my mind plagued with what-ifs. It's been a few years since Val disappeared from here on the day of her wedding and even though she's made contact with me a few times since, we both know she can never come back for good.

She made that choice when she agreed to marry Dmitri Stepanov.

Since my dad was really good at keeping secrets, none of us knew just how much of a snake Stepanov was and why the fuck Dad was handing Val over on a silver platter.

I could have stopped it all, but by the time I connected all the dots, it was too late. She was gone.

Now Mom is gone, too. And for all we know, the future of our family rests in a safety deposit box somewhere in the Bahamas.

I stand outside the dining room for a second, my hand on the brass door handle.

What I did to connect the dots around Val's mysterious disappearance... fuck. I'm convinced it's why my life crumbled to ashes around me. Except there's no phoenix in this story.

Just me in the center of my own personal hell with a bum leg and a hell of a lot of rage.

In the few years since Val left, my family has been chasing enemies down to figure out where she went and why. Turns out it was way bigger than Stepanov. And the list of enemies just keeps getting longer and longer.

Seems like someone is always out to get us, and when we snuff out one threat, there are five more in its place, thirsty for revenge and ready to attack.

So instead of living out my life as a rich as sin pro football player, I've become an expert in gun trafficking, money laundering, and killing anyone who tries to fuck with my family.

All because of the decisions I made that one night.

One night that changed the entire trajectory of my fucking life.

“Can I help you, sir?”

I twist around to see a tall, lanky waiter lift an eyebrow at me. “You were staring so hard at that door, I was pretty sure you were trying to open it with your mind.”

“Looks like The Force isn't working for me tonight.” I yank it open with a grimace. Hesitating even for a second can get you killed. And the guys waiting for me in the dining room are like vultures circling, waiting for their prey to appear so they can sink their teeth into it.

They stand up when they see me approach. After some glad-handing, we sit.

“Zak, we're really happy you were able to meet us tonight.” One of the men, Igor Resnick, sits back in his chair and lifts a glass full of clear liquid to his lips. He takes a long gulp and hails over the waiter who places a glass in front of me.

I wait for him to continue. I may not be the boss of my family, but as my brother Luka's representative, I command respect, even at the age of twenty-two.

“We're very interested in building out one of the properties we've just bought on Pine Island.” Another guy jumps in and Igor holds his hand out in front of him. “And we want to have ZIM Construction handle the job.”

“I apologize for my brother Vasily's eagerness,” Igor says with a trace of an accent. “He needs to learn control.”

“Maybe you need to be more aggressive,” Vasily mutters and takes a sip of his own vodka.

“Do you have thoughts about what you'd like to do with the land?”

“We want to build a hotel. And we plan to have some visitors from time to time during the construction process. People who will pick up various

materials and deliver them to our clients throughout the southeast.” Igor leans forward and drops his voice. “We have sources who tell us your ability to provide those materials is unsurpassed.”

“They’d be right.” I sit back in my chair and steeple my fingers. “But our prices are higher than any other construction company. We do the best work, but it comes at a high cost. Are you prepared to pay?”

“There is no price too high for quality.” Igor’s lips lift into a conspiratorial smirk.

Vasily squirms in his chair. I can practically see the drool slipping out of his lips.

These guys came to me because they want to make fast cash peddling weapons from the specialized gun parts our family can source. After my football career dried up like a woman’s vagina after seeing Jim Belushi naked, I graduated high school and dove into construction. I’d always been handy and it seemed like a good place to start my own business. The Malikov Bratva is already known for weapons trafficking, and with my growing construction network, we figured out how to use the building sites as weapons storage for sales with buyers.

With my older brother Nik running his own car restoration business selling weapons hidden in restored cars, construction seemed like a good way to branch out.

Having ZIM Construction build out their land is like having their own personal gun trafficker on retainer.

Vasily and Igor talk a little more about their “plans” for the hotel, and then the conversation turns in another direction.

“My son just got a football scholarship to Perdue,” Vasily says. He looks at me. “You know, he still talks about the great Zak Malikov. Shame what happened during your last season.” He shakes his head and drains the rest of the vodka from his glass.

I fist the white linen tablecloth in my fingers. “Yeah, it was a tough break.” The words get caught in my throat like ragged popcorn kernels.

“It must have been devastating to have your career end so quickly. I never knew something as small as an ankle break could end a football career.” Vasily waves the waiter over again.

“It wasn’t a small thing. I broke it in multiple places and shattered my fibula.” I clench my teeth to keep my lips from baring them like a wild animal ready to pounce.

“Oh, right. I think I remember reading that.”

Sweat beads pop up along the back of my neck. I shove the chair back and stand up like someone just shoved a rod up my ass. “I have another meeting. Get in touch when you’re ready to start the construction process and we’ll arrange for the first payment.”

I’m gonna soak these fuckers, just for being assholes and dredging up my past. And they can’t question my terms because nobody else can get them the goods I can. It’s why my family controls the distribution of weapons in the southeast.

I don’t give them a chance to say a word. I just stalk away from the table and shove open the dining room doors. Raking a hand through my hair, I walk toward the revolving glass doors in the foyer. The air is thick and toxic, and every breath I drag in makes tiny cuts into my lungs, slashing the hell out of them. I stop and lean against a wall, fisting both sides of my hair.

That motherfucker Kylian ruined my life.

I saw that look on his face while I lay on the field. I saw the victory in his eyes just before I passed out from the hit to the head. Kylian left a clear path for the right tackle to pummel me into the ground. He had no plans to protect me. And then he stole my scholarship right out from under my nose.

He got his revenge.

But I lost everything.

Anger I’d kept buried for almost four years bubbles just under my skin, ready to spew like hot lava at anyone who dares to get close enough to have their ass incinerated.

I let go of my hair and straighten up, a deep sigh leaving my chest hollow. Goddammit. After all this time, I still can’t let it go.

Can’t let *her* go.

“Skyla follows you around like a puppy dog. Figure out a way to use that. You need her help to do this job.”

Val’s voice echoes in my ears. The hairs on the back of my neck prickle under the cool rush of air that blows on top of me. Even she didn’t know we were together. Nobody did. And expectation and obligation fucked it all up.

“She’d do anything for you. Just get her to—”

“What the hell are you doing here?”

My head snaps in the direction of the voice.

Her voice.

“What the hell are you doing here? I sure as hell know you’re not on the

guest list.” Shock settles into her gorgeous face. “Are you here to threaten me again? To show me what I have to lose if I don’t keep my mouth shut about what happened?”

Skyla’s eyes narrow, full of hatred. It’s been three years since the last time I saw her at that night club in Miami, and time has turned the gorgeous book nerd with the messy bun and glasses into a sex goddess.

She crosses her arms over her chest in a tight black cocktail dress that hugs every inch of her body... the body I’ve fantasized about for years. My cock jerks, remembering as clearly as I do how incredible it felt to have her flushed skin pressed against mine.

She didn’t deserve what I did to her.

But I made my choice.

My fingers twitch, aching to tug at her long blonde hair. I remember the sweet taste of her skin under my tongue, the way her hips bucked against me when my lips teased the sensitive area behind her ear.

I should have stopped right then, before the damage was done.

I didn’t.

I couldn’t.

Lust grabbed hold of my sanity and my bed was made.

Losing her haunted me as much as the loss of my career.

I ball my hands into tight fists. My career... my life... got sucked into the toilet because of her brother, my former best friend. All that pent-up rage simmers in my veins as I stare at Skyla, suddenly unable to separate her from everything that went so wrong in my life.

I did a fucking stupid thing, and karma has had me paying the price ever since.

“Don’t worry. I’m not here to crash your party.” My mind tries to work out what kind of party she’s hosting here, tonight of all nights when I just happen to be in the same place. Like I really need karma biting me in the ass right now. “And anyway, last time I saw you, you told me you never wanted to see me again. So why the fuck are you even talking to me right now?”

“Because I want you to know what a worthless piece of shit you are,” she seethes. “I don’t want to miss the chance to have you hear those words again, just in case you’ve forgotten them because I haven’t.”

Stupid, stupid, fucking stupid.

I catch a glimpse of a tall guy walking toward us, not bothering to silence the groan. Tyson fucking Van Dyne, the prick heir to his father’s real estate

fortune, and one of the cockiest, most entitled motherfuckers I've ever had to battle for air.

"Malikov, this party is invite only. Leave now or I'll have you carried out in a body bag." Tyson's face twists into a grimace and he puts a hand on Skyla's shoulder. "Come on, you need to get back to the party and away from the trash."

Skyla nods as she glares at me. "Like I said, Zak. Worthless. Piece. Of. Shit."

A deep ache assaults my gut at the disgust dripping from her glossy pink lips.

I hate that I hurt her... that I ruined her on so many levels.

My eyes sweep over her toned arms and long, tanned legs.

But fuck, I want her back.

On her back.

Any and every which way I can get her.

Except she definitely wants me dead, which makes sense under the circumstances.

Skyla does an about-face and storms over to a closed door across the hallway without a look back.

Tyson doesn't make a move to follow her, though.

My pulse rumbles in my throat. I eye his preppy douchebag getup. I can kick his ass right now and make a brand-new fashion statement with bloodstains on seersucker. Fucking brilliant. I can be the new Tom fucking Ford. Electricity floods my fists, making them destruction ready. The only thing stopping me are the three security guards approaching from behind Tyson. They wear matching scowls, their narrowed eyes daring me to make a move.

Tyson must sense them close in because he inches closer to me.

"Listen very carefully, Malikov. Take your fucking ass out of here now before I call security. And stay the hell away from my fiancée."

Cue the record scratch sound effect.

His fucking... *fiancée*?

CHAPTER 3

SKYLA

I grab a flute of champagne from a passing tray and lift it to my lips with trembling fingers. A frenzy of bubbles fights a path down my throat as I guzzle the chilled liquid. My nose tingles with the urge to sneeze, and my fingers grip the crystal stem tight enough to snap the glass in half.

Champagne just isn't going to cut it tonight. Where's the fucking vodka? I'll need a whole bottle to process what just happened in the hallway.

My stomach roils. I clutch a hand over my midsection. Even after all this time has passed, Zak Malikov can still rattle me in ways that no other man ever could. He shattered my heart, manipulated me, played me like a fucking video game. I thought he might actually have cared about me... maybe even loved me.

He didn't.

And still, he has the power to make my knees quiver and my insides melt under his devious blue-eyed glare.

I should have known he could never see me as anything more than his best friend's geeky sister, no matter what bullshit he spewed while we were together. But I was just his dirty little secret.

Heat rushes into my cheeks while X-rated images of what happened that night flash in my mind like the most blinding lightbulbs.

I was stupid to believe what he told me, a complete idiot for thinking I'd finally gotten my wish.

Because Zak has a black heart with the most toxic kind of poison for blood. He used me. He betrayed me. And then he walked away like I was no better than dirt on the bottom of his Nikes.

But how pathetic am I to still feel that twinge of lust when he penetrated

my soul only seconds ago with those piercing eyes?

It's like the past four years didn't even happen.

All is forgotten?

I wave over a waiter with a tray full of tall thin glasses of bubbly and grab two with an appreciative smile.

Nothing is forgotten.

Through the crowd, I can see Mom standing with the Van Dynes, talking and laughing politely. A twinge of sadness assaults my heart. She hasn't been the same since Laney died. It's like she's become a shell of the person she used to be. Although she knows the importance of this whole wedding sham, and she definitely wouldn't be happy to know that I'm huddling in a corner at my own rehearsal dinner, chugging champagne, but fuck it.

Nobody ever asked what I wanted, so at this moment, I don't give a damn what anyone else wants. I drain one of the glasses and start in on the second one when a gentle hand grazes my arm from behind. I spin around, a gasp knotted in my throat.

"Dad, you startled me."

"I'm sorry. I just wanted to check on you. I saw you here by yourself and thought you might need some company." My father, Stuart St. James, smiles at me. But his smile doesn't reach his eyes. He looks... sad. Helpless. Hopeless.

The last time I saw the same flicker of devastation in his gaze, it was when we buried Laney. The twinkling light in his eyes was permanently extinguished that day. It rained like we were in the middle of a Category 5 hurricane on the day of her funeral, completely atypical for Miami. I believe it was her trying to speak to us since she never got a chance to say the words while she was still alive.

A shiver ripples through me. Years later, I still can't shake the feeling that the car accident was a warning... a threat of something ominous to come. She knew something was going to happen that night, and I was too wrapped up in Zak and my own angst to bother with hers. Her fingers digging into my arms at the club, her panicked expression, her fear-filled eyes... I tuned it all out because I had to nurse my broken and battered heart.

Now she's gone. My beautiful, brilliant, sparkly sister, horrifically snatched from this world. Guilt gnaws at my heart because I selfishly left her alone to confront my own demon. Maybe if I'd have stayed with her, I could have protected her from whatever was chasing her.

Because that car accident? It was no *accident*.

Hit and run with no witnesses at one of the hottest night clubs in South Beach?

No fucking way.

Someone was watching us.

Someone knew exactly how to hit Riley's car so that Laney would take the full impact.

And that same someone snuffed out my sister's life like a hiss of breath to a lit match.

Now, three years later, it's me who will be walking down the aisle tomorrow to meet Tyson Van Dyne at the end of it.

The end.

Sounds pretty accurate.

My life as I know it will be over once we become husband and wife.

Finishing my degree at Brown?

Nope. Try again.

Going to medical school to fulfill my dream of being a surgeon?

Pipe dream. Next!

Taking my place as the respectful and obedient wife to the heir of Van Dyne Enterprises?

Ding, ding, ding! We have a winner!

Fuck my life.

"Isn't it funny how even being in a roomful of people can make you feel more alone than you ever thought possible?"

He gives a nod, his shoulders deflating the slightest bit. I study his face. He looks paler than usual, the dark circles under his eyes more pronounced in the overhead light. Smudges of purple stain the skin, deep lines etched into the corners of his eyes.

Except he's not smiling.

"You miss her." He pats me on the arm. A lump of unshed tears lodges in the back of my throat. I swallow hard but nothing can break up that knot.

"More than anything. I just feel like I should have done something, like if I'd been paying closer attention, maybe I'd have seen or heard something..." Tears sting my eyes.

Seeing Zak dredged up all the guilt again, just one more thing to loop around my neck.

I already have one, otherwise known as Tyson, pulling so tight I can

barely breathe.

“We’ve been down this road. You have to stop blaming yourself.” He lets out a deep sigh. “There is plenty of blame to go around. We all could have chosen to do things differently in the past... things that might have different outcomes for the people we love.”

His eyes glaze over, his forehead pinched when he spots Nathan Van Dyne, Dad’s business partner and Tyson’s father, standing across the room from us. I watch his curious but threatening gaze tangle with Dad’s. Tension sizzles the air between them. They stare at each other for a long minute, their eyes sparring viciously while their mouths remain tightly closed.

Dad finally pulls his eyes away and looks at me. “I love you so much, Skyla. Always remember that.” Then he leans closer and kisses me on the cheek before walking back to my mother. My brows furrow. He walks with a slight limp, his shoulders slumped.

My heart pangs. He’s so beaten down, so broken.

Just like the rest of us.

I want to be angry. I want to kick chairs over and scream bloody murder. Hell, I want to punch holes in the wall and hurl champagne glasses at my fiancé and his smug-ass family.

But right now, I’m just sad.

Sad for everything I’ve lost and everything I’m about to lose.

Footsteps click along the tile floor behind me. A whiff of sandalwood invades my nostrils and again, my stomach clenches.

Tyson.

His fingertips wind around my left arm, squeezing so tight, I think he might brand my skin with his fingerprints. He gives my arm a good tug and I stumble, trying to resist falling into his grasp and failing.

“Don’t fuck with me, Skyla,” he murmurs, dragging his fingers through my hair. “And don’t ever make a fool out of me ever again or else you’ll pay the very steep price.” He fists my hair and tugs my head backward. “I won’t have my wife pine for another guy, especially a piece of shit like Zak Malikov.”

“You expect me to pine for *you*?” Blood rushes between my ears. “Because there’s no way that’s happening.”

“I want to feel that sweet cunt wrapped tight around my cock.” He fingers the hem of my dress, his dark eyes hooded with lust. “I want you on your back in my bed.”

“Well, fuck you. I still have one night of freedom, and there’s no way I’m going anywhere near your bed.” I wince when he tugs the fabric, pulling me closer. To anyone looking from a distance, anyone who doesn’t know the truth, it probably looks like we’re in love.

But the reality is smoke and mirrors. A complete and utter sham. The biggest sacrifice of my entire life.

Because this man is hours away from becoming the bane of my existence. And there’s not a damn thing I can do to stop it.

“Enjoy your last night, Skyla. Tomorrow, your pussy will be mine. Your fucking life will be mine.” Tyson drags his fingers through the back of my hair to hold my head in place while his lips graze my ear. “*Everything will be mine.*”

CHAPTER 4

ZAK

Angry sounds of Rage Against the Machine blare from the Bose speakers in my Audi R8. I can drown out the words Skyla spat at me back at The Surf Club, but nothing can keep the images of her in that hot as fuck dress from plaguing my mind.

Tyson Van Dyne. What the hell is she doing with that ass hat? How could she even think about marrying him?

Talk about a glaring and pathetic as hell example of a guy riding Daddy's coattails. Fucker never had to work a day in his life for anything. He almost didn't graduate high school because he barely cracked a book, figuring his father would bail him out. Hell, Tyson couldn't even make it into Princeton without his father buying half the campus and committing to invest a boatload more cash later to grease the palms of the admissions board.

But money can't buy brain power. I heard he got kicked out after his sophomore year.

I rub the throbbing stress knot on the back of my neck, pressing my foot on the gas when Nik's name flashes on my dashboard. I stab the Accept call button, silencing Zack de la Rocha's screams.

"Z, there's been a change in plans. The shipment is coming in tonight. You need to get to the warehouse."

I grip the steering wheel tight, clenching my teeth. After what just happened at The Surf Club, I really just want to go home and drown my past demons in bucketfuls of vodka.

Lost career, lost girl, lost life. A fucking string of failures that drags behind me wherever I go.

Vodka won't help me get any of it back, but at least it'll numb my brain

for a few hours.

“You there?”

“Yeah.” A sharp breath escapes my mouth.

“How’d the meeting go?”

“Great. They want to work with us.” It should be good news, but my tone couldn’t be less enthusiastic.

“Why do you sound like someone just set fire to your precious ride?”

“Not funny,” I grumble. “And even though the meeting went fine, something happened afterward.”

“Something” was talk of my bum leg and nonexistent football career colliding with the girl whom I let get away... the girl who’s getting married to a world-class tool who doesn’t fucking deserve her.

Not saying I do, either... especially after what I put her through.

“You gonna elaborate? I’d like to get back to fucking my fiancée.”

I roll my eyes. “Please stop. I don’t need that shit branded into my brain.”

“I’ll spare you the details if you just fucking tell me what happened.”

“You remember Tyson Van Dyne?”

“The elitist twat who graduated a couple of years behind me?”

“The one and only.” My Adam’s apple bobs in my throat. “He’s marrying Skyla St. James. How the fuck could she ever agree to *that*?”

“Fuuuuck. Kylian’s sister, yeah? The one who was all over your stick forever? She finally got tired of waiting around for you, huh?” He lets out a snicker and I flip him off through the dashboard screen.

I wince at his words but ignore the question. “It was just weird to run into her tonight. I haven’t seen her in years.” Nik doesn’t even know the real reason why. My short-lived affair with Skyla is a dirty, seedy secret that I only shared with Val. The bitch of it is I hurt Skyla... destroyed her, actually. She became collateral damage for a plan that completely crashed and burned. I should’ve said no, told Val there had to be another way to get what we needed. But I didn’t. And fuck, it eats at me to this day.

“So why is the marriage twisting your dick so hard?”

“Because I don’t like the son of a bitch. I don’t like that his father’s construction and real estate businesses compete with ours, and I sure as shit don’t like that he’s getting half the St. James’s empire because of the marriage.”

“A good prenup will protect St. James.”

My lips twist and I glance into the rearview mirror. I could have sworn I

saw a flashing headlight a few seconds ago, but it's completely dark behind me now. "Yeah, but only we can protect our interests. And the two of those families banding together can make shit very hard for us. She shouldn't be with him."

"Not up to you, bro. Your only priority right now is to hide the gun parts in the restored cars we're driving up to Tallahassee for the car show. A couple of the guys are gonna show up with crates that just came off a container ship at the Port of Miami. Take the crates, pay the guys, and store the weapons."

"Yeah, yeah." I half listen to the rest of his instructions, my mind working as fast as my car speeding down the interstate. He finally ends the call, leaving me alone with my tormented thoughts.

Skyla can't be marrying that asshole for love. I saw how she stiffened when he took her arm. I didn't miss the sneer on her face when he walked over. No fucking way did her body language scream love. Or even the tiniest bit of lust.

And Kylian... how the hell could he let the marriage happen? It's obviously a power play and Skyla's the pawn.

My jaw clenches when I think of my ex-best friend who was nowhere in sight tonight. Motherfucker stole my fame and glory right out from under me when he let me take that hit years back. College football star who's about to turn NFL pro for the Minnesota Warriors.

I should have killed him when I had the chance. If it wasn't for the fact that Luka had just gotten out of the clink and we didn't need any more heat on us, the bastard's head would've been on a spit. Then Dad and Dima were killed, Val disappeared, and our whole world turned upside down.

I really should have gotten back to it though. Messed with his brake cables or something.

"Fuck!"

I slam my hand on the steering wheel, then crank up the volume on my stereo, letting Metallica fill my ears. The road is pretty clear. I always take this route because it's not heavily traveled and I'm usually transporting seriously illegal shit.

A blinding flash of light glares at me through the rearview mirror. I blink fast.

"What the fuck?"

Slamming my foot on the gas, my car lurches forward like I just flipped a

switch for light speed. The truck behind me speeds up, closing the space between us. I drop a hand into the center console and flip open the lid to a secret compartment where I store my guns. I pull out a fully loaded Glock 19 and peer into the side view mirror. The truck is gaining on my ass, the road dark and empty. I dig the ball of my foot into the gas pedal at the same time that a dark form darts into the road. I swerve to the right to avoid hitting whatever the hell it is. Tires bounce on the gravel on the shoulder, the passenger side door scraping against the guardrail until I stomp on the brake. My head slams backward against the leather cushion.

Squealing tires cut through the heavy metal music. The truck skids off the road, missing the front of my car by inches. I crack my window just as the driver's side door to the truck swings open.

An explosion of bullets hits the still air. They ricochet off the sides of my car and windshield because Nik is an auto genius who armors all of our cars for us since this is the same kind of ambush he drove into a couple of years ago. We don't take chances anymore. Everything we drive is bulletproof. I point the barrel of my gun out the window and fire at the guy who crouches to the ground near the driver's side door. My pulse damn near hammers a hole into my throat as the bullets tear through the truck's door and window.

It doesn't take long for the guy to realize I'm not getting out and he's not getting in. I empty the rest of my magazine trying to hit the bastard. But being stuck in the driver's seat of my own car, I don't have a lot of reach. I manage to clip him in the leg and in the arm. He doesn't wait around for me to blast his head off his shoulders. He jumps back into the truck and peels away from the shoulder. I can't even reach the tires from my angle. The stench of burning rubber makes my gut clench, taillights disappearing into the darkness.

I grip the steering wheel, my breathing ragged.

What in the *fuck*?

There's only one person who'd know where to find me right now. And I'd bet my left nut it's the same guy who had his security thugs all over my ass when I walked across the parking lot to leave The Surf Club.

I grab my phone and stab some numbers onto the screen.

A deep voice answers on the first ring.

"Go."

"Alek, it's Zak. Listen, I need you to check someone out for me."

Alek is the brutal Russian boss of the Severinov Bratva. He also happens

to be the head of Red Ladro, the syndicate my family is part of. If anyone can get intel on the Van Dyne's, his team of master hackers can.

"Name?"

"Tyson Van Dyne."

He's quiet for a minute. "You know the rule about dragging Red Ladro into your own personal pissing matches."

Ire flames in my chest. "I don't give a fuck about the rule right now. But *you'd* better give a fuck about backlash on Red Ladro."

"Yeah? And why the hell is that?"

"Because I'm pretty sure the bastard just tried to have me killed. And since the syndicate is balls deep in our guns trafficking business, I think you'd wanna find out why just as much as I do."

CHAPTER 5

SKYLA

I grip my bedsheet, my fingernails practically slicing through the silky fabric as my back bows off the mattress. Electricity crackles and shoots through my insides like beams in a laser light show. I choke on sharp gasps of air, my lungs tight like they've been noosed by the heaviest of chains. My screams puncture the silence, the air thick, heady, and tinged with the scents of sweat, sex, and sin.

"I always wondered how you'd taste, how addictive this sweet pussy would be. It's so much fucking more incredible than I imagined." Zak's low murmur hums against my clit, sending my body right back into an uncontrollable frenzy as another orgasm commands every nerve ending. Explosive spasms overtake my limbs, my heart racing so fast, cardiac arrest might actually be likely.

I fist Zak's longish dark hair to keep his head in place as he French kisses my pussy, and through the haze of erotic bliss clouding my mind, one question flashes like a neon sign.

Am I dreaming right now?

The boy I've loved for years has his face buried between my thighs, driving my body into orbit with his deviant tongue, and for the life of me, I can't figure out what I did to get so lucky. I never thought he'd look at me the way he did when he leaned in to kiss me downstairs on the couch. Kylian left suddenly in the middle of the movie, saying he needed to run over to his girlfriend's house.

I was a little shocked when Zak didn't bolt out the front door once Kylian left. Hell, I wanted to scream with glee when he stayed in his spot on the couch next to me. But with him so close, the movie was the last thing on my

mind. I guess the same went for him because the next thing I knew, he'd pulled me into his lap and devoured me like a freshly baked plate of his favorite chocolate chip cookies. It was hard not to swoon when his hard cock pressed into my belly.

I did that to him...?

It gave me a little jolt of confidence, but with zero experience in the sex department, I had no idea if I was doing things right. When he asked me if we could go up to my bedroom, I guessed I'd watched enough videos on Pornhub to fool him into thinking I was more worldly than I was.

All I have to say is thank God Kylian needed to run out. From what he tells me, all the guys on the football team have their own pregame rituals. And Zak's is fucking.

Just when I think the pleasure is too much, he rolls on a condom and climbs on top of me. He has no idea I'm a virgin, so he's not gentle. I swallow a cry, my pussy erupting into flames at the sudden, forceful intrusion.

But fuck, to have him deep inside of me after all this time... it's worth every sliver of pain.

He snakes an arm around me and raises me off the mattress, one hand pressed into the small of my back as he drives into me hard and fast. Spasms quake my body with every push and pull against my clit. Zak's eyes and expression are feral, his hard muscles tensing with each thrust until he finds my spot and fireworks explode in front of my eyes, the pain suddenly replaced with the most mind-bending euphoria I've ever felt.

"Look at me, Skyla," he says, his voice husky. "I wanna watch you come all over my cock. But not until I tell you."

My lips part, a chest-rumbling cry building in my throat. "Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God."

"Fuck, yeah, baby. That pussy is screaming for me." He tugs my head backward. "Beg me to make you come."

"Make me come, Zak. Please, make me come!" I shoot up from the bed, the raspy words slipping from my lips. My silky nightgown is glued to my back like Saran Wrap from all the sweat. I clap a hand to my chest, my heart thrashing wildly. The bedroom is dark, and for a second, I forget where I am and why I'm here.

A shadow emerges from a corner of the room, and I pull the sheet up to my chin until I see who's moving toward the bed.

“What the hell are you doing here?” My voice is a choked whisper. I swallow hard, urging my body to calm the hell down after that insanely intense dream.

“I’m going to be your husband in a few hours. I have the right to check on my bride.” Tyson creeps toward the bed. When he moves in front of the windows, the moonlight casts a glow over his twisted expression.

A chill scuttles down my back. His pupils are not even visible, making him look demonic. Rightly so since I’m convinced he’s an ancestor of Satan himself. Out of the corner of my eye, I spot a pen next to my earrings on the nightstand... just in case.

But he wouldn’t—

Before I can even finish the thought, he’s on top of me. He presses one knee into my sternum, flattening my lungs. His other leg locks me in place while he unzips his pants and pulls out his hard cock.

“You were dreaming about Malikov? Fucking Malikov?” He sneers, stroking his dick. “Why? Because you think you love him or some shit like that?”

“Are you jealous, Tyson?” I sneer, wiggling against him.

“Are you stupid enough to embarrass me?” He shoves his knee harder into me. “Because you don’t want to be one of those people who is stupid enough to defy me. It will end very badly for you.” He leans close. “It might even kill you.”

I flounder on the mattress, trying to suck in oxygen. My head feels like a cement block, his words muffled by my strangled breathing.

Tyson’s lips hover over mine. “Zak Malikov is finished, Skyla. And so is his family. I’m the only one you’re gonna be fucking—in your dreams, in my bed, anywhere and anytime I want that pussy.”

I open my mouth to scream and he shoves his cock between my lips, thrusting hard so that the tip hits the back of my throat. He juts his hips, forcing himself deeper. My eyes sting with tears as I sputter, choke, and gag.

“Get ready ’cause I’m gonna fuck that tight ass next,” he hisses, thrusting faster. “And you’ll still be a virgin when we get married tomorrow. And then your sweet pussy will be mine to use and destroy.”

A strangled cry knots in my throat. The bitter tang of precum hits my tongue. I clamp down on his dick with my teeth, biting hard. Tyson screams like a bitch and pulls out of my mouth before I can draw blood.

Too bad his reaction time was so quick. I wanted to sever the head and

fucking spit it at him.

He falls backward, checking himself for damage. *Freedom.*

I kick him in the chest and he loses balance, falling backward on the mattress. I take the opportunity to roll off the side of the bed and grab the pen from the nightstand before running to the opposite side of the room. I grab the handle on the bedroom door, jostling the wedding dress that hangs next to it. The tiny crystals sewn into the fabric glitter in the thin stream of moonlight that slithers into the room when the door cracks open.

It's beautiful, adding to the smoke and mirrors of the whole sordid plan.

A quick glance at the clock tells me it's after midnight. It's bad luck for the groom to see the dress *or* the bride before the wedding, which is pretty appropriate because this whole sham marriage is a dark and twisted wormhole that I'm about to get sucked into.

"Don't even think about leaving."

"I'm doing more than thinking." My entire body shudders, his low, foreboding tone stopping me dead. I turn and hold up my hand, shaking the pen at him. "You sick fuck. This is over. I'm calling my parents."

He shoves his dick back in his pants and buttons them back up. "You're not calling anyone."

"Well, I'm sure as hell not marrying you." My voice rises, choked with dread. I grip the pen tight. "And if you come anywhere near me, I'll stab you in the fucking eye."

"Your threats mean nothing to me, little girl. You will learn to play this game or else." He slides off the bed. "Don't be stupid, Skyla. You know exactly what your family has to lose."

Blood rushes between my ears. Tyson creeps toward me, and I wield the pen like it's a samurai sword.

But I know it can't save me. Nothing can.

CHAPTER 6

ZAK

I stand in front of the mirror in my hotel room at the Four Seasons in Palm Beach the next morning and adjust my bow tie. I grab the tube of gel, squeeze it into my hand, and rub it into my hair, slicking it back.

“You clean up nice,” my brother Danil says with a smirk. “Love the penguin suit.”

I flip off my phone screen. “I’ve gotta blend.”

“Just make sure nobody sees you. There’s a lot at stake, and if the Van Dynes find out you’re there, they will shoot you on sight, got it?” My other brother Luka’s face comes into view, but he’s not smiling. His forehead is pinched, his jaw tense. “According to Alek’s intel, Denis Stepanov will be at that wedding today, too. The security will rival the Secret Service detail for the president.”

Denis Stepanov, the miserable bastard who tried to marry his son Dmitri off to Valentina for a steep price. None of us knew about the arrangement until the wedding day, and before we could wrap our heads around why the hell my father would have agreed to the arrangement, he and my brother Dima were gunned down and Val disappeared.

I grit my teeth. Right after Alek called last night with the information we needed, I jumped in my car and drove up here to execute our plan. “Stepanov has been quiet since you killed Dmitri, Luka. Now we know why.”

“According to Alek’s contact, he’s been working secret underground deals with weapons manufacturers overseas, and recently sank his claws into Van Dyne for funding. The marriage to St. James will give them the legs they need to stomp all over our territories. And since fucking with our business threatens Red Ladro, Alek is all over this.”

I'd really like to storm into the reception and blow those fuckers all to hell for what they've done and plan to do to my family, but my orders were very clear. With a deep breath, I pick up my Glock 19 from the dresser and stick it in the back of my pants where it's hidden by the tuxedo jacket, trying again to block the image of Skyla's stricken face from my memory. I broke her once, and now I'm about to smash the shit out of the pieces I left behind. "I'm ready."

"Okay, so you've got the layout. Alek sent pictures of the whole event wing. Get in, get out, and get the fuck back to Miami." Luka sweeps a hand through his hair. "We still need to figure out how the hell to get into that safety deposit box in the Bahamas."

A safety deposit box that requires a key, and not two, but three, fucking codes to open.

"You'd think Olek Moroz stuck the nuclear codes to the football in that box with the levels of security needed to unlock it." I let out a dry laugh.

"Branko Ivanova wants what's inside that box as badly as we do. He'll bulldoze us to get to it if we don't move fast."

"He's got nobody left. How's he gonna take us out by himself?"

I glance at Danil on the screen and shake my head. "Come on, D, a guy like that has armies just waiting to launch an unexpected attack."

"According to Alek, Red Ladro has the same Special Ops armies waiting to retaliate if Branko tries anything."

"Yeah, and Valentina is part of that army." Luka rubs the back of his head, pacing back and forth in front of his desk in his home office. "We need to do everything we can to protect her."

My spine stiffens at the mention of my sister's name. She's been secretly working for Alek for the past few years trying to uncover the whereabouts of Branko Ivanova. None of us know details other than she's part of the team he has in place to eliminate threats to the Red Ladro syndicate he oversees.

It seems like every time we get close to Branko, he buries himself farther in the trenches, so fucking deep, I'm beginning to wonder if we'll ever find the motherfucker who's killed a third of my family.

"So hang up the damn phone and let me get to work. I'll call you when it's done."

"Remember what I said, Z. In and out. If the groom or any of his guys see you—"

"I guarantee Tyson is more focused on his dick being ridden later tonight

than on me crashing his wedding.”

Luka narrows his eyes. “You just make sure that the only thing his dick will be riding is his hand.”

I smirk and click to end the call. One last look in the mirror makes me cringe.

I really do look like one of the waiters.

A few minutes, and a few private staff elevator rides later, I walk into the massive kitchen. Men and women dressed in the same lame-ass outfits as I am fly past with trays of intricately designed appetizers for the cocktail hour. I pick one up and follow a line of servers out the swinging doors.

Except I don’t enter the cocktail reception.

I take a sharp right down a private hallway.

After studying the pictures and the schedule for the event, I know exactly how much time I have to do my job. But my window of opportunity is damn small, and the risks of being caught are nothing less than deadly.

Not only for me, but for my brothers and sisters, too.

I duck around a marble column, pretending to arrange what’s on my tray when loud giggles and voices hit the air. A gaggle of bridesmaids in pink dance around in the hallway, champagne flutes clutched in their hands. All together they look like a cloud of cotton candy.

“Picture time, ladies,” a deep voice says. A man with a camera appears from the opposite direction. “Where’s my bride?”

“Oh, s-she’ll be out in a minute. She’s-s just fixing her makeup,” one of them slurs. She elbows one of the other girls. “You know s-she’s s-such an exhibitionist.”

They all giggle, and the hairs on the back of my neck prickle.

I don’t know why I give a damn that someone is talking shit about the bride, but for some reason, it pisses me off.

“Okay, let’s start in the rose garden.” The photographer ushers them toward the exit. Once they’re out of sight, I walk toward the closed door.

I twist the handle and slowly push it open. My feet sink into the plush cream-colored carpet when I step inside. Trays of half-eaten appetizers are scattered over every tabletop, empty champagne glasses littering the place. An all-consuming cloud of perfume invades my nostrils as I lock the door behind me.

The urge to sneeze grabs hold. I struggle for a few seconds to keep it in. Fucking allergies.

I put down my tray and pull out my gun, taking a look around the place. An ornate white wedding gown hangs on the back of the closet door, and another door toward the back of the room is closed. A thin stream of light creeps out from the bottom.

Jackpot. She's in here.

I inch closer, the gun in my outstretched hand.

A choked sob from behind the door jars me. The door opens and Skyla steps out of the bathroom dressed in a white lace bra and matching G-string. My mission fades to the back burner while my eyes hungrily drink her in from the tips of her bright red-painted toes to the ends of her long, curled locks of hair hanging over her lush tits. She's perfect, from the smooth tan skin that my fingers itch to touch to the full pink lips that I want wrapped tight around my cock.

The bride-to-be wipes her nose with the back of her hand before doing a double take when she realizes I'm not actually a waiter. Her blue eyes pop open wide with recognition just before they land on the gun pointed straight at her.

"Zak...?" Her voice is incredulous but still so damn sexy. I remember the way it made my body hum in response like it was yesterday. I'd fantasized about hearing it again and again, preferably screaming my name for hours on end.

I step forward, my throat tight. Forcing my eyes away from her endless curves, I grit my teeth.

It doesn't matter what I felt that night. All that matters is what I have to do right here and right now. "Surprised to see me?"

"Nauseated is more like it." Her lips pull into a tight line and she nods at my gun. "Are you here to kill me? As if you haven't caused me enough damage?"

"No. I'm here to save you."

The door handle to the bridal suite jiggles. A clicking sound follows. I twist around as the door creaks open. My finger rests on the trigger, my heart stuttering to a stop. Shots fire, blunted by a silencer. A startled scream pierces the air behind me as Skyla falls to the floor.

Fuck.

I'm too late.

CHAPTER 7

SKYLA

My strangled cry pierces the air in the bridal suite. Searing pain shoots through my arm like I'm being impaled with a hot fire poker. Blood pours from the wound, dripping onto my bra and panties. Deep-red stains blossom on the lacy fabric, tainting it just like Zak did to me and my innocence... the now nonexistent innocence that Nathan Van Dyne, Tyson's father, bartered my dad for in exchange for his silence.

I didn't even feel the bullet tear into my flesh at first. It wasn't until I hit the cold floor that the initial sting exploded into full-blown agony.

Tears spill onto the white tile, mixing with my blood to form dark-pink puddles around my knees. My breaths are short and sharp. Every quake of my chest makes my arm ache more.

"You're fucking dead, Malikov."

I cringe at the deep, menacing voice belonging to the man who burst into the suite and shredded my freaking arm.

Another muffled gunshot fires and something drops to the floor with a loud thump.

Zak...

I crawl forward, using my good arm to help pull me across the floor.

Polished black wingtips stop in front of me. I slap my free hand on the floor, my bum arm hanging limp by my side. Zak lowers himself to the floor, a flicker of concern in his normally cold blue eyes.

"I've got to get us out of here." He looks around and grabs my white silk robe from the spot where I'd tossed it over a nearby chair. "There wasn't anyone in the hallway before, but if this guy was tracking me, I'm sure he's got backup on the way."

“What the hell is going on?” I rasp through clenched teeth. “I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“So this is a happy occasion, then?” he sneers, getting in close. “You’re all in for this marriage?”

“It’s none of your business. You had your chance and you fucking blew it.” A pained cry slips from my lips as the burn intensifies. “Jesus, this hurts so bad.”

Zak holds his gun up to the side of my head. “Just because I haven’t blown your cover yet doesn’t mean I won’t still. You’ve got a lot to lose, especially with Tyson Van Dyne as your fiancé. If I expose you, your family is finished, and this guy?” He nods his head to the dead guy sprawled on the floor. “There will be more of him. More guns. More death. You really wanna be responsible for that?”

My good arm gives out and I slip forward on my sweaty palm, crashing into the floor. I yelp at the pain that shoots down my arm when it hits the ground. “I hate you so much for what you did to me, but that’s all in the past. You can’t touch me anymore. I don’t have a medical career to protect. I don’t have a future at all other than being a fucking trophy wife for the most insufferable ass on the planet, next to you. So threaten me all you want, but this wedding is going to happen.”

“Things have changed. Trust me, you’ll do everyone more damage by staying.”

I glare at him. “Take that gun away from my head. We both know you’re not going to pull the trigger.”

He only presses the barrel harder into my temple. “You’re going to get up and walk the fuck out that door or I will carry you.”

I smack the gun away from my head. “My family needs this wedding to happen.”

“I think your family would rather keep you alive.” His lips pull into a tight line. “They already lost one daughter.”

My jaw drops. “Don’t you dare bring Laney into this. Nobody is trying to kill *me*.”

“They will if they think you’re in bed with the enemy.” His breath is hot against my cheek. He reaches behind my head and tugs my hair, pulling me close. “And you have no idea how much heat that’ll bring on your father. The only way you can save them is by coming with me.”

“Why the hell should I trust you? All you’ve ever done is hurt me. It’s all

you know how to do, you sadistic bastard.”

“You don’t have a choice, Skyla. You’ve always been the good girl, the one who does what everyone wants. So you’re gonna get up and come with me. Otherwise, you know what I’ll do.”

“If Tyson finds out I’m gone—”

“Tyson tried to have me killed last night,” Zak growls. “If Tyson finds out anything else I might share, do you know what that means for you and your family?”

Memories of Tyson shoving his cock down my throat and making threats against me for simply dreaming about Zak come rushing forward like a wave careening toward the shore. I know all too well what he’d do if he found out about... everything.

“It was four years ago. He wouldn’t care. We weren’t together back then.” But even as I say the words, I know the timeline would mean nothing to a guy like Tyson. What happened would still humiliate him to this day, taint his reputation, and fuck with the perception of power and control he’s created.

Zak’s lips curl into a menacing smirk. “You really wanna take that chance?”

A long minute passes. Zak is a vindictive motherfucker. He uses people to get what he wants—I know that firsthand. He doesn’t give a damn about me beyond what I can do for him, and while I may be part of his agenda, I also know that part of my dad’s agenda is protecting my family... and keeping the Van Dynes quiet.

If Zak follows through on his threats, there’s no guarantee that’ll happen, marriage or not.

Zak is right. I have to go. I don’t have a choice.

“If Tyson thinks I just took off and jilted him, he will destroy my family.”

Zak lifts an eyebrow. “There’s enough evidence right in this room that will tell a very different story about why you suddenly went missing.”

I use my good hand to wrench Zak’s fingers away from my hair. “For fuck’s sake, let me go while I still have hair left.”

He drops my hair, his eyes lazily caressing my hunched over and half-naked body.

“So you’re kidnapping me.”

“Yup.”

“Why?”

“Revenge.” He breathes the word and it hits my cheek like the most sensual touch. Anything this man says makes me feel that way. And my God, I hate myself for admitting it.

“So you kidnap the bride and then what? What’s your end game? What do you want from the Van Dynes?”

“No more questions.” His expression darkens, ice frosting over his gaze.

“And I’m supposed to just accept that?”

“You’re a good girl, aren’t you? And good girls do as they’re told because they know what happens when they *don’t*.”

“Screw you,” I hiss, creeping around the couch. “Who the hell is that, anyway? He doesn’t look familiar.”

I pull myself to my knees. Zak drapes the robe around my shoulders without answering. I slide my good arm into the sleeve and wince the entire time. Blood immediately soaks through the side now covering the gunshot wound. “I’ve read so much and seen so many videos about gunshot trauma but fuck, I never knew it’d hurt this much.”

Putting on the robe saps my remaining energy. I slump over the arm of the couch, panting from the effort.

“We’ve got to get to a doctor.” Zak loops his arm around my waist and lifts me to my feet. “You got any shoes other than heels to wear?”

I point to where my UGG slippers sit next to the door and right outside the pool of blood leaking from the intruder’s head.

Zak leads me over to where they sit and I slide my feet into them. He looks at my blood-stained robe and pulls off his jacket, slipping it over my shoulders to cover it up. Then he pushes open the door to the bridal suite and peeks his head into the hallway.

Conflict knots in my gut. For the millionth time since this sham engagement was announced, I ask the question that’s been plaguing me, the one that can’t change the past and will forever change my future.

How the *fuck* did my father allow himself to get sucked into the Van Dynes’ toxic cesspool of evil?

Zak takes my hand, and with a small tug, pulls me toward him. He runs down the hallway, away from the cocktail reception and down another service hallway. There’s a door at the end of the darkened corridor. He pushes it open. Bright sunlight makes me recoil and squint.

Giggles and chatter break the tense silence. “It’s my bridal party. They were taking pictures in the rose garden.”

He glowers at me, daring me to so much as squeak out a word. But I guess he doesn't want to take any chances that I'll cut and run, so he scoops me up into his arms and runs toward a Range Rover parked nearby.

After pulling open the passenger side door, he dumps me inside, clearly not giving a shit about my injured arm, which shouldn't surprise me since he's never given a shit about me before.

"Hey!"

I twist to the side, clawing at the headrest for leverage. My brother Kylian darts out from the bushes near the rose garden, murder in his eyes. Zak stops next to the driver's side door for a split second before opening it. Kylian runs across the road. A horn honks loudly and I jump, turning to stare out the front windshield at the Maserati that blows past us.

Zak jumps inside and starts the ignition. The Maserati's tires squeal along the pavement, and the last thing I see is my brother flying backward into the bushes.

"Zak, stop! He's hurt." A sob bubbles in my chest. "We can't just leave him."

Zak peers into the rearview mirror, a grimace twisting his lips. He looks at me, malice dripping from his gaze, and then stomps on the gas. "Too bad nobody had *his* blind side."

CHAPTER 8

ZAK

I grit my teeth and swing the steering wheel to the left out of the Four Seasons parking lot. “Stop fucking punching me; otherwise, I’ll turn this car around and drive over your pathetic piece of shit brother to make sure he’s dead.”

“You are such a scumbag,” Skyla screams, shaking her fist in the air before slamming it into my shoulder one last time. Little Miss Know It All always needed to have the last word. I slow down for a stop sign and lance her with a glare. Her robe opens and slips off her shoulders, exposing the blood-stained bra and panties. Her tits bounce, chest heaving with rage.

“Why the hell should I have stopped to help him and risk my own ass? He deserves to have his career destroyed. It’s karma.”

Seeing Kylian again after all this time boiled my blood. Son of a bitch stole my glory right out from under me and is riding it all the way to the goddamn NFL. All because of what I did to Skyla.

But what my ex-best friend doesn’t know is that I never wanted any of it to happen. I didn’t want to hurt Skyla. It was supposed to be a one-and-done job, the one thing Val needed before I blew out of this town, and because he sabotaged me at the championship game, now these jobs have become my life.

Everything I wanted was in my reach, and then Kylian chopped off my hands and feet.

He yanked away my future, beat it to death with a tire iron, and then incinerated it until there was nothing but a pile of ash.

I slam my hands on the steering wheel. If that car hadn’t just run him over, I’d have done it myself.

“He’s my twin brother. He used to be your best friend,” she screams, punching me square in the jaw while I change lanes on the Turnpike. Her eye makeup runs down her face in black puddles. “How can you be so horrible? He could be dead.”

“Are you crazy?” I yell, slamming my right arm over her chest and pinning her to the seat to keep her arms still. I ignore her yelp of pain when my arm crashes into her injured one. “He’s not dead. I saw him sit up before we left the place. The car wasn’t going fast, and he’s a pretty big guy. It’d take more than a car going fifteen to do real damage to him. Okay? And just so we’re clear, if you hit me again, I’ll shoot you in the other shoulder.”

“Liar. You said you came to save me from the wedding, so I know you’re full of shit. Now give me your phone and let me call my parents so I can tell them about Ky.”

Fury floods my insides. I wrap my fingers tight around the wheel, imagining they’re squeezing Skylia’s neck, and fuck me if I don’t get hard at the thought. “The only person who’s about to get a phone call is my brother. So sit back and shut up. I have a muzzle in the back seat. Don’t think I won’t use it.”

I stab Nik’s number into my dashboard. Goddamn Kylian. I’d love nothing more than to see his ass in a wheelchair, mangled beyond repair.

We could have both been superstars in college. We could have both been drafted to the NFL and lived out our dream.

Instead, he’s living his best life with scouts crawling up his ass, and I’m stuck here in Miami, a thug gangster who used to be able to throw a perfect eighty-yard spiral. Now, I slit throats and sell guns for a living.

Every time I look at Skylia, I remember what happened the night before that game, what I did that ended my career and shattered my dreams. She is a constant reminder of the pain of that crushing loss, pain that haunts me every day.

And I want her to feel it, too.

“Z, what’s up? You pick up the package?”

“Yeah, I got the package.” My eyes slide over to Skylia. “But it’s broken. Needs to be patched up.”

“What do you mean, patched up? What the hell happened?”

“There was a little complication. Something went wrong.” I let out a sharp breath. “You need to make the call.”

“Jesus Christ,” Nik mutters. He knows that “making the call” means we

need a doctor, stat. "I'll take care of it and meet you at the track."

More code. I need to haul ass over to his place right now. Skyla is finally quiet, but it could be because she's weak from the blood loss, or the adrenaline crash, and even the constant assaults on me since we left the Four Seasons.

"We're going to the racetrack?" Skyla twists toward me once I hang up.

"Why? You like to bet horses?"

"It's analysis. Of course. I have my own system for handicapping horses." She rolls her eyes as if it was a stupid thing for me to ask.

"That's right. I forgot. You're the brainiac of your family."

Skyla twists away from me. She sucks air through her teeth, squeezing her eyes shut as she gingerly cradles her injured arm. "Fuck," she mutters.

I glare at the road, weaving in and out of lanes to avoid slow as shit cars.

"Can you please be careful? It'd be really ironic to get shot and then die an excruciatingly painful death in a car accident."

"Death seems to be the only way I'd get any peace, considering your mouth hasn't stopped once since you got shot. Why don't you save your energy? Isn't the blood loss making you tired? Maybe you need to shut your eyes for a while, like the rest of the trip."

"As if I'd let myself bleed out. While you've been moaning and groaning about your 'lost glory,' I made myself a tourniquet with a linen napkin I grabbed from the bridal suite on the way out. You were too busy with your wallowing to notice."

My head snaps in her direction. She still has one side of my jacket covering her, but the shot-up arm is bare and wrapped. I guess I was too preoccupied with my own hell to notice how she was dealing with hers.

"Right, you wanted to be a doctor."

"A surgeon." She huffs. "And then in a hot second, everything *I* wanted for my life got yanked away from me, and now I'm expected to keep my damn mouth shut and smile for the cameras or else."

If that isn't the story of my own fucking life.

"It is the worst betrayal of someone's trust when you steal their life away because of your greedy choices. But then again, you know all about that, don't you?"

I inwardly cringe at her caustic tone.

She knows I do.

I was responsible for threatening to steal her life away the first time.

But really, all I wanted was to be part of it.

Another chance blown.

I pull onto the private road that leads to Nik's house a few minutes later. Gravel crunches beneath the tires, dust kicking up around us when I slow to a stop. I turn off the car and push open the door to get out.

"I'm not going anywhere until you tell me what the hell I'm doing here. You kidnapped me for a reason. I want to know what it is."

A groan threatens to escape my lips, so I swallow it down. I should have known she wasn't gonna go quietly. She'd been a bookworm years ago, but there'd always been a fierce spark deep inside of her. It's that part which always fascinated me about her. She has played the part of the good girl, that was true. Did what she was told, followed the rules. But that spark always flickered in her eyes, like the naughty alter ego dying to break free.

I always wanted to be the one to make it ignite.

I came close once, then fucked it all up.

That naughty girl is all I see when I look at her now, half-naked in her wedding lingerie. But I can't focus on that now. Taking her from Tyson is only part one of our plan.

The rest gets fuzzier and fuzzier the longer my eyes get caught in her cleavage.

"I already told you."

"Yeah, revenge. Great. Could you be any more evasive? My family's livelihood just went up in smoke. I think I deserve a little more than that."

"I don't owe you any explanations."

"The fuck you don't. After tormenting me the way you did?"

I pull the car door closed and twist around to face her. Leaning over the center console, I snake my fingers around her neck. Her skin is so soft against the rough pads of my fingertips. Occupational hazard of having a dual career as a hired killer and construction worker. Her pulse hums, the vibration making my own heartbeat zoom.

She covers my hand with her good one. Her nails dig into my skin so hard, I think for a second she might've drawn blood. My cock jumps, the sting of her anger charging through me like a surge of electricity.

I've always known the spark was inside of her.

But fuck, to feel it, to know it's real... it only makes me want to harness it and use it so that she's finally under my complete control.

I give her neck a squeeze. Her eyes pop open wide.

“You’re sick.” Her words are choked. She tries to pry my hand away from her neck, teeth clenched as she lances me with an icy glare.

“You know it. And you loved it.”

“You won’t hurt me again,” she rasps, her nails continuing to slash my hand. Each scrape deepens the ache inside of me. “I won’t let you.”

I close the space between us, relishing the flicker of doubt in her tortured gaze. Her breathing stutters from my tight hold. “You don’t have a choice, Skyla. Because you’re not gonna be Tyson’s trophy wife.” My lips curl upward. “You’re gonna be *mine*.”

CHAPTER 9

SKYLA

I don't think my eyes could fly open any wider without popping out of my freaking skull. "Did you just say... no, no, you definitely did... that you stole me from Tyson..." My voice morphs into an incredulous screech, a sound which even makes *me* cringe. "So that *you* could marry me?"

Zak's chiseled jawline, peppered with sexy stubble, is tight as he stares at me. The silence that follows is even more foreboding than his spoken words.

The fingertips on my right hand tingle like they've been assaulted by pins and needles, my skin cold to the touch because of a lack of circulation from the tourniquet. My pulse jumps, hammering hard against my neck because even though there's nothing remotely romantic about what he just said, my body doesn't give a damn about things like logistics and revenge schemes and spoils of brutal mafia wars.

It only knows the most intense desire, hunger, and yearning for something that it's wanted for far too long, despite the resulting hatred that blackened my heart when he betrayed my trust and fractured my heart.

"I'm not marrying you. Never in a million freaking years."

He laughs, a sharp, biting sound that cuts the tense air around us. "Like you have a choice in any of this."

"I just told you I only agreed to the marriage with Tyson to protect my family. Why would I walk away from that burden and leave my family exposed to God only knows what so I can marry you, some... some has-been football god turned mafia thug?" My nostrils flare.

"Revenge can be a very dirty game. And I'm betting that the Van Dynes know just how valuable you are to their plans to ice out my family. They won't let you go without a fight. They need you because you're the link to

your father's empire. So when they come for you, we crush them."

"Great, so I get caught in the middle and become a casualty of your war?"

"It's how shit in our world works. The marriage lets us keep what's ours and then take what's yours."

Zak runs a hand through his dark hair, his ripped biceps tensing through the thin fabric of his shirt. Why is it that my focus is on his muscles, and not what I stand to lose if he executes on this insane plan to make me his wife?

"Think of it like this. You can get your life back. Be the doctor you always wanted to be. Make your own rules. Be the bad girl I know you are. The one you really wanna be."

A chill slips down my spine.

And for better or worse, I only want to be bad with you...

Argh! Such bad timing. I press my hand to my forehead. "None of this makes sense. So you're going to marry me or use me as bait?"

"Both. And when I'm done dangling you in front of that bunch of hungry vipers, I'm gonna use you for my own purposes."

Heat pools in my belly at the innuendo. I slam my knees together to prevent that heat from leaking out of me. I refuse to let it out. Fuck him for turning me into his captive... his very willing and horny captive, not that he needs to know any of that. X-rated visions from my dream last night about Zak blast my mind like splattered paintballs—vivid with color and clarity, drenched with yearning.

He drags his hand down the front of my chest. "You'll be the obedient wife who does what I want, when I want, and how I want it. And in exchange, you get to live."

"Oh, so if I turn down your supersweet and touching proposal, you'll just kill me?"

A malicious smirk lifts his lips, and the urge to devour them clutches me hard. I want them to taste every inch of my flushed skin, to tease me, and to taunt me like only he can.

Like only he ever did...

"I've killed for way less."

"Well, I can definitely check off all the boxes on my Prince Charming checklist now." Sarcasm spews from my mouth, my mind very aware that his hand is still pressed against me. Dammit, I won't let him do this to me again.

"You're a deceitful bastard. You violated my trust and made me betray my family once. I won't let you do it again."

He doesn't respond. Instead, a gasp escapes my lips when he slides his hand over my breast. He takes my nipple between his fingers, never once moving his eyes away from me.

He flicks my taut bud hard, making it peak in his grasp. My back arches. I puff out my chest, hunger swirling in my belly at his demanding touch. "I remember how much you liked that." His low, growly voice rumbles through me like a slow explosion gathering force. He pulls down the top of my bra. A chill hits my breast before the warmth of his mouth closes over it.

I cry out when he takes my nipple between his teeth, tugging and sucking it until I'm paralyzed by the sensation.

But deep down, I know it's more than the sensation that is shuttling my body faster and faster toward the brink of bliss.

It's because he's the one generating the sensation.

It's him.

It's always been him.

No, no, no! My brain screams, bitch-slapping my inner sex goddess. *We hate him. We hate him. We hate him!*

A flash of white light in my periphery makes me blink fast, like a harsh wake-up call to return to the land of the sane people.

I pull away, immediately feeling the void which I'd gotten used to over the past four years once my nipple slips from his lips. He pulls back, his blue eyes hooded with lust and glittering with rage. Another car pulls into the driveway next to us. I quickly close my robe under his penetrating stare. As if a simple scrap of fabric can fend off the deviant beast in front of me.

"Someone is here." My voice hitches, tripping over the lump lodged in my throat.

"It's the doctor." He doesn't move his eyes away from my face. "He's here to fix you."

My lips twist. "Is that even possible?"

"I hope so. Because I plan to break you over and over and over again." His suggestive growl slithers over me, licking the hairs on my arms. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch a glimpse of an older man stepping out of his car with a medical bag. He looks around, his curious eyes landing on Zak's truck. But with the windows and windshield so heavily tinted, there's no way he could see us.

A tiny thrill zips through me.

But what if he could?

Oh Jesus, is this what happens to me when Zak Malikov flies into my airspace? I just lose all self-control, integrity, and self-respect?

Zak grins, his fingers slipping into the front of my lace panties. I clench my thighs together and sneak another look out the windshield.

“He can’t see us.”

“It’s because you have the tinting so dark, which is also illegal, by the way,” I rasp. His fingers are like fire on my skin. They sizzle my flesh. Perspiration beads on the back of my neck as his digits travel south. I can’t hide my secret anymore. His smirk widens and he spreads my lips before dragging his fingers down my seam, ready to expose me for the liar that I am.

“Fuck the law. I do what I want.” A guttural noise forms in his throat as he grazes my slit. “You’re so wet. Tell me what turns you on more—me fucking you or him watching?”

I suck in a breath, my heart racing like a McLaren on the Autobahn. “You’re insane. I don’t want him to watch. He’s like, eighty.”

“Older guys still need to get off. And they definitely would if they saw the things I’m gonna do to you. You know, since you just admitted you want me to do them.”

“I didn’t say anyth—”

“You didn’t need to. Yor pussy is screaming for my cock, my hands, and my mouth.” Zak’s smile takes on a deviant glow when he drives his fingers inside of me. My head falls backward, hips bucking at the shockingly delicious intrusion. I can’t stop him. My working limbs are paralyzed with anticipation and need.

He moves in and out of me, crooking his fingers with each push deeper. A scream bubbles in my throat, waves of forbidden pleasure rippling through me, blunting any pain from the bullet hole in my arm.

“If you scream, he’ll hear you.” He pauses, his hot breath fanning my face. “But you want that, don’t you?”

Zak plunders me with what feels like his whole damn fist. But my God, I’ve never felt so desired... so wanted... or so disgusted with myself.

I clench my teeth, sanity finally smacking me like a wet glove across the face to wake the hell up and get away from this evil monster. He’s already proven how easy it is to maim his prey before leaving it for dead and searching out his next victim.

I was the prey once. There’s no way I’ll be on the receiving end of his sick and twisted punishments again.

I close my fingers around his wrist and pull his hand away from my quivering pussy. She screams a whole lot of expletives at me, but the stupid bitch needs to learn self-preservation and self-control, for Pete's sake.

Zak brings his fingers to his lips. The tips glisten and he sticks them into his mouth, making a big show of sucking off my juices. "Tastes like you wanna fuck me."

My jaw drops. "You're a disgusting pig."

"Your body sure as hell doesn't think so."

I struggle to calm my breathing, but my heart gallops far ahead, oblivious to my pleas to slow the fuck down. "You will never own me again."

He traces the outline of my lips with one of the fingers he plundered my pussy with, forcing it through my lips. "I always did, Skyla. I still do, even now. And that control makes me fucking crazy with the need to break you."

"Is this kidnapping really about revenge, Zak?" I swallow hard, very aware of his hand inching up my thigh. "Because it sounds more like it's about me. And fuck you for dragging me back into this cesspool of lies and secrets. I'd rather chew off my left arm than wear your engagement ring."

"It's always been about you." His eyes narrow to slits. "The world will know you're mine, with or without a ring. And now that I have you, I will kill anyone who tries to take you away from me. Not a quick shot to the head, but a slow, painful death of the most excruciating kind. Nobody touches you. Nobody looks at you."

"But my parents—"

"Your parents need my family to stop the Van Dynes. They'll do whatever the fuck I say. Just like you will, unless you want to suffer the consequences."

Zak pauses, grabbing a fistful of my hair and pulling me toward him. The rough timbre of his voice vibrates against my skin. "We all make choices. I'm sure your parents wouldn't want to know about one specific choice you made, especially since their lives are damn close to being obliterated by the Van Dynes."

"Oh, whatever. You failed in your little plan to seduce me and then completely blindsided me."

"History always repeats. Just remember, I have no limits, Skyla. And no fucks left to give. So unless you want me to share the footage of that very questionable choice you made, you're gonna play by my rules and be my pretty little puppet." He tilts my chin upward. "I'm gonna have a hell of a lot

of fun pulling the strings, too.”

CHAPTER 10

ZAK

I climb the steps to Nik's house with my arm tight around my bride-to-be. She winces every few steps. Once we get to the top step, Skyla turns to look at me, her eyes flooding with contempt.

"Get your goddamn meat hook off me, scumbag. This is never going to happen, no matter what you think in that maniacal brain of yours."

Scoffing, I grip her tighter. "You never complained about having my meat anywhere near you. Don't waste your breath pretending to be so offended by what I just did to you in the car, either."

I love the look of shock that splashes across her face. But more than that, I love that I can still make her speechless. Little Miss Know It All always had an answer for everything and everyone... except me. Knowing I still have that control makes my dick hard, especially since it's the only control I have over anything these days.

Four years ago, I had it all.

Now, I have four bosses to answer to—my older brothers.

I make plenty of cash, but who the fuck cares about money when you're constantly a fucking peon doing all the crappy jobs without getting any of the power?

Me kidnapping Skyla made the most sense to my brothers because I always get the shit end of the stick. I'm the youngest brother, and Luka and Nik say it's because I have to earn my place. I say it's because they don't want to get their hands dirty.

But fuck that. I'm changing the game. Making my own rules.

Nik opens the door before I can knock. He rolls his eyes and steps back so we can walk inside the foyer. "You couldn't manage to get her out of there

without getting shot?”

“The guy was a suck-ass shot. What the hell am I supposed to do about that?”

Skyla uses her good hand to keep her robe pulled tight. Bright-pink spots pop into her cheeks as she glowers at me. “You’re an animal. And wipe that smug smile off your face because that is most definitely not a compliment.”

“Doc, take her into the back bedroom. It’s all set up for you.” Nik rubs the back of his neck as the doctor guides Skyla to the back of the house. She turns and flips me off before disappearing around the corner.

“Come into my office,” Nik grunts.

Nik’s fiancée, Kenzie, gives me a wave and watches us walk into a room off the foyer. “Good luck, Z.”

I wink at her. “I’m all outta that. Gotta use my charm this time.”

“There’s not enough of that on the planet to help you.” Nik shoves me inside and closes the door before rounding his desk and dropping into a chair. “Tell me what the hell happened. How the hell did she get shot?”

“I don’t know. Someone must’ve been tracking me.”

“How the hell could you let that happen? You were supposed to get in and out with her. Why can’t you ever just do what you’re supposed to do? Why is there always a problem or a complication or a fucking issue?”

“Look, the guy barged into the bridal suite. Knew me by name. I’d bet my left nut that Tyson had the guy staking out the suite, just waiting for me to show up since he knows his kill order backfired last night. I made sure he was dead before we left. Luckily, we escaped before anyone saw us leave.” I drop my eyes to the floor and trace the edges of the tile with the toe of my shoe.

“So nobody saw you?” He stands up from his chair, his dark eyebrows knitted together like he doesn’t believe me.

I shift in my spot against the wall. I always hated sitting in the chairs in Nik’s office because he purposely bought ones that are low to the ground so he’s always taller than anyone around him.

And right now, I need all the height I can get.

“Kylian may have seen us.”

“*Fuck.*”

“But I don’t know yet if it’s a problem.”

“How could it not be a problem?” Nik’s voice thunders in the open space, and I swear the walls shake for a split second.

“We made it to my truck before he could get to us. And when he made a run for it, a car came out of nowhere and plowed into him.”

“He got hit by a goddamn car?”

I nod. “And the good thing is if he hit his head, it could scramble his brain up and he might not even remember seeing us in the parking lot. Which means they wouldn’t know it was me who snatched her from the wedding.”

“So all we have to do is hope for broken surveillance cameras and brain trauma? That’s the new plan? Jesus Christ, Zak. How the fuck could you let this happen?”

Nik slams his fists on the top of the desk. The vein in his neck throbs and for a second, I’m a little afraid it might rupture. I really don’t need the fucking burden of having my brother bleed out on my shoulders, so I think fast to come up with a reason to calm him down.

“Calm down. I can fix it.”

“Oh, yeah? How?”

“This marriage is a total sham. Everyone knows it. The Van Dynes are trying to shut us down permanently. They need St. James for that. They need his network. We don’t. We have our own.”

“Get to the fucking point, Zak, or I’m gonna stroke out listening to your bullshit.”

“I’m gonna marry Skyla. Once I do, the Van Dynes lose their leverage and their network, and we keep our organization intact. It’s perfect.”

Nik scrubs a hand down the front of his face. “I think it’s *your* brain that’s scrambled from all the football concussions.”

“Why? What the hell else were we gonna do with her? If I marry her, it keeps us in power. Van Dyne and Stepanov want to crush us, and Skyla was their solution. Now she’s mine.” I narrow my eyes at him. “It may not have been the original plan, but it’s a better one than just keeping her chained to my bed.”

“Who the fuck said anything about chaining her to your bed?”

“Fine, chained to a pole in the basement.”

“Why do you keep talking about chains?” Nik presses his fingertips to his temples and I know he’s losing the little patience he has left for me.

“Forget the chains and think about my idea. You know it’s a winner. It protects us and Red Ladro.”

“There’s more to this than keeping our organization intact. It’s also to expose Van Dyne’s partners. We know he’s working with Stepanov. He

might be able to get us closer to Branko. Finding that piece of shit has always been the goal. That bastard is the reason why Mom, Dad, and Dima are dead, and why Luka was almost killed.”

“If memory serves, your fiancée had something to do with Luka’s near-death, too.” I can’t resist taking the dig and it hits home. Hard.

Nik’s glare promises murder. “Don’t fucking go there again.”

I hold my hands up in the air. “All I’m saying is that shit happens and you need to take opportunities when they come. It’s what Kenzie did, yeah?”

My brother walks around the desk, his shoulders squared and fists clenched.

I fold my arms over my chest. “You know I’m right. This could save us.”

“It could fuck us, too. And it’ll open us up to all of Van Dyne’s allies. Us, Red Ladro.”

“Make the cockroaches scatter. That’s the best way to get to Branko. If I marry Skyla, he loses leverage and control. He won’t be able to rely on Van Dyne or Stepanov to fuck us. If he wants to destroy our family, he’ll have to come for us himself.”

I cross my feet at the ankle, the corners of my lips lifting. “I’m brilliant. Just say it.”

“You’re a cocky bastard.”

“Also brilliant.”

“There’s no love lost between you and Skyla. How are you gonna get her to submit?”

“I have plenty of ideas.”

Nik fists the sides of his head. “I don’t want to hear about any of them. I’ll talk to Luka later. You just figure out a way to handle Bridezilla.”

Kenzie pops her head into the office after lightly knocking. “What the hell was with all the yelling?”

“Zak here decided he’s gonna marry Skyla to save the family.” He walks out into the foyer and snakes an arm around Kenzie’s waist, pulling her close.

“Ooh, another captive bride. You Malikov boys definitely have a pattern, that’s for sure.”

“He also said some shit about you. I had to set him straight.”

Kenzie chuckles. “I hope it was good stuff.”

“Just the usual you almost killing Luka thing.”

Kenzie throws a look at me over her shoulder. “You need to get some new material. That’s ancient history. Besides, now I’m Luka’s favorite

almost sister-in-law.”

“Don’t tell Alexis or Larysa that. Those bitches can be pretty brutal.” I snicker, referring to the fiancées of my brothers, Taras and Danil. I pull open the door to the stainless steel refrigerator, pull out a bottle of Coke, and twist off the cap before guzzling it down. The fizzling bubbles go straight into my nose. I fight the urge to sneeze as they fizzle out.

Nik nods toward the doorway to the kitchen. “Doc, how’d it go?”

Dr. K lets out a weary laugh. “I don’t know why I keep letting you boys drag me out of retirement.”

“Come on, Doc,” I joke. “You know it’s ’cause we pay the best.”

“Just try to stay out of trouble.”

“That’s like telling a bear not to shit in the woods.”

Dr. K shakes his head. “Sense of humor just like your father’s. It’s only because of him that I haven’t changed my phone number.”

Kenzie walks around to give him a quick hug since they’re old friends from her bomb-making days. “Can I get you anything?”

“No, no, I’m just fine.” He gently grazes Skyla’s patched-up arm. “And this young lady is, too. Almost as good as new. I was able to extract the bullet and patch her all up. Lucky for her, it missed everything important. Just make sure to keep the wound clean and protected.”

Skyla smiles at him. “I will. Thank you so much for everything.” Then she turns to me, and her eyes immediately darken like a hurricane is brewing in the depths.

Makes me think of all those chains and how I’m gonna make her “submit.”

I take a few steps toward Skyla while Nik and Kenzie talk to Dr. K. Draping an arm around her shoulders, I lean toward her and graze her ear with my lips. “Just told my brother the good news that you’re gonna be my wife. And once I get you home, you’re gonna show me just how grateful you are that I saved you from that asshole Tyson Van Dyne.”

She turns to me, her lips pulled into a tight smile. “Grateful. Yes. I am so grateful... that you brought me here and gave me the chance to take my life back. On my terms.”

A sharp, stinging pain in my side makes my knees buckle. I yelp, my eyes dropping to the small pair of scissors sticking out of me. She fucking stabbed me?

“Fuck you, Zak.” Skyla shoves me out of her way, whirls around, and

runs for the front door.

A loud roar erupts from my chest when I pull out the bloody scissors.

She won't get far in slippers and a see-through robe.

And when I get my hands back on her, she's gonna wish all I did was chain her up.

CHAPTER II

SKYLA

I tear out of the house, so tempted to look back when he yells my name, but knowing if I dare, he'll be right there to snatch me back. Those scissors won't stop him from coming after me, but hopefully, my jab was deep enough to make him hesitate. I just need a little bit of a head start to make a break toward freedom.

Freedom.

I could really do it. I could leave here and never come back. Leave my bloody robe, bra, and panties somewhere where they'd be found. Maybe near the water. I'd be presumed dead. Drowned. It'd destroy my parents, but at least they'd be safe from the Van Dynes, since there's no other daughter to marry off. They'd be broke, but I know my dad could claw his way out from that. He built his business from nothing. He wouldn't need Van Dyne.

He doesn't need him now. He's taking the cowardly way out of his bad decisions by putting my life on the line.

I have to escape. This is my only chance. Thank God Dr. K had the pair of scissors in his bag and that I was able to swipe them without him catching me.

My feet pound against the front steps, the soles of my UGGs skidding in my haste to get the hell away from Zak. I grab on to the railing, gripping it tight as I slide down the length of it until I land on flat ground. I suck in a breath and run as hard as I can, my calf muscles tense and tight. I stumble over bits of gravel in my path, the balmy breeze whispering through the silky material of my robe. The sides fall open, beads of sweat popping up on my skin. My hair clings to the back of my neck, sweat drizzling down the sides of my face.

Nik's house is set at the end of a private road, so there are no cars around and no other people. Just a lot of trees and shrubs around the perimeter. With the sun setting on the horizon, I have an advantage. Dusk falls around me, the impending darkness my only possible salvation right now.

Laney's smiling face flashes in front of my eyes, blurred by my tears.

Is this how she felt that night at the club years ago? Panic and fear choking her because of a dangerous threat hovering over her like an ominous cloud?

All she could do was run. Just like I am now, running for my life.

I push myself to move faster. All I have to do is get to the tree line, and then I can disappear forever.

"We have to leave."

A sob rises in my chest, tears now streaming down my face as Laney's voice echoes in my memories.

"Please. Don't ask any more questions, okay? We need to get away from here."

I choke out a cry, my shoulders quaking when I remember how she pulled me out of the club, thinking she could get to safety. "I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry!"

I jab my toe into a rock in my path and stumble forward. Pain assaults my injured arm, shooting down to my fingertips. Clutching my wrapped wound, I prepare to go down hard. A strong arm loops around my waist, stopping me from face-planting in the dirt and rock.

With a sharp rush of air from my lungs, my body slams backward into a hard wall of muscle.

I gasp and pant, digging my nails into his skin. I pull the hair on his arms, screaming and kicking my legs backward in an attempt to sweep them out from under him.

But nothing rattles the Devil.

He holds me tighter and holy shit... is that his—?

My pulse hammers hard.

Jesus, it is.

"Did you think a little prick was gonna stop me from catching you, Skyla?"

His voice is eerily calm, the vibration humming against the shell of my ear.

"A little prick for the biggest prick on the planet," I seethe. "I'd hoped

you would bleed out.”

“You didn’t want me dead.” His teeth clamp down hard on my earlobe. I squeal, my heart shuddering.

Then he moves his hand to my wound and wraps his fingers tight around the dressed area.

A bloodcurdling scream shatters my eardrums, and I can only hope it does the same to him. “You sick fuck. He just stitched me up!”

“Did that hurt, baby girl? I fucking hope it did. I hope your arm is throbbing and that the ache is too much for you to bear. And I want you to remember it, too, because once I’m finished with you tonight, you’re gonna experience pain at a whole new level.” He releases my arm and fists my hair, dragging my head backward so my cheek is flush against his lips. “I told you I would break you. And after what you just did... Fuck, I want to destroy you.”

“What got your dick in such a twist?” I sneer, a total glutton for his punishment with every word that tumbles from my lips. But screw him if he thinks I’m going to cower. “Was it that I got one over on you or that I ran away from you? Because you’re a god, right? Nobody runs from the great Zak Malikov.”

Sarcasm drips from my words, my face screwed up like I’ve just taken a gulp of year-old milk.

He flips me around so I can see his impassive expression. But his eyes give it all away. They’re fierce, wild, and blaze with fury. “You’re right. Nobody runs. Maybe you’re not as smart as you think.”

“Screw you. I’m smarter. And if you try to cage me up, I’ll find a way out.”

“You weren’t desperate enough to run from Tyson.”

“Tyson is a dickhead, but he’s not a deranged psychopath like you.”

“A compliment.” The corners of his lips curl into a malicious smirk.

“Of course you’d think that. It just proves my point about you being a deranged psychopath.”

He pulls open my robe and runs his hands down the sides of my torso, digging his fingers deep into my hips, then moving them over my ass. He squeezes my cheeks so hard, I yelp.

My pussy clenches, the whore that she is.

“You definitely couldn’t run from me that first time years ago. And you didn’t stop me when we were in the car before. What makes you think you

can get away with it now?”

My slippers crunch over bits of gravel and dry sand. Tall grasses brush across my legs like the feeling of a million spiders dancing over my skin.

“I’ve learned my lesson.”

Yeah, bullshit. What have I learned? That Zak can manipulate me as easily now as he could four years ago? That the lovesick puppy who hid her adoration for him behind stacks of textbooks is no different than who I am right now?

What the hell has happened to me?

In mere months, my life was turned inside out and upside down. Pulled from the pre-med program at Brown University so I could marry Tyson as settlement for my father’s debt for God only knows what. I dug hard for specifics to figure out some other way to repay the debt other than with my life. But Dad was either too embarrassed, or under strict instructions not to breathe a word, because prying information from him was like shucking an oyster with a plastic spork.

I couldn’t just run away from my family and Tyson, but if I somehow got killed by some faceless enemy of theirs? Zak kidnapping me might have been a blessing in disguise. I could have contacted my parents much later after things blew over to let them know I was okay.

I ignore the fluttering in my belly when he stares down at me, his eyes glowing against his shadowed snarl. Isn’t it just like fate to kick me in the gut and turn my captor into the sexiest fucking man I’ve ever laid eyes on? I’d always thought he was hot, but damn. His football career crashed and burned like a raging inferno, but he hasn’t lost his thick, muscled body. He’s got bulges and ripples everywhere, and all the pent-up anger that took the place of his arrogant cockiness just made him that much more devastatingly handsome.

Only minutes earlier, I had my one chance to escape Hell. One swift jab of those scissors, and I could have been home free. Except the Devil has other plans, and mine didn’t match up. Except I didn’t do what needed to be done. At best, I caused a flesh wound. I couldn’t hurt him the way he deserved, even if I needed to self-protect.

The whole escape plan was stupid anyway. A desperate attempt at freedom. I wasn’t thinking straight. I’m still not, because my mind is whirring with ways to bring the crazy bastard in front of me to his knees. I may be his prisoner for now, but I will never be his property.

“I’ve learned some things, too.”

“Why do you hate me so much? What the fuck did I ever do to you?”

“When I look at you, I remember everything I lost.”

“I had nothing to do with that. We’ve been through this.”

“But you did. And I fucking hate you for it.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” The words catch in my throat when the gleaming stainless steel tip of the scissors glimmers, catching the last bit of light in the sky. He holds them against my chest, the sharp edge pressed against my skin. His eyes stay locked on mine as he drags it, scratching me hard. I clench my teeth, sharp gasps slipping from my lips.

He’s getting me back for what I did. This is his punishment.

My chest heaves, chills making my teeth chatter.

Please let this be the worst of it.

But I know Zak.

It’s not even close to the worst.

CHAPTER 12

ZAK

“It’s because of you that Kylian caught us. It’s because of you that he fucking sabotaged me at that football game and destroyed my fucking life.” My voice and my hand shake with rage, the tip of the scissors leaving scratch marks on her skin because of the fury coursing through my limbs.

Skyla winces, her face streaked with tears and black eye makeup. “Always blaming everyone else for what’s wrong in your life. You’re so pathetic.”

“You know I could cut you right now and make you bleed out.” With a thundering heart, I slide the stainless steel blade up to her jugular. “You could have done the same thing to me if you hated me as much as you say you do. You could have killed me right there in my brother’s kitchen. Ms. Brainiac knows where the carotid is, right?”

I replace the scissor blade with my hand and capture her around the throat. “But you took a cheap shot just to get a head start out the door. You know why?”

Her blue eyes fly wide open when I apply pressure to her neck. Terror seeps into her expression. I grab her tight enough where she has to pant for breath. Her nails claw at my skin, but I don’t feel a damn thing other than disgust.

“Why?” she mouths, unable to drag in enough oxygen to speak.

“Because you wanted me to catch you. Daddy’s princess didn’t want to show her balls by walking away from her pretentious douchebag fiancé, am I right? So letting me snatch you saved your ass. Don’t tell me that thought didn’t ever cross your mind, baby girl. I’m your fucking savior. We both

know it.”

I release my grip and she falls forward onto the ground, clutching her throat. She coughs and sputters on her knees. A grin tugs at my lips. I bend down and cup her chin, yanking her head upward. “Get used to that position. You’re gonna spend a lot of time on those knees.”

She fires a punch directed right at my cock. I grab her fist just before it has a chance to sterilize me.

“My job requires me to have eyes everywhere. Did you really think you were gonna get away with that?” I pull her up by her good arm, although the temptation to jerk her injured one makes my balls tighten.

She yelps as I drag her to her feet. “Too bad you weren’t as skilled four years ago. You could have used more eyes on you before you got your ass sacked.”

I try to run my fingers through her knotted hair, but they catch at the ends. Tearing my fingers out, I let out a snicker. The sound of her high-pitched scream makes my dick twitch. Her pain can’t come close to what I suffered, but I’ll try damn hard to replicate it for her. I lean forward, hovering my forehead over hers. “Just imagine the other things I’ve had time to perfect in the past four years.”

Fuck me if there isn’t a flicker of curiosity in her expression.

She remembers that night.

And she’s gonna get to relive it, over and over again.

I decide to show her a little bit of mercy when I grab her around the waist and pull her good arm tight against my side. “Walk,” I hiss against her ear.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Home, so I can carry you over the threshold.”

“That’s not even remotely funny, and we’re not married.” She struggles when I pull her along next to me.

My God, I love the fire in her. I always felt it, always sensed it was there. And after our night together, it erupted full force, spewing lava, hatred, and regret. I wanna make it rage again.

“Not yet. But trust me, Van Dyne’s loss will be my gain. And your father will have no choice but to go along with it or else.”

“Or else what?” She elbows me as I walk, fighting me every step back toward my truck, never once submitting. I press my hand against her flat stomach to keep her from moving too much. My groin fires, fingers itching with the urge to fuck her again.

Her skin sizzles my palm. Such a challenge. It'll make the victory that much sweeter when I finally break her down, when she will beg for my punishments.

I stop and fling her back against the trunk of a nearby tree. A whoosh of breath breaks from her lungs on impact. "Or else he's gonna be scheduling a couple of funerals. One for you. One for Kylian."

"That's if he isn't already dead," she screams, driving her knee into my gut.

"So predictable," I murmur. "How are you gonna cause my pain if I can see it coming a fucking mile away?"

"Everyone has a weakness. When I find yours, I will expose the shit out of it and destroy you."

"Yeah, yeah." I grab her and fling her over my shoulder before turning to walk out of the clearing. I stomp through the gravel, pressing my feet deep into the ground as if I'm crushing my demons with every step toward my new life as Skylia's husband.

It's the only way I can redeem myself, and fuck her for thinking she can stop me. As if stabbing me could ever keep me from getting what I want. I've lost plenty and I've adapted. She'll learn to do the same thing when I make her my wife.

I will finally have her exactly the way I want her.

And she will have no choice but to accept it.

Marrying her will protect my family. Owning her means I'll get to call the shots in my own life, and my brothers will have to deal with that. They won't be able to hand me the shit jobs anymore.

Retribution will be mine. *She* will be mine.

Once we get to my truck, I open the passenger side door and dump her into the seat. At this point, she's pissed me off enough where I don't give a damn if her arm gets knocked around. And she's stubborn enough to try and hide it from me.

"I want to call my mother." She doesn't look at me. Just stares straight ahead.

"No." I slam the door closed. I storm around the car to my side, smoke practically coming out of my ears because she has me so damn on edge.

Call her mother, my fucking ass.

Speaking of calling, I'll call Nik later when we get back to my place. He knows I'm not dead. She didn't even get me deep enough to require a stitch. I

can fix myself up with a Band-Aid, for Christ's sake.

I jump into the seat and start the ignition. Slamming my foot on the gas, the tires squeal over the concrete, the truck skidding as I swing the steering wheel to the left away from my brother's house.

"Didn't you do enough to my family already?" She turns to glare at me, her lips pale and quivering. "You used me to get what you wanted. What the hell else could you need from us?"

"My family business is none of your concern. Swallow your questions down or I'll shove my cock down your throat to keep you quiet."

"You took advantage of me. I gave you everything, hoping you finally saw me differently. But it was a game to you. A way to use me to get what you wanted. I betrayed my family for you."

"No, you betrayed your family because you couldn't keep your legs closed."

I squeeze the leather steering wheel, guilt eating at my brain, as it always does when I think about that night.

A pained gasp slips from her lips. "You son of a bitch. You knew how I felt about you, but it didn't matter. You never gave a damn about me. You saw an opportunity and took what you wanted before pulling the rug out from under me."

My lips press tight together. I keep them locked so I can't speak because I have no defense. She's right and we both know it.

And the bitch of it is, my plan crumbled like I fisted stale bread. I failed. Didn't get shit other than a raging case of blue balls every time afterward that I thought about Skyla and fucking that sweet virgin pussy.

Mission not accomplished.

The truth is, I'm sorry for what I did. It was a dick move, one I will regret forever. And not just because I didn't get the information Val needed.

But karma had the last laugh since I've been paying for it ever since.

Being my brothers' peon is reason enough to play this card now.

Skyla gives me the control I've been missing. I will take it any way I can get it, something she'll learn the hard way.

I slam my foot on the brake. The truck lurches forward, tires skidding to a stop just before making it out to the main road.

"You've buried your head in the sand for a very long time, baby girl. It's time for you to open your eyes and see your father for who he really is. Guys like your dad don't become targets for people like me unless they get in my

way. And Boy Scouts don't get in my way. You get me? He's a criminal and he deals with seedy bastards who are just like him."

"You don't know what the hell you're talking about."

I slowly twist to look at her. "I know that he gave you up to save his own ass. He cares more about what he stands to lose than what he already lost when he signed your life away."

Skyla shakes her head, tears slowly slipping from her eyes. "I can't believe you just said that. He made some bad financial decisions and he can't afford to lose his investors. Van Dyne is going to help him recover."

"Van Dyne is a business partner. He's got a vested interest in helping without laying claim to you." I inch toward her, closing the space between us. "You're a smart girl. Your dad's got no cards to play. Why'd he have to give you up? Unless..."

"Unless what?" Alarm flickers in her eyes.

"Unless—"

Screeching tires cut off my next words. Three blacked-out trucks careen around the corner, forming a barricade in front of us.

A group of men jump out of their trucks, guns pointed right at us. My chest tightens. Fucking AKs. All that firepower will break down my vehicle armor. Windows will shatter, bullets will tear through my truck.

And we'll be screwed.

"Oh my God," Skyla whispers. "We're—"

I grit my teeth, staring into bright-white headlights. "Trapped."

CHAPTER 13

SKYLA

“They’re going to kill us.” My teeth chatter so hard, I can barely spit out the words. I count at least five guys hopping into the street once the doors to their trucks open. They all have guns. I shudder, an icy shill scuttling down my back.

Zak slides the cover off a hidden compartment in the center console. I peer into it and let out a bit of the breath I’m holding. At least he’s armed. When he punches a button on the dashboard and a ringing sound follows, my jaw falls open. “How can you make a phone call right now? We’ll be Swiss cheese before anyone can get here.”

Panicked thoughts riddle my mind, every muscle in my body tensing. There’s nowhere for us to go. The trucks formed a perimeter around us when they pulled onto the road. Jumping out of Zak’s truck would be suicide.

A deep male voice answers. I recognize it as Nik’s.

“We’re about to go into a tunnel,” Zak says in a startlingly calm voice. “I might lose you. Can you bring me something to light it up?” He clicks to end the call and my jaw hits the floor.

“What the hell was that about? You didn’t tell him anything.”

Zak’s jaw tightens, his eyes on the windshield. “I told him everything he needs to know.”

Nik’s place is off the beaten path. I guess mafia guys figure their thug rivals can always do a home invasion, so better to be tucked away from prying eyes than in the middle of a neighborhood.

But it also makes them very damn vulnerable, too.

I didn’t see another house for at least five minutes before we made it to Nik’s street.

Reality crashes down on me like a guillotine blade. Nobody can help us.

“Get down.” He pushes me to the floor and slides open the driver’s side window.

A sea of gunshots pelts the car. I cover my ears with my hands and scream, but it’s the only sound I hear, other than muted bullets ricocheting off the metal and glass.

I furrow my brow.

No crashing sounds follow.

How the hell did they miss all the windows?

I tilt my head toward Zak. He has his gun pointed out the window and fires a stream of his own bullets. Bullets from different directions pound at the car, but Zak doesn’t move.

“How are you going to hit anything if you’re only aiming at one spot? You’re not moving at all. They can get out of your way.” My voice quivers with fear. I huddle deeper down, away from any windows.

“The truck is armored. Glass, metal.” His lips twist, eyes following the men as they approach the truck. “But if they hit the same spot over and over again with that AK ammo, they can crash the windows.”

“How many guns do you have?”

“Not enough.” He pauses. “I’m getting out. I have to hold them off.”

“You called Nik, right? He’ll be here. Don’t get out, please.”

Longing that I’ve unsuccessfully tried to ignore since he showed up at The Surf Club last night does frenzied spirals through my insides. The insanity of this situation isn’t lost on me. I’ve spent so much time hating this guy, how am I begging him to stay with me and not run into a flood of bullets that can tear him apart exactly as I’d wished?

“They will eventually get in unless I stop them.”

“You’re one person. You can’t compete with an army.”

“Five guys ain’t an army.” His eyes narrow and he tilts his gun before shooting another slew of bullets. “And now we’re down to four.”

I crack each knuckle on the fingers of my good hand, avoiding the ones on my bad one because my whole arm hurts too damn much to make a move after being thrown around in the seat.

“I really hate it when you do that.” Zak levels me with a side glare. “I always did.”

“I know. So hurry up and get back here so you can punish me for it,” I seethe through clenched teeth.

Zak looks in his rearview mirror and lets out a frustrated sigh before grabbing a second gun and sticking it in his pants. He pushes open the door, and crouching low, he creeps into the road using the door as a shield.

A wedding day is supposed to be the happiest day of a girl's life. Yet here I am, kidnapped and half-naked, stuffed on the floor of a truck, praying my heartless, ruthless captor and I don't die even though the alternative of marriage with Tyson Van Dyne would be a fate far worse than death.

I coddle my injured arm, wincing in pain when my fingertips gently graze the wound. That animal definitely busted the stitches before.

Please, please, please let him get back here alive so I can finally get my chance to land a punch against his gorgeous, demonic face.

An explosion that shakes the whole front of Zak's truck jars me. The passenger side dips low. I scream so loud, I practically burst my own eardrums, and if Zak's windshield wasn't made of super secure armored glass, I bet the sound would have shattered it before any bullet ever could. The pungent smell of burning rubber attacks my nose and makes my gut wrench. My eyes burn, heart thundering against my chest.

Fire. Fire!

I peek out from under the dashboard. Dark plumes of smoke outside of the car wind their way into the sky.

Holy shit, it's on fire. The truck is on fire and I'm stuck in here by myself while Zak takes on whoever the hell is trying to kill him.

A knot of tears forms in my throat. It's not my damn time. I can't stay cooped up in here, waiting for it to go up in flames like my father's plans for my life.

I crawl up to the seat and push open the door. Thick, humid air chokes me, but I can breathe free.

For now.

Slithering my way out of the truck, I peek left and right. A sigh of relief escapes my lips. All the action is taking place on the other side of the truck. I use my hand to navigate down to the ground, but it slips out from under me and I tumble off the running board, getting a face full of gravel in the process. Bits of rock and sand stick to my face. I push off the ground, sharp edges scraping my palms.

Before I can even look up, another car speeds around a corner, brakes squealing as it just narrowly misses the back bumper of Zak's truck.

Nik. He came, thank God.

I stagger to my feet, careful to keep myself hunched over in case more bullets fly in my direction. They're still popping into the air. I squat down, backing away from the open door and toward the white Dodge Challenger behind me, the same one that was parked out in front of Nik's house when we pulled up.

"Skyla, no!"

Zak?

I twist around.

Big freaking mistake.

A strong hand grips the back of my hair and pulls me close. The heels of my feet scrape against the gravel. My stomach roils at the noxious smell of sweat and body odor caught in my nose. Raspy breaths against my ear make me cringe. I can actually feel his sweat drip onto my skin, burning my flesh like it's acid.

"Don't bother," he grunts. "It's too late for you. Too late for all of you."

I struggle, elbowing my assailant with my un-slung elbow, but I bet he can't even feel it through the layers of fat around his midsection. With my back pressed against his chest, he holds out in front of my face what looks like a hunting knife. My heart drops into free-fall mode, eyes tracing over the jagged, serrated edge.

More bullets crack into the air, but my focus is only on the gleaming metal that looks as if it could slice me in half.

"P-please..." I whisper as he brings the blade to the side of my face. He drags the edge against my cheek and I squeeze my eyes shut. For all I know, he's going to cut them out of my skull. "My father—"

"Fuck your father. And fuck the Van Dynes." He moves the knife from my face and sticks the point into my throat. My pulse jumps left and right, playing a fierce game of pinball. A sharp prick makes me cry out. Something warm and wet drizzles down the side of my neck.

Did he just stab me?

Oh my God, he's going to kill me...

"Please don't do this. Don't hurt me." Desperation drips from my lips, a silent prayer for help looping through my mind. My body stiffens while my brain works overtime to figure out how I can escape this madman.

"Move, and I'll slice your throat."

My knees buckle. I sway against him, my vision blurred with tears. "I'll give you whatever you want. Just don't—"

“I’ll have exactly what I want,” he growls, pulling my hair tight, pulling open the door to one of the trucks surrounding Zak’s. “Once you’re dead. Now get the fuck in.”

CHAPTER 14

ZAK

“Zak, help me,” Skyla cries out. “Please don’t let them take me.”
The guy with the knife to her throat digs it in hard enough where another stream of blood drips down the side. “Shut the fuck up or you know what I’ll do.”

He tries to throw her into the back seat but she digs her heels into the ground. Her shrieks hit the air. Anger colors my vision the deepest red. I forget about the guns and the bullets and all the guys who want me dead.

I just run, the need to save her trumping every other sane thought that screams at me to get the hell out of the line of fire.

Skyla suddenly goes limp in the guy’s grip, and his arms loosen as she starts to drop to her feet. When he pulls the knife away, she junk punches him.

That’s my fucking girl.

With a loud grunt, the guy pulls her up by the hair, slams her head into the side of the truck, and throws her listless body into the back seat.

“You motherfucker,” I yell, pointing my gun at him because I finally have a clear shot now that she’s down for the count. “You’re dead, do you hear me?”

A hail of bullets targets me from the other direction and I dive to the ground, using my arms and feet to drag myself over to my truck door for cover.

The kidnapper climbs into the truck and slams the door shut. Tires kick up gravel, sending clouds of smoke into the air around them.

I crouch down low to avoid more flying bullets and then dart over to Nik’s car when they finally have to reload their guns. “Throw the fucking

thing now. They're gonna get away with Skyla."

He lights the cloth stuffed into the plastic bottle in his hand and flings it over to the group of trucks that ambushed us. It explodes before it hits the ground, spitting flames in every direction. A Kenzie specialty. She makes all kinds of bombs in her spare time, and thank fuck she was home tonight to deliver.

Now, instead of bullets cracking in the night air, there are only screams and shouts.

Good. Let those motherfuckers burn.

The squeal of tires around ground zero makes my chest tighten. "We need to go. Now."

We run toward Nik's car. My eyes sting from the fumes. Blinking fast, I jump into the passenger side and barely have time to slam the door shut before he starts the car and slams his foot on the gas.

I pull a new magazine from my back pocket and swap it for the now empty one in my Glock as he speeds around the charred mess in the middle of the empty road.

"Thank fuck you're so far off the main road." Peering out the tinted windshield, I can make out a couple of guys on the ground, clutching their throats from the fumes. The other one lies still, covered in flames. "Drive around them and get me close."

We have a very small window, but there's no way these guys are getting away alive.

Nik swings the steering wheel around, tires skidding for the sharp left. He slows down as we pass the guys on the ground. One by one, they stop moving, the orange flames jumping around them. They'll be ash soon enough.

"I made a call before I got here," Nik says, almost reading my mind. "My guys will take care of the cleanup."

I crane my neck, keeping the taillights of the truck in sight. "Drive faster. You're gonna lose them."

The Challenger lurches forward like Nik just hit a button for light speed mode. I slam backward against my seat. We don't have much time before escaping this maze of dark roads. My only shot to stop that truck before we lose it is to blow out its tires.

I lower my window, point my gun at the rear right tire, and fire.

The truck swerves just before the bullet hits the air.

“Who the hell are you even shooting at?”

“I don’t know, but they’ve got Skyla.” My lips press tight together and I line up my next shot. Again, the fucker jerks the wheel.

I feel Nik’s eyes on me so I keep my focus on the truck. “Is this really about revenge, Z? Or is it something else? Because you’re trying real hard right now not to look desperate to get that girl back, and I can see right through it.”

Jesus. That’s the second time someone called me out on my twisted obsession. Looks like I need to work on my poker face.

I grit my teeth. The entrance to the main road is too damn close. If I can’t stop the truck before they make it out of here, there’s no way I can fire off shot after shot trying to take out a tire in Florida traffic.

We’ll lose them.

I’ll lose her.

“She’s our leverage. Without her, we’re fucked. Van Dyne and St. James will cripple our businesses if her wedding to Tyson happens.”

“And there’s no other reason why you suddenly decided to marry her yourself? Without running it past any of us, the ones who make the fucking rules and set the direction for this family?”

I twist toward him. “It’s not like any of you could do it. I’m the only one without a fucking ankle shackle right now, yeah?”

“I’m sure the girls would love to hear you call them ankle shackles.”

“I made the sacrifice because I could. That’s all.” This time, I avoid the accusation in his eyes.

“Just like you sacrificed your life running into a flood of bullets to save her from that guy in the truck? Come on, Zak. Don’t bullshit me. You didn’t do that to save our family. And lemme tell you, when you put your dick before your responsibilities, shit gets very complicated. And dangerous. Keep the head on your neck clear, or else you’re the one who’s gonna go down in flames.”

I let out a frustrated sigh.

Nobody other than Val knows about what happened between me and Skyla the night before the championship football game that ended me; otherwise, this would be a very different conversation. Nobody knows that I’ve been haunted by this infatuation with Skyla for years, and that it all bubbled to the surface after seeing her at The Surf Club last night. And then hearing that she was marrying that shit for brains prick made my obsession

flare up like a raging case of herpes.

I had to stop it from happening, no matter what.

Who the hell ever thought I'd have gotten my dick in such a twist over my ex-best friend's geeky little sister? For years, I knew she had a thing for me, but never gave it a second thought until I had to use her feelings against her to get something I needed.

After that night, I tried to bury my feelings, pretending that what happened between us didn't affect me. But it did. More than I'd ever admit to anyone, especially her.

Seeing her at that club a few years ago brought it all back. And for as much as I'd wanted to fuck her senseless against a wall, to feel her body plastered against mine, to hear her scream my name over and over, I wanted to hurt her. The overwhelming urge to punish her for her part in crushing my future grabbed hold, and I knew if I didn't send her away, I'd deliver on every sadistic thing I'd ever wanted to do to her.

But ever since I saw her last night, that need for revenge has become tangled with lust and longing, and I can't separate them, no matter how hard I try.

A dark car jumps out of the trees, speeding toward the truck. Blinding blue and red lights flash in the distance before the sound of the sirens pierce the air.

"Shit." Nik spins the wheel, making a hard right into the bushes next to us. "Fucking branches are gonna ruin my paint job."

"You got a tracker in here?"

Nik pulls open the glove compartment and hands me a small magnetic GPS tracker. The truck skids to a stop when a car pulls out in front of it, blocking its path. I stay low to the ground, moving as fast as I can toward the back of the truck and staying out of sight at the same time. I stick the tracker behind the rear right wheel, ready to disappear into the bushes when two gunshots fire.

Something... or someone... hits the ground. Hard.

I dive to the ground, hoping like hell I blend in with the darkness so I don't end up shot, too. The truck driver slams his foot on the gas and plows the car to the edge of the road before disappearing around the corner.

Once the truck is out of sight, I run over to the guy on the ground, dropping to my knee in front of him. Snapping branches and crunching leaves let me know Nik's car is close. He pulls out of the trees, runs out of the car,

and stops next to me.

“Lieutenant Nogueres,” I say, raking a hand through my hair. For years, the guy busted our balls every chance he got, looking to send my brothers to the clink for any little dipshit thing he could get on them. But not too long ago, he ended up saving my brother Taras’s ass when he was chasing down our family’s biggest enemy. I guess he figured saving Taras was the lesser of two evils. After that, Nogueres pretty much left us alone.

I straighten up. “You got a read on the tracker?”

Nik pulls out his phone and scrolls through a few screens. A minute later, he nods. “I’ve got them. They’re still driving.”

“Ironic that we wanted him dead for all those years, and now that he lays off of us, he gets popped.” I stare down at Lieutenant Nogueres, my lips twisting. For so long, we’ve been dodging death jabs that were launched at us from our own inner circle, namely my dead brother, Dima. This guy actually saved us, and now he’s gone.

I fist my hair, pacing in front of Nik’s car. “This doesn’t make sense. Tyson wouldn’t want to hurt Skyla. He wants to marry her because of what her family’s influence will do for him. That guy wanted to hurt her.”

“What are you saying?”

“I don’t think it was Tyson who sent those guys. He knew I took her, but how the fuck could he have found her here?”

My lips pull into a tight line.

You never really know a person’s true colors until the shit hits the fan.

An icy chill grabs hold of my gut.

Even if you’ve known him your entire life.

CHAPTER 15

SKYLA

My head lolls to the side, the leather seat cooling my cheek. Crippling pain explodes across my forehead. I slowly crack open my eyes and bring my fingers to the area of the throbbing ache. Wincing, I pull my hand away from the golf ball-sized lump.

White and red lights flash across my eyes, blurred by my squinting out the tinted window. I take a deep shuddering breath, but the agony intensifies like someone is swinging a hammer at both of my temples.

What the hell happened?

Bass pumps through the speakers as the truck zooms down a traffic-congested road, the pounding beats like clashing gongs in my ears. Slowly, I twist my head away from the window. The last thing I remember was being in Zak's truck and leaving Nik's house. Now I'm in a truck going God only knows where.

"Who are you?" I manage to rasp the words despite the agony assaulting my head.

A dark-haired man with beady, menacing eyes glowers at me from the passenger seat. "Someone who's gonna make sure your family is punished for the crimes your father and his business partners have committed."

"I don't understand. What crimes?" The pounding in my skull muffles my words, almost drowning them out completely.

The man turns around in the seat and I recoil. With thick, dark eyebrows, eyes black as the night sky, and a full beard, he has the kind of ominous look that makes my gut wrench and my heart thrash. His hate-filled gaze sweeps over me. My skin crawls under his invasive glare. I clutch the sides of my robe tight around me as if the silky fabric can protect me from whatever the

hell is going on in his mind.

What the hell *is* going on in his mind?

“You can have all the money in the world and still not have everything, Skyla. Not even close. Because people like your father, Nathan Van Dyne, and their other partners like to take. And when they take, they cause pain.” His voice drops to a low growl. “And this time, it will be me who takes from them.”

Tears sting my eyes. “Why am I here? I didn’t do anything.”

The man flips around in his seat. “It doesn’t matter. I could easily kill the men responsible, but that’s too easy. They need to experience the kind of darkness they’ve unleashed on other innocent people. Kylian knows all about that pain now.”

I choke on a breath, clutching the side of the seat. “My brother. Oh my God, that was you at the hotel today. Is he—?”

The man twists to look at me again, one eyebrow lifted. “Business is war. There are always casualties.”

“You fucking bastard.” My voice shakes. “Why are you punishing us? Whatever my father did has nothing to do with me or my brother.”

“Maybe not, but it will hit your father hard. Just like your sister’s death did.” He shakes his head. “People get so damn greedy. They never think about consequences. And those are the people who need to suffer.”

He turns around again. “Sending our message today... on the day you were supposed to cement your union to the Van Dyne family... is perfect. Malikov may have beaten us to the kidnapping part, but we have you now. It’s over. For all of you.”

He knows it was Zak who took me from the hotel. How freaking small is this criminal underworld, anyway?

A sudden wave of nausea crashes over me, and I put a hand on the back of the driver’s seat to steady myself. The truck keeps going faster and faster... or is that my brain working in overdrive to figure out how the hell I’m going to get out of this?

I press my palms against the pebbled leather, my skin prickled with sweat.

Laney...

Questions bounce around my mind like frenzied ping-pong balls.

Is that why Dad could never talk to me about the accident? Did it have something to do with him and his work? Was it guilt that ate at him? Or was

it regret that he sacrificed his daughter for money?

Blood rushes between my ears, bile creeping up the sides of my throat.

Does Mom know?

She and Tyson's parents were talking and laughing like asshole buddies last night at The Surf Club. Was she playing a role... the dutiful wife... for my dad's sake? Does she know who and what he really is?

After Laney died, a light went out in Mom's eyes. She hasn't been the same since. Laney was so much like her, and I was always the odd one out. Maybe a tiny part of me, as resentful as I am for giving up my dreams, hoped that this marriage might bring us closer together, that maybe I could reignite that sparkle in Mom's empty gaze by doing what's expected of me the way Laney always did.

My stomach clenches. I stab the button to lower the window before it revolts all over my UGGs.

"What the fuck are you doing?" the driver yells when a rush of air fills the cabin of the truck.

I gag and heave, hanging out the window for a long minute afterward and dragging in deep breaths of dank air.

I've been yanked out of school, pulled away from my plans to become a surgeon, my life effectively crushed... all because of my father's alleged greed. And for all the time I've been grouching about everything I was forced to give up, I never once stopped to think about what Laney lost, and how she'd gotten tangled up with the Van Dyne family. I chalked it up to unrequited obsession on Tyson's part.

Dread seeps into my skin like the most toxic poison at the revelation.

Laney was the first target.

I drop back against the headrest once I'm finished, using my sleeve to wipe my mouth. My chest shudders with quiet sobs.

Kylian was the second one.

And I'm the last.

I squeeze my eyes shut. I had my chance to run before.

Maybe I can still save myself.

Even if I have to wander around in scraps of fabric with no shoes, no food, and no money, it has to be better than living as a prisoner, a victim of someone else's fucking bad choices.

Death would be preferable.

And if I stick around much longer, it will be inevitable.

“Get off here.” The man in the passenger seat points to the upcoming exit sign, pulls out his phone, and stares at the screen. I can tell he’s looking at his phone because it gives his profile a fluorescent glow in the darkness of the truck.

Are they taking me somewhere where they can kill me and dump me off like a bag of trash?

The driver pulls off the exit ramp, and the truck slows for a red light at the end of the road.

I swallow hard. It’s not the best place for me to escape, but without knowing where they’re taking me and what they’re going to do to me, it might be my only shot for survival.

I had a chance before and I lost it.

I can’t make that mistake twice.

My pulse jumps, my fingers wrapping around the door handle as I quickly look up at the red traffic light.

It won’t stay that way for long. Open the door. Jump. Now.

A horn honks behind us, jarring me. I twist my neck just in time to see light beams shine into the back of the truck.

“Fuck,” the guy up front mutters, turning to peer out the back windshield. “Watch out!”

The driver swings the steering wheel to the left to avoid getting hit. But he’s too late. The piercing sound of metal crashing against metal fills my ears, the smell of burning rubber choking me for the second time tonight. I crash into the side of the door, my good arm smashing against the handle.

The truck spins, doing a one-eighty in the middle of the road. A scream erupts from my lips when I see the headlights coming straight for us again. I scramble to the other side of the back seat and cling to the bar on the side of the door, preparing for another hit.

Except this one never comes.

The car skids to a stop just before impact. I don’t think. I don’t breathe. Pushing open the back door, I dive to the ground, yelping as I fall onto my injured arm. For what feels like the longest minute of my life, I’m paralyzed by the worst kind of pain I’ve ever experienced. I have to push through it, dammit. The threats are too real, too close, and too fucking terrifying to stay still and let them ravage me.

I somehow find the strength to drag myself to my feet. Then I run until my chest erupts into flames and I can’t drag another breath into my lungs. My

knees buckle, legs folding under me.

So many lies. So many more secrets.

Tears stream down my cheeks, my vision rippling as if I was staring into the surface of a lake during a rain shower.

I keep going, my body faltering with each step.

This is it, my chance at freedom. I can't miss it again. I won't.

This time, I don't look back.

A powerful arm locks around my waist, nearly sweeping my legs out from under me. The air rushes from my lungs when my back smashes into the person who grabbed me.

I scream, fighting him with my three working limbs.

I won't be his next victim. Fuck that!

A tattooed hand closes over my chin and squeezes my cheeks before drawing my ear close to his lips.

The familiar and smoldering scent of spice wafts into the air and I pull it in deep, letting it infuse me. My arm goes limp, feet rooted to the spot when his voice hums against my earlobe.

“There's no escape, baby girl. You should know that by now. And now I'm gonna make sure you never forget it.”

CHAPTER 16

ZAK

S kyla's soft hair brushes against my face, her body melting against me. For a split second, I let myself forget why we're standing here on the off-ramp of the Florida Turnpike, why I had my brother crash his car into the assholes who tried to take her from me, and why I was so desperate to get her back.

I push all the anger and guilt down deep. My focus is only on her. Tiny mewls slip from her lips when my grip on her bare skin tightens. A light perfumed scent tempts me to drag her head backward and bury my nose in her sweet-smelling neck.

But reality jerks my cock.

I'm not her savior.

I can't ever be.

Nik is already challenging my ability to follow through on the fucking brilliant plan that I wish I'd never come up with in the first place. If I give in to the emotions poisoning my brain, any sliver of respect he has for me will shrivel up like a dick in a cold pool.

Same goes for the rest of my brothers.

My priorities were reset for me four years ago when the doctors told me I'd never play football again and I lost my chance for a college scholarship. In a blink, I went from a future as an NFL hopeful to one of a Bratva enforcer.

The priority hasn't changed since then and nobody, especially Skyla St. James, will take my focus off what I need to do.

I grit my teeth.

What I need to do.

Four years ago, Val needed my help. She gave me one lousy job to do, and I fucked it up because I let Skylia creep under my skin. Lust and anger screwed with my head... *both* of my heads, and I let my sister down.

I let my whole family down, not that any of them know it.

Things might be different if I'd done what I was supposed to... instead of doing Skylia.

But Skylia can help me fix what I broke years ago. And I won't let anything stop me from destroying the people who hurt us... including her father and Nathan Van Dyne.

Power is the deadliest weapon you can use, and taking down our rivals will be the most lethal ammunition.

"I knew it was you." Her shoulders shudder. "I could smell you."

"I hope that's not a bad thing."

"My life ended today. Do you know that? I'm not dead, but I may as well be. All the secrets and lies that put me here tonight, in a fucking bra and panties, crushed my future. People who are getting married usually look forward to the rest of their lives together. I didn't get that luxury. Instead, my life was bartered for money, and my future went up in smoke and flames when this ring was shoved onto my finger." She slowly turns, her blue eyes red and puffy around the edges. "No wedding. But I still get the gift of misery ever after."

Tears cling to her dark eyelashes, wedding makeup long gone after a full day of tears washed it away. Two gunshots behind me make her jump. She presses herself into my chest, resting her head against my shirt.

An engine roars. I twist around to see the truck skid on the side of the road before veering back onto the concrete. A body lies at Nik's feet. Bright-red taillights disappear into traffic.

Skylia gasps and runs toward Nik. "That's the driver."

"The other asshole shot him and shoved him out the door before I could get close." Nik nods at me, his eyes narrowed, accusation shooting from his gaze like a flaming spear. "You could've gotten to him. But you went after the runaway bride instead."

He doesn't bother to hide the criticism. Just lets it ooze from his words.

I don't need to read between any lines, either. He left them out completely. Made it real simple for me to get his message.

Received, fucking loud and clear.

"You know why." I clench and unclench my fists.

“Yeah. I do.” He turns back toward the guy on the ground. Sirens blare in the distance.

“Let’s grab what we can. The cops will be here soon. We can’t be seen nosing around the car, especially with Nogueres’s body so close to your house. They’ll haul us in for that alone.” I jog over to the dead guy and feel around in his pockets for a wallet or phone.

Nik digs around the center console. “Empty. Nothing here. I bet that fuckhead took everything before he shoved this poor bastard out of the truck.”

“He got away.” Skylia presses a hand to her forehead and sinks to the ground. “That means he’ll be back for me. He has a message to send and we’re it. Laney, Kylian, and me.”

“Don’t get comfortable.” I pull her up by her good arm. “The cops are on the way, so we need to be, too.”

Skylia looks up at me, a fierce glare in her blue eyes. “Didn’t you just hear what I said?” She jumps to her feet and stomps over to me before shoving me hard. “You know what? Fuck you, Zak. Fuck you, fuck your family, fuck my asshole father, fuck the Van Dynes, and fuck my life!”

Nik lets out a low whistle. “Listen, princess, if you’re gonna have a meltdown, do it in the back of my car. I’m not getting pinched because of your problems. I’ve got enough of my own to deal with.”

Skylia spins around, pointing at Nik. “Fuck you, too, Nik. I never liked you. I always thought you were a raging asshat.”

“Pretty accurate.” Nik shrugs. “It’s not like I haven’t been called worse. Now get in the fucking car, or you’re gonna end up like this sorry motherfucker.”

“Did you hear me?” she yells. “I just found out—”

I grab her arm and tug her close. A spark of current flows between us, shooting straight to my groin, so tight with longing. “You’re not the first one to find out your entire life is fucked because your own blood screwed you over for money,” I growl. “We’ve lost people, too. And it sucks. But getting pinched by the cops isn’t the way to take back control.”

“They’ll find me again. Just like they found Laney and Kylian. And that’s if Tyson doesn’t find me first.” Her chin lifts in defiance. “Someone is going to kill me. So how’s that for your little plan to marry me, huh? You’re assuming I’ll actually make it through the engagement alive.” Her nostrils flare, teeth clenched so tight her jaw might actually crack from the pressure.

The sirens get louder.

“I’m your best shot at surviving.” I bend over, lift her, and fling her over my shoulder.

She screams. “Ouch! My arm, you animal.”

“I’ll stitch it back together later. Maybe. And while I’m at it, I might stitch your lips together, too.”

Her fist flies against my back, over and over.

But instead of making me angry, it makes my dick hard.

A few seconds later, we’re on the road toward my place.

“I’ll take care of your truck.” Nik swings his steering wheel to turn around a corner. “Nobody is following us, and nobody will think you’re home if your truck isn’t there.” He slants me a look. “Today was a world-class fuckup, Z.”

“No shit,” I mutter.

“We need to find out who the hell else is after her.”

“Next time they try to kidnap her, I’ll get a name and number.” I roll my eyes and stare out the window.

“Shove your sarcasm up your ass. We need to know what we’re up against.”

“It makes sense that someone wants to fuck with St. James. He’s a low-life bastard.”

“How the hell did they find her? You said Kylian spotted you outside the hotel, right?”

“Yeah.” The stress knot on the back of my skull just keeps getting bigger and bigger.

“Kylian didn’t do this. The guy who grabbed me said Kylian was dead.” Skyla’s voice cracks. “Dead, as in, can’t talk, dickwad.”

“He’s not dead, for fuck’s sake. I told you.” I ball my hands into tight fists, all the ways I plan to punish Skyla for shooting off that mouth wallpapering my brain. “They went to the hotel looking for Kylian and Skyla.”

“You don’t know that. You don’t know anything!”

This time when Skyla tries to hit me, I catch her by the wrist. “Do it again, and I’ll handcuff you to the ceiling of my bathroom tonight.”

She wrenches her wrist out of my grip, and I let her go so that she flies back against the seat.

“Did anyone follow you to my place?” Nik asks.

“No.” I pause. “But *someone* knew where to find us.”

“Fuck, you’re right,” Nik mutters, slamming his fist on the steering wheel. “Luka’s gonna be pissed when he hears what went wrong and how we need to fix it. This was supposed to be a simple job.”

I scoff. “Yeah, well, it’s not like she’s not the most agreeable captive.”

“Stop talking about me like I’m not even here.”

I fire off a glare over my shoulder. “You tried to run twice. You know what they say. Third time’s the fucking charm. Wanna test me?”

“Let’s be very clear. The only low-life bastard in this car is *you*.” Hatred spews from her words, but she doesn’t volunteer anything more, which is a damn good thing considering Nik has no clue why she has this opinion of me. He just thinks she’s a spoiled, feisty bitch. And damn, he’s right about that.

This girl is as fierce as she is brilliant, and I’m going to love every second that it takes to break her.

A few minutes later, Nik pulls into the entrance of my building on Brickell Bay Drive. Crowds of people my age flood the sidewalks, walking in and out of bars and restaurants like they don’t have a care in the world. Lucky fucks.

Some eye Nik’s smashed-up front bumper and try peering into the car, but nobody can see through the window tinting. Anonymity in our line of work is always a good thing.

“I don’t know why you love living in this shithole.” Nick pulls up to the front door of the complex.

“It’s a four-thousand-square-foot condo with an oceanfront view, not a fucking slum.” I push open the door and step onto the concrete, the stress knot shooting from my neck all the way down my left side like a raging fireball. I stand still for a few seconds and wince, the pain so intense it actually makes my eyes sting.

“You okay?”

I wave my hand at him. “Fine,” I rasp. “I’m fucking fine.”

I force myself to turn and pull open Skylia’s door. She pulls the sides of her robe closed and steps out of the car.

“I’ll call you tomorrow. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.” Nick chuckles and I slam the passenger side door closed... but not before Skylia bends over to flip him off.

Can’t help cracking a smile at that. Nik can be a real dick sometimes.

I pull out my key and stick it in the lock before twisting open the door to

the building. A few minutes later, we're standing inside my foyer. Skyla looks around, her nose scrunching like she's just sniffed rotting trash.

"You seriously live like this?"

"Like what?" I kick off my shoes and walk into the kitchen, stabbing pains assaulting my left leg with every step I take. Fuck, I need a drink.

Or five.

"Like a total slob. This place is a mess."

"I'm a busy guy. I don't have a lot of time to clean." I pull open the refrigerator door and grab a beer.

"Do you have time to make a phone call and hire someone?"

I pop off the cap and take a long gulp, the ice-cold liquid pouring down my throat like it's water. I guzzle the whole thing down in seconds before slamming the bottle on my kitchen island.

Skyla walks toward me, her arms folded over her chest and her eyes on the empty bottle. "Are you just going to leave that there?"

I lift an eyebrow. "Maybe."

"You're disgusting. This place is a health hazard."

"You really are a pain in the ass. I didn't ask for your opinion about my place, did I?"

"If this is going to be my ivory tower, I'd like it not to be featured on *Hoarders*."

"That mouth never stops, does it?" I take another beer from the fridge, and this time after I pop off the cap, I toss it across the room, smirking as she recoils, her face a twisted mask of horror.

"It's a bottle cap, baby girl. Not meat covered with maggots."

"Which I'm sure you have plenty of in that refrigerator."

"Relax. It's cluttered, not dirty. Don't be so neurotic. And if you hate it so much, get on your knees and clean it."

I put the bottle down on a nearby coffee table and inch toward her. Her eyes widen, darting left and right for an escape route, like she's a caged mouse, and I'm the big bad kitty about to pounce.

She's not wrong about that last part.

And right now, it's the only thing that can blunt my pain.

"Or..." I drop my voice and close the space between us, fisting one side of the silky robe. She closes her own hand over mine, her breaths shallow. The other side of the robe falls open to reveal lush tits popping out of the top of her bra. Her nipples poke through the lace, so hard they could cut through

every window in here. “Just get on your knees.”

CHAPTER 17

SKYLA

“Take your hand off of me.” I dig my fingernails into Zak’s sun-bronzed skin, but he only scrunches the fabric of my robe tighter in his fist.

I can’t let this happen to me again. If I get sucked into his sexy, smoldering undercurrent again, I may not make it out alive.

Heat pools between my legs when Zak presses his chest into me, backing me into the kitchen island. A corner of the marble countertop jabs my hip bone, but my biggest concern right now isn’t physical pain.

If I let him touch me, he will reduce me to the hot mess I became four years ago, the one who fled the city for college so I could get away from him and bury the memories of our sinful, forbidden night together. It was definitely one I’ll remember forever, and not because of how otherworldly and incredible it was to finally be with the guy I’ve been in love with for as long as I can remember.

It’s because I was naïve enough to think that it could become more than just one night... that he saw me as more than just his best friend’s dorky sister, more than a bookworm who was more focused on reading human anatomy books than kicking back and having fun like all the other girls vying for Zak’s attention.

But if I was as smart as I think, I’d have seen through his bullshit façade. Zak Malikov is a manipulative bastard who used me like a paper napkin and then threw me away when I was covered in his filthy, dirty lies.

“You’ve grown up, baby girl.” The rough timbre of his voice hums against my cheek, and my eyes involuntarily float closed.

No, no, no! You can’t let him get away with this!

My eyelids fly back open, my mind screaming bloody murder while my back arches and hips thrust against his. Blood bubbles in my veins, simmering with pent-up lust.

His hand wraps around the back of my neck. A shiver explodes down my spine at his rough touch. He pulls my head back. My knees buckle as his demanding fingers tangle in my hair. Something clatters on the marble countertop behind me.

Zak's eyebrows furrow mid-tug. "What was that?"

"I don't know, probably a hair pin or something." My heart bounces in my chest, pumping like I'm in mid-sprint.

Don't stop...

He peers over my shoulder and reaches for whatever fell out of my hair. To be honest, I don't even know how there's anything left after the day I've had. And fuck whatever it is for interrupting us.

"What the hell is that?" he mutters under his breath, holding whatever it is in his hand. I peek up at it.

"I told you it was a hairpin."

His lips press together in a tight line, eyes narrowing to slits when he examines it up close. "It's not a hairpin." He turns and walks into the living room. There's a table set up in the corner. His back is stiff as he stalks over to one of the drawers and pulls it open.

I let out a deep sigh of defeat.

And thank you, fucking loose hairpin, for completely ruining the mood.

"What are you doing?"

But what my body really wants to ask is, "Why are you not doing anything to *me*?"

I spot a hairpin in his fingers. He sweeps his hand over it and lets out a groan. "Those bastards."

"What is it?"

Zak looks at me and dangles the pin in front of his face. "Someone put a GPS tracker on this thing. I saw it when it hit the counter. That must be how those guys found us."

"That doesn't make any sense. Who other than Tyson would have done that? And if it was Tyson, he'd have come to get me, not hire those other guys to kidnap me, or worse. The one who threw me in that truck was very clear about wanting to get revenge on my father and the Van Dynes."

Zak holds the hairpin between his fingers and goes back into the kitchen.

He rummages through another drawer and pulls out a hammer. With his stormy gaze locked on my face, he pounds the shit out of the hairpin, the tracker reduced to bits in less than a second.

And of course, he leaves them in a messy pile on the counter. Doesn't even sweep them into the trash.

He slowly advances toward me. "You know what this means, don't you?"

"Yeah. It means I'm dead. Whoever planted it knows I'm here. They're going to come for me." I grab on to the edge of the counter to keep balance when my knees buckle at the realization. Panic courses through me. "All because my father got into bed with Nathan Van Dyne. I should have known things would turn out this way. Why else would someone like you want to get in close to him? Why else would you have played me like a goddamn piano? How could I have been so blind?"

The ache in my injured shoulder moans and groans, but I fight through the pain, the emotional trauma consuming all of my focus as puzzle pieces fall together. Part of this is my fault. If I'd kept my eyes and ears open over the years, if I'd have paid more attention to what was going on at home instead of burying my head in textbooks for so long, maybe this wouldn't come as much of a shock.

Maybe I'd actually know how to handle enemy dealings and how to protect myself.

But no. I loved my blissfully ignorant bubble.

Now it's erupted, spewing ugly truths that I don't want to acknowledge because they could get me killed.

Tingling pains explode down the side of my arm. My head spins with scenarios where I end up thrown in a dumpster after being chopped up into tiny pieces after an excruciatingly horrible and torturous death.

No. Hell fucking no!

"I'm getting out of here. There's no way I'm sticking around so more of my father's enemies can find me again. I don't have that many lives left."

I dart to the front door, and just as I grasp the cool metal handle, Zak grabs me by my good shoulder and spins me around so my back slams against the door.

"You're not going anywhere."

"You can't lock me away. You think you can bargain with my life. Well, guess what? That makes you a complete idiot. My sister is dead, my brother probably is, too. All because of my father. What makes you so sure he won't

fuck you over, too? You think I'll give you some kind of leverage? He doesn't give a crap about me. How could he if he sold me to save his own ass?"

I elbow Zak in the gut, hoping to startle him enough so that I could open the door and flee down the hallway, not like I have any idea where to go in this getup of blood-splattered wedding lingerie. But my funny bone screams once it crashes into the wall of hard muscle otherwise known as Zak's chest. I double over in temporary agony, cringing through the pain.

"Dammit," I yell, stomping my slippered foot on the floor. It makes my shoulder jerk. I squeeze my eyes shut and hold it still to blunt the thrumming sensation rippling up and down the length of my arm.

"I thought I told you what would happen if you tried to hit me again. For someone so smart, you really don't ever learn your lesson." He steps forward. "I think you need some help with that."

"I'm not afraid of you." I push past Zak in a huff, still nursing my shoulder. Only when I'm out of his reach do I flip around to face him.

"I think you're very afraid because you know exactly what I can do, and you fucking loved every second of it."

"Don't flatter yourself."

"I don't need to. Your body has already told me everything I need to know. Why are you ignoring what it wants? What you know only I can deliver?"

I scoff. "What are you going to do? Punish me? Chain me up? Torture me because you're a sick bastard who gets off on hurting other people?"

As if I need to hear his answer.

I can clearly see the hunger etched into his expression, his gaze spitting sparks of desire that prickle my skin like tiny flickering embers of anticipation.

And I must be a total and complete headcase or worse, a glutton for his punishment, because I want so badly for him to teach me a lesson. So many lessons. Lessons for *years*. Drilling me over and over until they are second nature in my mind.

And I don't care how long it'll take to cover everything.

I stand still, my feet rooted to the shiny tile floor while Zak approaches with the stealth of a predatory jungle beast.

"Not just other people." His eyes light up with fury. I stare into his turbulent blue irises, wildfires blazing bright in the depths. "Only you."

CHAPTER 18

ZAK

S kyla's fear hangs heavy in the air, so thick I can bite through it. She watches every step I take, her eyes glued to mine as I close the distance between us.

She thinks she knows what comes next.

But really, she has no clue what I'm about to do to her.

Alarm bells blare out from the corners of my mind, a reminder that whoever is tracking her knows exactly where we are right now.

If I was thinking clearly, I'd do the smart thing and get her the hell out of here before all hell breaks loose.

Lust floods me like a crushing wave, submerging me to the point where I can barely suck in a breath without feeling like my lungs are going to explode. I've fantasized about this for so long, feeling her body submit to me because the erotic torment is too overwhelming to fight against.

So I'm not going anywhere.

Not until I take what I want.

What I've craved for so long.

I push the robe off her shoulders. It falls to the floor around her feet, a pool of white silk stained with deep-red blotches.

Tainted innocence.

How fucking poetic.

I reach around her back and flick open her bra, letting it drop onto the robe.

"Take off your panties," I growl. "Nice and slow."

My breath hitches when she loops her thumb into the side and pushes them off with her one working hand. She wiggles to her ankles, never

breaking her stare. Then she steps out of the slippers and kicks off the panties one long, toned leg at a time. Bright-white nail polish on her toes pops against her deep bronze skin.

I rake my eyes over the length of her curvy figure. Perfect lush tits begging for my mouth, tiny waist with hips I want to dig my fingers into while I'm fucking her senseless, plump pussy lips I want to bury my tongue between.

She flips her hair over one shoulder, tilting her head to the side like the vixen I know she is.

Skyla was a complete control freak back in high school. I want to see just how much of a freak she can be without clinging to whatever slivers of control she thinks remain in her grasp.

"This doesn't mean anything." Her voice shakes and I know she's bitching herself out right now for letting me in on what's really going on in her mind.

Because we both know it means *something*.

"I still hate you." She clenches her one fist, chin tilting upward in defiance.

Defiance that I want to punish.

"You're gonna hate me more when I'm finished with you."

We stand there, glaring at each other as the seconds creep past, knowing the danger that staying here poses. But neither of us makes a move to leave.

I grab the sides of my shirt and tear it open. Buttons pop off the fabric, flying through the air before hitting the floor. I pull it off and toss it behind me. Her eyes drop to my fingers where they work to undo the belt around my waist. I slide it out of the pant loops and smack it hard against the arm of the leather couch. It makes a satisfying whipping sound that makes my balls tighten.

Skyla swallows hard as she follows the swift path of the belt against the couch a second time. She takes a small step away, but I reach out and capture her around the waist.

"No, baby girl. You're not going anywhere." I slide my palm over the globes of her ass, squeezing the flesh tight in my fingers. My cock jumps, screaming to be released from his fabric prison. I smack her hard, her pained yelp the sweetest music to my ears.

A charge zaps my insides like I've just grabbed a livewire with wet fingers. I push her against the window overlooking Brickell Bay Boulevard

and spank her again, harder this time. Precum drips from my dick when her scream pierces the air. My skin tingles, sparks of lust firing every nerve ending.

“You deserve to be punished for everything you did today.” I bring my hand against her ass again. “You didn’t know how to keep your hands to yourself, so I’m going to do the same thing to you so you learn your lesson. And I’ll keep teaching you until you finally understand your place. You don’t raise a hand to me. You don’t shoot off that fucking mouth to me. And you don’t ever disrespect me. Do you understand?”

“I’m not your puppet. Shove your threats up your ass,” she rasps through a moan.

My cock throbs, and while I’m tempted to shove it into her mouth until she chokes, I don’t have a lot of time. So I let her comments go... for now... because not only am I close to erupting, we need to get the hell out of here.

Her body shivers in anticipation of my hand, but instead of inflicting more pain, I drop to my knees and part her plump pussy lips. I dig my fingers into her thighs, keeping them locked open while I bury my mouth between them. Sweeping my tongue over her wet slit, I let out a low groan.

“You’re so wet, baby girl. So fucking wet. Tell me how much you love my hands on you.”

Skyla’s voice is barely above a mumble. “I didn’t like it. I hated it. I hate you, too.”

Her hand nearly rips out my hair when I flick her clit with my frenzied tongue. She writhes against the window, thrusting her hips against my hungry mouth. Her cries get louder, her pleas for release ricocheting between my ears.

I bring a finger between her ass cheeks, teasing her hole while I feast on her pussy. She takes it in, clenching tight but still riding my tongue like the dirty whore I need her to be. I slide in a second finger and her whole body spasms like I’m electrocuting her with my mouth and hand. Her knees lock tight around the sides of my head like a vise.

If I had the time... fuck, what I’d do to her.

My lips curl upward when I pull my mouth away from her sweet cunt.

What I *will* do to her when I do have the time.

I flip her around so her tits are pressed against the window.

“Zak,” she rasps, her body still quaking from aftershocks. “All of those people... they’ll see us.”

“I know. And you love it.” I bring my mouth to her plump ass cheek and gently lick the red welts before sinking my teeth into them. The beast inside of me roars in response to her shocked screams. Swirls of desire snake around my insides, blood rushing to the head of my cock. My vision blurs with a haze of lust.

I fumble with my pants, tugging them open and sliding them and my boxer briefs to my knees. My cock swells, throbbing with need. My ears thunder with white noise, heart pummeling the sides of my rib cage as I loop the belt around Skyla’s neck. Holding both sides in one hand, I use my other hand to stroke my cock before lining it up between her quivering ass cheeks.

“You fucking lunatic,” she moans, slamming her hand on the pane of glass. “Crazy, twisted mother... ahh!”

Tight. Hot. So fucking forbidden.

And all the control I’ve tried to reclaim is lost with one hard thrust. I grip the sides of the belt, giving it a little squeeze as I bury myself balls deep in her ass. She chokes, her hand at her neck in an attempt to pull the belt away.

“No, baby girl. This is your punishment for defying me. If you try to fight against it,” I hiss against her ear, thrusting hard into her ass. “I will split you in two with my cock.”

I push three fingers into her pussy with my other hand. Her juices flow over my fingers, telling me exactly what I already suspected.

“You like when I threaten you. You like when I hurt you.” I pick up the pace, jerking my hips faster. I play with her clit, gently pulling on the sides of the belt while I fuck her perfect ass. I don’t tug the belt hard, giving it just enough slack for her to breathe. She gasps, her body in a complete frenzy. Her cries are muffled, her hand now digging into my hips as she rides my fingers and cock. Her muscles clamp down on my cock, pulling me deep.

My cock throbs, her slick hole blanketing me in desire. I force my eyes shut, blinding white flashes bouncing behind my lids. I drop the belt, wrapping my arm over her chest, careful not to knock into her injured arm as we move together. She thrusts her ass back against me, taking my whole dick as her screams shatter the silence, getting louder and more desperate with every passing second. Her head drops back against me, soft hair draping over my chest.

Suddenly, I’m back in her bedroom four years ago when my brain short-circuited with a completely foreign craving that I never knew existed before I was deep inside of her.

I had a job to do.

But I fell for my best friend's sister instead.

The orgasm slices through me. I clutch Skylia tight against me, tremors shuddering my body.

And fuck my life... I think it's happening all over again.

CHAPTER 19

SKYLA

Zak's head rests on my shoulder, his chest pressed tight to my back. He lets out a deep sigh, his breath fluttering against my neck like butterfly wings. I shiver in his muscled arms. A tingling sensation dances across my skin where his lips graze the back of my neck. Our hearts pump in tandem, fiercely intense beats that reverberate between my temples.

He doesn't make a move to break away. Instead, he slides his other arm around me and underneath the sling, careful to avoid jerking my bad shoulder.

But then blaring alarm bells sound off in my mind.

We've been here before, remember? He makes you feel desired, like he can't breathe without you, and then, bam!

He drops you to the curb, and while you're down, kicks you in the head. Used. Duped. Discarded.

My jaw tightens, as if my body is taking a stand against his firm grip on me.

Come on, Skyla. You know from experience that the whole post-coital act of his is total bullshit.

I can't let him have that control over me again. I spent way too long pining for the guy, and he walked away with my virginity and my heart.

I refuse to give him any more than he's already taken.

That's right. I'm in control now.

Then he runs his fingers through my hair and drags his tongue over the outer shell of my ear, exactly the way he knows drives me absolutely crazy. And I melt into him, like the whole girl power pep talk I just gave myself was just a bunch of white noise.

How utterly pathetic and sad.

Not that it makes me want to push away.

I let my eyes flutter closed, my chest still shuttering from the delicious aftershocks of that erotic assault. Goosebumps pebble my arms, my heart clenching when I feel his slick, half-hard cock pressed against my ass cheek.

“Did I hurt you?” he whispers, clamping onto my earlobe with his teeth.

Did he hurt me?

Is he kidding me? It burned like someone stuck a lit match up my ass. “Yes.”

“Good.” He sinks his teeth into the base of my neck. Not a sweet little nip, but an actual bite that sends chills scuttling down my spine.

That’s going to leave a mark.

His mark.

My pussy clenches.

He’s a vampire, and all of a sudden, I’m his very willing victim?

I can’t help the smile from creeping across my face. He is so sick and twisted, even more so than I remember. There had always been a sexy darkness about him, a dangerous aura that screamed deviant bad boy. And it drew me in the second I laid eyes on him. But since I had absolutely no game at all, he knew he had me caught.

And shame on me because I never really tried to break free.

Even after our night together.

A year later, I was still mooning over the guy who broke my heart and spirit.

Seeing him in that club, watching his expression change when he realized it was me all grown up... I was stupid enough to think that he’d be tempted to make a move.

But he couldn’t shove me away fast enough.

It took years of immersing myself in a brand-new life to forget about his monster grip on me. And here I am, right back in his arms, the place I swore I’d never be again.

When he finally lets me go, I immediately feel the loss of his warmth and ironically, his security.

My kidnapper turned savior.

And everyone always thought I was so smart.

Turns out I’m just as stupid as all the silly girls who’d fall all over themselves in the hopes of catching Zak’s attention.

“You need clothes.”

I turn around, awkwardly holding an arm over my breasts like it actually covers anything. He takes a long look at me, like a caged lion who’s been starved for days. He licks his lips, a sexy half smirk making my knees wobble.

“Nah. I think I’d rather keep you like that.”

“Might draw some stares if I leave like this.”

A shadow eclipses his lustful expression. “Fuck,” he mutters. “We need to get out of here now.”

“Where will we go?”

Zak parts his lips, then snaps them shut before dropping his eyes to my engagement rock. To call it a ring when it practically reaches my knuckle is a little bit of an understatement. He nods toward my finger and holds out his hand.

I pull off the ring and drop it into his palm. He brings it up to his eye, brows furrowed as he studies it from every angle.

No way did Tyson embed something into it.

Right?

“Looks clean.” Zak tosses the ring back to me. “But you’re gonna stop wearing it. Soon enough, you’ll be wearing mine.”

“You know what? I’m tired of your rules.” I close my fingers around the ring. “If you want me to wear your ring, then you’re going to let me call my parents. I need to hear for myself that Kylian is okay, and I want them to know I’m alive. Quid pro quo.”

A wild glimmer flickers in Zak’s blue eyes. “What did I tell you about that mouth? If you open it to give orders, I’m gonna choke you with my cock. Got it, baby girl?”

I roll my eyes. A cool rush of air from the overhead vent blows over my prickled skin, and my teeth chatter in response. “F-f-fuck you. You get what you want, I get what I want.”

“You never learn, do you? But I’m gonna enjoy replaying the lesson.”

“I don’t see what the big deal is.”

“The big deal is I have a plan, and you don’t just walk in here making demands.” He snakes his fingers around my neck, and warmth pools between my legs at the thought of the belt being tugged while he fucked me. I’ve never been so erotically charged in my life. “Unless you want to be punished again. And again.”

Ooh. Yes, please.

But I'll never admit that to him. My body, on the other hand, is a total traitor and has already given everything away too many times to count.

With one last long leer, Zak turns and walks over to a leather recliner in the corner of the room that seems to double as a portable dresser. I bite down on my lower lip, curling my toes as I watch the muscles in his back and legs tighten with each step he takes. Swirls of black ink snake down his spine and adorn his arms. And that ass... good Lord, it looks so bitable.

I force my eyes away, but they betray me, sneaking peeks while he picks through some things lying over the back of the recliner. "Is that stuff even clean?"

"Like you're in a position to be picky?" He holds up a Florida Panthers hoodie and a pair of basketball shorts. "These'll work."

I pad over to him, grab the clothes, and take a long sniff, dragging the clean scent of detergent into my lungs.

"They're clean. I just didn't have time to put them away."

With a sigh, I pull on the clothes. "Oh, you mean you didn't have time to dump them in a pile in your room?"

"Something like that." Zak swats my ass. I jump with a gasp because the welts are still tender. But that charge of electricity zaps my core, heat swirling in my belly at his loosely veiled threat. I am *such* a glutton for his punishment.

I narrowly escape his hand a second time and jog over to my slippers before sliding my feet into them. "By the way, you never told me where we're going."

"If you needed to know, then I'd tell you."

I flip my hair over my shoulder. "Your little power trip is getting old fast. Whoever found me once will find me again thanks to that hairpin tracker. We should have already left. The longer we stay, the more certain it is that they'll find us."

But even as I say the words that should chill me to the bones, I can't help but gape at the sight of Zak pulling on a pair of sweatpants. My eyes trace hungrily over the sharp, chiseled lines of his godlike body, the delicious memories of him driving me into the most erotic oblivion make the hairs on my arms spring up like tiny magnets to steel.

Flickering embers of desire that I'd never been able to fully extinguish ignite into roaring flames of passion deep within me. I should hate him for

what he did, what he took, and most of all for not giving a damn that he destroyed me.

But when that fire hose between his legs catches my eye again, I know nothing short of a loaded gun to my temple would ever have me running away from him.

Because one instantly addictive taste of the forbidden was enough to ruin me for life.

And if I'm being honest, I'd take my chances with that gun.

CHAPTER 20

ZAK

“Hello.” Skyla snaps her fingers in front of my face. “Are you with me or what?”
With her.

Fuck, I’m inside out because of her.

Every move I’ve made today has dug me deeper into a hole, and I don’t know that I’ll ever be able to claw my way out of it. Pounding into her tight, virgin ass in front of that window, causing her the most intense pain and pleasure at the same time, knowing we were on full display for curious eyes... it makes me hard just thinking about it. Not ideal since I’m supposed to be planning a fast escape from enemies who want us both dead.

I somehow manage to drag my eyes away from Skyla, my X-ray vision still seeing her naked porn star body underneath the bulky clothes she just put on. I gave her the most unflattering things I could find to hide what lies underneath, figuring she’d be less of a distraction to me when I really need to focus on what happens next, and how the hell we can ditch this place before the next shoe drops.

So dead wrong.

“I need to call my family. They need to know someone is after us.” She pauses. “And I want to make sure Kyl is okay.”

“I told you he was moving.”

She lifts an eyebrow. “Corpses move, too.”

“His eyes were open. And yes, before you say anything, I know you can be dead with your eyes open. Been on the other side of that.”

“You’re unbelievable,” she scoffs.

“Well, I had to make a new plan for myself when your fucknut brother killed my football career.”

“So you took up murder. Fabulous choice.”

The vein in my throat throbs. I grab her by the arm and yank her toward me. “Listen, baby girl, not all of us have a huge-ass brain like you. I did what I was good at.” My jaw tenses. “The second best thing I was good at.”

“My parents never did anything to you. They could be in danger.”

“They’re in bed with the wrong people, people who’ve hurt my family. They don’t deserve a warning from me.” The throbbing is so intense, it wouldn’t shock me if the damn thing exploded out of my neck. “The only thing I give a damn about is getting what’s theirs. And since I have you, that should be enough of an incentive.”

“I can’t believe I...”

But before she finishes, her eyes pop open wide and her lips snap shut.

“Can’t believe you what?”

A deep pink floods her cheeks. Her eyes drop to the floor. “Nothing. It doesn’t matter. You’re the guy you always were. A lot more depraved now, which I didn’t think was possible. But the same blood runs through your veins, and it’s toxic.”

I flash a nasty smile at her. “Just think, when I knock you up with my kid, it’ll have the same toxic blood. Just like Daddy’s.”

Since I have her gripped so tight, she can’t break away enough to hit me.

So she spits at me.

And fuck me if it doesn’t make my cock hard.

I wipe my face, the urge to strip her out of the clothes and chain her to my bed making my plans fizzle. “I will make you pay for that.”

“Promises, promises.” She struggles, but my fingers dig into her flesh, and every twist and turn makes her yelp. “I’m done with this. I’d rather take my chances being out there alone with people hunting me than staying with you.”

“If you walk out that door, you’re as good as dead, and you know it.”

“I managed to get away from you twice.”

“And I caught you both times.”

“Maybe they won’t.”

Lust swirls in the air between us, clouding my brain with the kinkiest shit I can imagine... all the dark and dirty things I want to do to my future wife to make her feel every bit of pain and suffering I’ve had to endure over these

past few years.

And only after she cries and screams and begs me to stop will I reward her with the greatest pleasure she's ever known.

Her breaths are short and sharp, fear scraped into her expression. She can lie all she wants, but she knows the risks of taking on the underworld alone.

"They will. They always do."

"I guess you'd know since you're cut from the same mafia thug cloth, right?"

I shrug. "You could say I'm kind of an expert."

She lets out a huff and kicks my ankle. I wince.

"That's two strikes."

"I hope you can count higher than the number of fingers on your hands. Because there will be plenty more where that came from."

"Then you really aren't as smart as I thought." I dip my head over hers. "Or maybe it's because you want me to make you suffer. You secretly love my hands on you, and you wanna find out just how far I'll take these punishments."

"Don't flatter yourself." She wrenches her arm away from me. "I want you dead."

"Your pussy doesn't want me dead."

"Well, she doesn't get a vote." Skylia pushes into me, her knee lifting into a threatening position. I jump backward and let go of her arm.

"I'm gonna pack a bag, and then we're gonna take off." I narrow my eyes. "Are you gonna sit down like a good girl, or do I need to tie you to a chair?"

She flips me off and sinks onto the arm of my couch, the one spot that's clear of any of my stuff. "I'm not sitting anywhere but here because I don't know what might crawl out of these piles of crap."

"Relax. I told you. It's just clutter."

"Clutter, my ass."

If she starts talking about her ass, I'm definitely gonna abort mission. So I haul ass to my bedroom, which is actually clean and free from clutter. I don't like to fuck in a mess, so I keep it pretty neat. And most of the time when I bring girls back here, they're too focused on other things to notice or care about what the other rooms look like.

I push open my bedroom door and stand in the middle of the floor, fisting my hair as another thought grabs hold of my mind.

What the hell is St. James so deep into that someone wants his kids dead? Alek wasn't specific about what he'd found out, other than Van Dyne being aligned with Denis Stepanov.

But nobody's made an attempt to take out Tyson, his brother, or sister.

It's just the St. James' kids under fire.

I pull open my closet door and stare at the racks of clothes.

And was Laney's "accident" really just that? What else isn't St. James telling his family?

I know all about secrets that can tear a family apart.

Before Valentina's almost wedding to Denis' son, Dmitri, none of us knew it was a business arrangement. Val kept Dad's secret from everyone to protect him and his mission, a mission we still don't understand. It took years for us to connect some of the dots.

Some, not even close to all of them, which scares the shit out of me when I think about what the hell else we could be up against.

Secrets have caused a lot of pain and heartache for us. We lost Mom, almost lost Luka. Trust and hearts were broken along the way. Val is still gone. And we're always on our toes, waiting for the next bomb to explode.

Because one thing's for shit sure... it always does.

I throw some t-shirts, jeans, and basketball shorts into a black duffel bag, a groan rumbling in my chest.

As a Malikov, I'm no stranger to lies and betrayal. It stings the worst when it stems from your own blood. My brother Dima had his own underground network of scumbags who wanted to crush our organization, and he handed it over on a silver platter for promises of money and power.

But even Dima, the most deceitful bastard of all, got his in the end when he was killed by one of the people he conspired against us with, leaving us to put together the jagged piece of this sordid puzzle that is now his bloody legacy.

We learned a harsh lesson because of him. The only way to survive is to always assume people want us dead. Dima and Dad made a lot of enemies over the years, and they've all tried to battle us since they died. It seems like every time we knock one off, another cocksucker surfaces.

How many more battles do we need to fight before we'll win the war?

My eyes drop to a drawer at the back of my closet. I pull it open, my jaw twitching as I run my fingers over the items staring back at me. All of the anger rushes to the surface, bubbling in my veins as it always does when

reality gut punches me.

Pain. Suffering. Loss.

I crushed Skylia. Then Kylian crushed me.

Then life took a sharp downward spiral into the fucking core of the Earth.

I have so many targets for my rage, and only one person I can unleash it on.

Because the only bit of peace I can grasp on to sits innocently in the eye of the storm.

Skylia.

She didn't deserve to be there four years ago.

She doesn't deserve to be there now.

I zip the top of my duffel and toss it over my shoulder.

But she is. And it's exactly where I need her to be.

"Please tell me that he's okay." She lets out a sigh and rests her head on her hand, slumped at the counter. "Thank God."

My spine stiffens at the sound of her relief. So the fucker's alive after all. Too bad. I grip the top handles on my duffel tight and swing it at the empty bottles right next to where Skylia stands. They fly off the marble, crashing against the floor. Shards of amber-colored glass scatter across the tile floor.

Skylia jumps, my phone clutched in her hand as she twists to look at me. Her mouth hangs open for a second before she tries to speak.

"I just wanted to find out if Kylian was okay. He is. Just a broken leg and ___"

"Shut the fuck up." I drop my bag and cross the room in a few strides. I grab the phone away from her and hold it to my ear. "Who the hell is this?"

"Zak, this is Amelia St. James. Please don't hurt Skylia. Just give her back to us. Don't put her in any more danger."

My sharp laugh hits the tense air. "You fucking people are the ones who put her in danger. I saved her ass multiple times tonight, but my protection ain't for free, *Mom*. I don't know if Skylia told you the good news, but I'm gonna marry her. And I expect a hell of a lot in return for taking her off your hands."

"You can't do that. You're not thinking straight. Please just give her back to us."

A rustling noise in my ear is followed by a deep, gruff voice. "Zakhar, this is not up for discussion or negotiation. Return Skylia to us now or there will be consequences."

“Wow, so you think using my full name is gonna have me shitting my pants, huh?” I snort. “Think again, *Dad*. I know all about your little business arrangement with Van Dyne, the sham wedding. And your daughter almost got killed because of seedy-ass scams you guys have pulled. You’ll be better off working with me. Skylia’s better with me, too. You couldn’t protect her. You couldn’t save her from being snatched by me or your enemies. She’s safe here.”

I look at Skylia’s stricken face, her eyes pooled with tears.

“But how long she stays that way is up to you. So stand the fuck down and call off your guys, or little princess is gonna be punished.” I pause, the corners of my lips lifting. “And you can take that any way you want. Let your mind wander. I dare you.”

CHAPTER 21

ZAK

“I can’t believe you just said that to him.”

Skyla’s shocked and incredulous whisper makes me chuckle.

“Well, it’s supposed to be your wedding night, yeah? You should be fucked raw.”

“I don’t have a husband, you sicko.”

“Not yet.” I walk back to pick up my duffel bag and unzip it again. I toss in a few magazines and two guns. I grab a jacket, throw it on, and stick another gun into the waistband of my sweatpants. But I need something else.

I scour the room until the gleaming handle of my stiletto knife catches my eye. I grab it from a table near the couch and turn toward Skyla. I press the button, a stainless steel blade shoots from the top. I hold it in front of her face before laying the blade on the tip of her nose. She stiffens, not moving a single muscle.

“Are you wondering what I’m gonna do with this knife?”

She swallows hard but doesn’t answer.

Defiance.

Good, I’ll fuck that out of her later. *Hard.*

“Yeah. Now you are.” I pull it away and retract the blade before sticking it in my pocket. “Let’s go.”

Slinging my bag over my shoulder again, I walk toward the front door and poke my head into the hallway. It’s brightly lit and quiet. I step into the hallway, wait for Skyla to join me, then pull my door closed. I twist my key in the lock and guide her toward a back staircase.

“Why aren’t we going out the front?”

I push open the stairwell door and palm my gun. “Nobody is gonna know

we left, not even my brothers' guys. Nobody will see us; nobody will hear us. And pretty soon we'll be lost on Brickell Bay Boulevard."

"On foot?"

"It's just up the road a little bit. A little walk won't kill us."

Skyla huffs. "No, but a drive-by might."

We get to the bottom of the stairwell. I give the door a shove, the Bay air muggy and stifling. We leave the air-conditioning and step into the soup. I pull at my t-shirt a few seconds afterward. It sticks to me like a piece of Saran Wrap.

I look at Skyla. Her skin glistens with sweat, but she doesn't make a move to mop it off. There's a boutique hotel a few blocks up. Very exclusive. Only a few suites. Nobody will go looking for us there. And I think I made it damn clear to Stuart St. James what I'll do if he makes a single dipshit move.

Except he doesn't know I'm gonna make good on all my threats whether or not he makes said dipshit move.

I reach down and lace my fingers with hers as we walk, that fucking rock scraping against my fingers. "I told you to take this thing off."

She sidesteps a group of drunk girls in bikini tops and the shortest shorts I've ever seen. They slow down and give me the side-eye, letting out a low whistle. I swallow a laugh when Skyla stops short and twists to face them.

"He's taken. Move the fuck on."

One of the girls stupidly sways closer, blasted out of her mind. "Maybe he'd like to take another car for a test drive. Maybe one that's not buried under a huge mound of clothes."

"Keep walking or I'll tear those extensions out of your head." Skyla lets go of my hand and balls up her fist, keeping Tyson's ring pointed outward.

The girl gapes at the ring and stumbles backward. "Bitch."

"Whore." Skyla narrows her eyes. "Go back to your brothel."

She lets out a satisfied snicker as they stagger past us and starts walking again. With a look at me over her shoulder, she jerks her head. "Come on."

"Number one rule when you're trying to fly under the radar: don't cause a fucking scene."

She looks at me, batting her eyelashes. "I didn't. A scene would have been me pulling out those horrible extensions."

"Just because she looked at me." I shake my head. "I didn't think you were the jealous type."

"Don't be too flattered. I'm pissed off, and they were being bitches."

I wrap my arm around her waist and pull her close. “Don’t try to bullshit me. You were gonna fight for me.”

She tries to squirm away from me. “Whatever. You’re not worth it.”

“You sure about that?” I lean in close, grabbing on to her earlobe with my teeth. “Would that sweet pussy of yours agree?”

“She’s a fucking idiot.”

“Don’t say that about her. My cock loves her. And you love him.”

Her eyes flash, blazing with anger. “Maybe I did. Once. But that was a very long time ago. And he doesn’t deserve anything else from me now. Neither do you.”

“You’ve got a lot of fire in that body. I wanna make it rage.”

“No, you want to know you still have power over me. That’s all this is,” she hisses. “You want to use me again, just like you did last time. You toyed with me, and I was so fucking stupid for falling for your lies. I hate myself for that almost as much as I hate *you*.”

This time when she wrestles herself out of my grip, I let her go. She stalks ahead of me, not having any idea where we’re going. I follow behind, my temples morphing into stress knots that decide now’s a good time to play ping-pong with each other.

Somebody is after her.

And I need to protect her.

I fist the sides of my head. Fuck, it’s happening again.

This is not about her. Or me and her.

This is for my family. They’re the reason why I need to keep her safe.

But my cock doesn’t care.

It didn’t care four years ago.

Neither did my heart.

I wanted her, so I used my job as an excuse to get close to her.

Now I’m doing the same thing, and Nik knows it.

Pretty soon, the rest of my brothers will know it, too.

And I’ll lose all credibility with them.

I’ll be Nik’s peon for fucking ever. They’ll never trust me to run my own show if I can’t figure out a way to beat Van Dyne and Stepanov.

And my second attempt at a career will come crashing down around me.

We come to a set of buildings that back up to the water. The wrought iron fence is lined with shrubs and grasses, so thick the fence is almost invisible against them. I pull out my keys and jog so that I’m in lockstep with Skylia. I

jingle the keys and point to a lock on our left. She shoots me a curious look.

“How do you check in?”

“I don’t.” With a quick look around us, I decide it’s safe to enter. I stick the key in the lock and push the gate open the slightest bit. Skyla shimmies through and I follow, locking the gate behind me.

The plants open to a clearing with a pool. White lights shine below the surface, casting a cobalt glow on the still water. Two fire pits sit on each end of the rectangular pool. A set of stairs sits in the middle.

“What kind of hotel is this?” Skyla looks at me, her eyebrows knitted together.

“It’s not a hotel. Not officially, anyway.”

“So what is it... unofficially?”

“A family friend owns it. Just bought it recently. It’s kind of like a refuge... a place for people in our organization to go if things get hot. It’s not open to the public, and it’s easy to lay low. I’ve never stayed here before, but I thought it might be the best choice for tonight. Nobody knows we’re here. It’ll be safe.”

She walks over to one of the bamboo lounge chairs next to the pool and sinks into it. “Safety is relative.”

Maybe she didn’t want me to hear that since she mumbled her words.

But damn if my curiosity isn’t piqued by them.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

With a cold glare, she pulls her lips tight and tilts her face up at me. “You’re not stupid, Zak. It means that the perception of safety is one thing, but the reality is a whole other story.”

“Still not getting it.”

She rolls her eyes. “Jesus, do I need to spell it out for you? Keeping me tucked away from whoever is looking to use me to get revenge on my father seems logical and smart and makes sense because I’m out of harm’s way. Your insane marriage plans stay intact since you have your precious leverage in a gilded cage.”

“But...?”

Her pained eyes glimmer in the moonlight, as deep in color as the pool water. I could drown in them... again... if I let myself. Her hair gleams, a tangled mess of sexed-up hair that shines like a halo. Appropriate because she’s an angel... an angel tainted by me.

The Devil.

“But being with you is more dangerous to me than an army of my father’s most vengeful enemies, and if given the choice, I’d rather battle them with buckets full of rusty nails and paintballs than have my heart impaled with your lies again.”

CHAPTER 22

SKYLA

Zak cups my chin tight, his fierce eyes almost black in the darkness. “Is that supposed to make me feel bad for you, Skyla? That you got hurt because you trusted someone you shouldn’t have?”

I smack his hand away from my face. “I didn’t say it to make you feel bad, not like you ever would because you’re a callous, blackhearted bastard. I did it to myself. I blame *myself*. I just wanted you to know I’d rather face death than do it again.”

“You don’t have that choice.”

I spring out of the chair, my pulse leaping into my throat. It thrums and throbs, blood rushing between my ears like roaring rapids. “This isn’t the Dark Ages. You can’t take away my freedom.”

“I only took it with the intent to buy.”

I crush my fist against his hard bicep and damn, it hurt. He captures my wrist in his tight grip. “You did it again. What did I tell you about showing respect?”

“Oh, fuck you and your demands. I only wish I had a gun so I could shoot you with it,” I seethe, struggling against him.

He reaches behind his back with his free hand and pulls out the gun he’d stuck back there while we were still at his condo. Holding it up in front of my face, his lips lift into a slow, menacing smile. “A gun like this?”

His hand moves from my wrist to my hair. His fingers tangle in the back, massaging my scalp in a way that makes my entire body tingle. My eyes droop closed for a second, and my mind trips back to that night. I remember his fingers in my hair, teasing me the exact same way, driving me mad with lust.

Power and control.

He wants it.

He has it.

But I can't let him know it. I need to grab some of it back, now before it's too late and I lose it forever.

My eyes fly open. He fists my hair, leaving my hand free to take the gun.

"Take it." His gruff voice ripples through me, humming against my cheek. "It's what you want, right?"

He forces it against my hand, urging my fingers to snatch it from him. I slowly grasp the handle. It's heavy, heavier than I expected, I guess, because it's loaded. The textured grip rubs against my sweaty palm.

"Put your finger on the trigger." He tugs my head backward, dragging his tongue down the column of my neck. I let my eyes float closed again and wait for his mouth to pull me into the deliciously erotic abyss.

The gun hangs from my limp hand while he sets my skin ablaze with his lips, tongue, and teeth. Heat coils in my belly, snaking through my insides.

I moan when his tongue traces the outer shell of my ear, his breath hot against my face. "You're a liar. You don't want to shoot me. You just wanna fuck me."

"No," I rasp, my breath hitching as his tongue navigates a determined path around the back of my neck. He nips at my skin, each tug of his teeth making the sparks in my gut ignite like fireworks on the Fourth of July. "I want to kill you."

"Prove it." He pulls his mouth away and backs up before taking the gun out of my hand. With one hand, he slides my arm out of the sweatshirt sleeve, my slinged arm still nestled underneath the fabric. Then he yanks it over my head and tosses it onto the chair. He raises my hand and wraps my fingers around the gun handle. Still, I can't point it at him. My heart clenches at the thought.

Because he's right.

I am a liar.

But Zak doesn't like it when instructions aren't followed. He nudges my hand upward, forcing me to point the gun at him. My hand wobbles, fingers quivering as they grip the handle.

"Do it. Shoot me, just like you said you wanted to do."

Tremors assault my hand, the barrel jerking around in every direction but Zak's.

His sexy smirk makes my belly flutter. “Told ya. *Liar.*”

I grit my teeth and swallow hard, trying with everything in me to steady my hand. I slide my finger over the trigger and stare at him. I try to ignore his taunting gaze, the way his eyes glow against his tan skin, the way his tattoos creep up the sides of his neck and peek through the top of his t-shirt, the way his knowing smirk dares me to extinguish him from my life.

My hand drops.

I can't.

I won't.

I never could.

“What’s the matter, baby girl? You can’t pull the trigger?” He takes the gun from me and uses it to push into the sides of my shorts, shoving them to my ankles. Since I’d only had the lacy wedding lingerie on when he captured me, I had to go commando once we bolted from the condo. I stand in front of him, naked and shivering.

Except it’s ninety degrees out, and the air is so soggy and steamy, you could melt in it.

“Because you don’t want me dead, do you?” His eyes glimmer with danger as he lays the gun against me. I shudder, the barrel cool against my skin. He drags it between my breasts. If he pulls the trigger now, he’ll blow a hole through my skull.

Heat pools between my legs, my back arching. He presses his cock into me, grinding against my pussy, the gun a thinly veiled threat making me crazy with anticipation. Zak slides one hand down to my ass, squeezing my sore cheek tight. My head drops back. Heaving breaths command and quake my lungs. I thrust against his hard cock with my bare pussy, rubbing against his pants with the overwhelming need for release.

I need his fingers. I need his cock.

A cold sensation teasing my entrance makes my eyes fly open wide.

“What the fu—?”

His mouth crushes against mine, swallowing my words before they can hit the air. The gun barrel grazes my clit, shock zapping my nerves. My spine stiffens as if moving will make the gun fire. But then he pushes it in, slowly, gently, and desire clouds my mind and swirls deep in my core. I’m too panicked to breathe, but the threat of danger and death sparks me on a level so deep, I didn’t even know it existed.

Darkness, depravity, and sin catapult me closer and closer to the line I

was never supposed to cross again. Zak's tongue pushes into my mouth, snaking around my own with the thrill of dirty, filthy promise. His mouth is hot and hungry, his godlike body a beast of prey. I moan, my teeth catching his bottom lip and tugging it. I writhe against his hand and the gun, my mind short-circuiting from the sensations coursing through me.

Zak's arm is tight around me, holding me upright while my body has all but given out from the pleasure roaring inside of me like a funnel cloud consuming every protest my mind can scream. He slides the gun out of me and tosses it onto the chair behind him before using his hand to strip out of his clothes. He never lets me go for a second.

He lifts my leg and loops his arm under it. His cock grazes my slit and I melt against him with a loud mewl just as he pushes in deep.

"Oh my God, that's so good," I moan, meeting his every thrust. I clench my ass, squeezing him tight. He fucks me with long, hard strokes, my walls convulsing as the tip of his cock finds my spot. The guy is truly gifted at what he does.

"Open your eyes, baby girl," he rasps, his cock throbbing between my quivering walls. "Look at me while you come. I wanna see how much you fucking love what my cock does to you. What *only* my cock can do."

I shudder and shake, shock waves gathering force and exploding out to every extremity. His thrusts are forceful and intense, his grunts of pleasure telling me he's close. He covers my mouth with his own, silencing my screams for more as I come apart in his arms...

The very thing I vowed to never, *ever*, do again.

CHAPTER 23

ZAK

“What the hell are you doing, Z?” Nik sits back in his desk chair and lets out a frustrated sigh. I grit my teeth as I stare at the phone screen, bracing myself for his next words. “You know, you came up with this half-cocked plan to marry Skyla without consulting with anyone, and I let you run with it because I thought you’d be able to keep things under control. But now we’ve got fucking enemies of St. James and Van Dyne up our asses because you were spotted snatching her from the hotel. You left your place without letting anyone know, and then you went to the Red Ladro safe house with your bride-to-be, no doubt doing things I don’t even want to know about when you’re supposed to be getting shit ready for this weapons exchange.”

“Look, I know things haven’t gone exactly according to plan—” I keep my voice low, my eyes stuck on Skyla sitting hunched over on the edge of the pool.

“According to plan? Are you serious? That’s how you’d describe this mess?” Nik lets out a dry laugh. “I don’t give a damn that things haven’t worked out according to the fucking stupid plan you came up with while flying by the seat of your ass. I agreed to it because I wanted to give you a shot to take a lead here. But every time I see or talk to you, things spiral.”

I scrub a hand down the front of my face. Skyla fell asleep for a couple of hours while I tossed and turned about what the hell I’m gonna do next to save face with my family. I came up empty because all I could think about was the way Skyla’s writhing body felt beneath mine and the way my name sounded on her lips when she came.

After a cold shower, I came back to the bedroom to find an empty bed. For a second, I thought she'd tried to escape, not that she could have gotten out without the key that I hid in my wallet once we got into the room. Then I looked out the window and saw her leaning against the pool railing, trailing her toes along the top of the water.

Even now, knowing what's at stake... not only my credibility but my life, Skyla's life, my family's organization... I still can't drag my eyes away from her. Or stop tasting her sweet pussy on my tongue. Or stop feeling the crazy emotions she's dredged up inside of me after so much time has passed—emotions I thought I'd buried for good when she walked away from me at that night club.

Nik's right. My head is all over the place, and it's because of the beauty I let slip through my fingers. I was young and stupid, too focused on myself and my dreams. I knew I'd never be good enough for Skyla, so I tried to make my own goals a reality doing the one thing I was awesome at. Football gave me control over my future until it was yanked away from me by Kylian.

And now, I'm spiraling, just like he said. I can't think straight when she's around because she fogs up my brain with such a haze of lust and desire that there's no room for rational thoughts to break through.

"What are you gonna do about it?" Nik snaps his fingers, and I return my eyes to the screen. "Wake the hell up and figure out how the hell we're supposed to hold these guys off who are trying to snatch your girl."

I should be focused on the "how" but instead all I can zero in on is the "my girl" part of what he just said.

"I only came here because I was afraid if I went anywhere else, they'd have tracked us." I rub the back of my neck, waiting for his next question.

"How would they track you?" His eyes narrow, his fist clenching tight like he wants to pound me with it.

He definitely will after this next part.

"I found a tracker in a hair thing she was wearing."

"Before or after I dropped you guys off?"

"After."

"Fuuuuck."

I sink into a cushioned leather chair and spin a ballpoint pen around on the polished wood desk. "Don't worry. We didn't leave through the main doors. I snuck her out the back and walked to the safe house. I figured if they were waiting to ambush us at my building, I wasn't about to take any chances

calling you or the guys.”

He doesn't need to know exactly *when* I found the tracker and how I fucked Skyla within an inch of her life before finally hauling ass outta my condo.

And damn Alek Severinov for ratting me out to Nik. Fucking Big Brother is always watching. Can't even take a piss without wondering how many cameras are gonna record it.

Speaking of cameras, I wonder how many are hidden around the rooms and outside at the pool. That'll just be more shit for me to deal with later.

“I need you for this weapons deal. If you don't show up, Luka is gonna rail your ass for it.”

“I know. I'll be there.”

“Take Skyla to Danil's. She can stay there with them while we handle the deal.”

“I'm not leaving her.”

“You're done making decisions.” Nik's lips twist like he just tasted a mouthful of dog shit. “She'll stay. You'll come with me.”

“My plan only works if she's alive. We have no leverage if she's not.”

“Exactly. So keeping her holed up with D will be a safer option. It's not up for discussion. I'll be there to get you guys, and we'll drop her off before heading to the warehouse.”

Nik stabs the screen and his grimace disappears.

I drop the phone on the desk and recline in the chair, a deep sigh slumping my shoulders. It would be smart to keep her with Danil and his family. He's crazy overprotective because of his daughter and fiancée so I know she'll be safe there.

But I need to know I can keep her safe. Me, nobody else.

I saved her once because Nik showed up on the scene.

No more bailouts. It has to be me protecting her from now on. So I told Nik what he wanted to hear, but I'm going with my own plan. It's the only way to grab back the control that is slipping further and further away. Having Skyla close is the only way to keep it.

She's mine to keep, to protect, and to dominate.

I'll leash her if I need to.

My dick jumps at the thought of that.

A metal bikini... a long leash with a collar around her neck like Princess Leia... me tugging it every time she gets mouthy... her pussy soaked with

need because of it...

The patio door handle twists and Skyla walks back into the room. I stare at her in the dim light, her eyebrows furrowed when she sees the empty bed. With a quick glance to the right, she spots me and her shoulders immediately deflate.

“Disappointed to see me?”

“I wouldn’t say disappointed is the right word. I’d say utterly disgusted and abhorred instead.”

I’m not sure what *abhorred* means, but I’m guessing by the context that it’s not good.

“You need to stop lying to yourself. Your brain had better get on board with this marriage; otherwise, shit’s gonna go sideways for your family.” I rise from the chair. “And you.”

“That’s if you can manage to keep me alive long enough to marry me.” She crosses the room and flops onto the mattress. “This little oasis here isn’t going to protect me forever. And when we finally leave through that gate out there, who’s going to stop those men from doing what they originally planned? And what happens to your plans if they actually do get to me?”

I take a few steps toward her. “You don’t trust me to keep you safe?”

She lifts an eyebrow. “I don’t trust you to do anything but hurt me. That’s your big play. You want to punish me. You want to make me suffer. Me, Kylian, my parents.”

“I’d never let anyone hurt you.” My words are gruff, but my chest tightens at the pain in her voice.

“You’re a fucking hypocrite for even saying that after what you did to me. I was innocent. All I cared about was you. But you knew that all along. Making me feel like I meant something to you, like you wanted me in the same way.” A single tear slips down her cheek. “But it was bullshit. You’d have ruined anyone to get what you wanted.”

My spine stiffens when she stops talking. I turn away and pull open the handle to the mini refrigerator. I grab a beer out of it and pop off the cap before taking a long swig.

“You think drinking will make you forget? Make you feel better about what you did?”

I slam the now half-empty bottle on the desk. “What did I tell you about respect?”

“You don’t deserve my respect,” she seethes. “You’re pathetic. Maybe

more so now because you haven't changed at all. You've become more of a thug-ass prick than you were back in high school."

"Shut the fuck up right now," I roar, swinging out my hand and sending the beer bottle crashing into the wall. Amber glass shards fly into the air and crack against the floor.

Fury burns a hole in my chest. I reach out and grab Skyla by the neck. She only has one working hand that can claw at my skin. And the joke's on her because the sting electrifies me. It doesn't stop me for a second.

She turns her tear-filled eyes up at me. "Was it worth it, Zak? What you did that night? Was it worth everything you lost?"

CHAPTER 24

SKYLA

Zak's jaw tightens to the point where it just might crack from the pressure. Kind of like the way my neck will snap if he doesn't let up his grip.

"Please," I croak, clasping my one hand around his wrist. "I can't breathe. Stop."

His eyes spit white-hot embers. They singe my skin, the pain and helplessness that swirls in his gaze claws at my heart.

"Don't you dare question me, Skyla. I did exactly what I had to do for my family."

He mercifully loosens his hold on me, and I choke down oxygen, coughing and sputtering as my lungs fill.

"It didn't stop your family's enemies. You were chasing a rabbit down a hole and they—"

"I know what I did. And I fucking know what I lost. Because of them. And because of *me*."

He lets go of me completely, still holding my gaze captive.

My brain rattles, ears shattering when he bellows the words.

I tentatively reach a hand out to him, placing my quivering fingertips on his bare chest. He recoils like he's just been shocked, then lowers himself over me, straight dark hair hanging over his eyes.

But his torment can't be masked. It's evident in his corded muscles, his clenched teeth, and the vein in his neck that throbs when he's flooded with rage. God knows, I've seen that plenty in the past twenty-four hours.

None of this is new to me. I witnessed it all over the years. I saw Zak at his best, his worst, and everything in between. And every little detail was

recorded in the depths of my mind, along with all of my unrequited feelings.

They should have stayed buried forever, tucked away in the deep recesses of my soul so they could never break my heart all over again. Because as much as I hated the idea of marrying Tyson to keep my father's livelihood intact, the mere thought of having my feelings for Zak exposed again, like wounds torn open to expose the raw nerves underneath, was gut-wrenching.

There's a very fine line between love and hate and right now, I'm straddling it hard.

The pads of my fingertips tingle as the electrical current flows between us. Our heaving breaths comingle in the air, so thick with lust and need, I could bite through them. He moves closer, veins in his forearms popping under his weight. The tips of his hair tickle my forehead, his turbulent irises pulling me into the deep abyss, daring me to resist.

But I can't. I never could. And I never will.

"I lost someone, too. I know how much it hurts, how you feel like you blame yourself for not doing enough to stop it." I slide my hand upward until it grazes his stubbled chin.

"I could have stopped it."

I shake my head. "They would have found another way, and it may have been even more devastating. You know that."

For a second, the clouds in his tortured gaze clear and give way to a bright-blue sky, and I think I've broken through his anger, reached him on a level I'd only dreamed about. But when his lips twist and the doom and gloom eclipse the sun struggling to shine, I know he's gone again. Dragged back out to his lonely raft for one, leaving me flailing in the distance with no lifeline to cling to.

But my heart can't accept that.

Too much loss and betrayal have shredded what's left of it, and I don't know if I can fit the pieces back together again.

I never thought I'd be back here again, riding this crazy train of emotion.

Suddenly, memories of my sister and her panic the night of her death pop between my ears like cracking bullets.

Tears sting my eyes, blurring my vision of Zak. A quiet sob bubbles in my chest.

Laney is gone. It was such a senseless death, like a brightly lit candle snuffed out by a gust of wind. So sudden, so devastating. I should have paid closer attention to what was happening at the club and with Tyson, but I was

too focused on Zak and the gaping hole he left in my heart.

Maybe we could have escaped by ourselves instead of letting that bitch Riley drive us away from the club, or we could have called Mom, Dad, or Kylian for help. If I just had a few minutes more, I know we could have thought of a different way, a safer way. Maybe Laney would still be alive right now.

A deep ache in my chest ruptures, and all the guilt and blame bubbles to the surface. Another lockbox I keep sealed up tight because the resulting anguish breaks me all over again anytime I let it out.

I know Zak feels the same way. Powerless to correct the past, uncertain how to make a future.

A stray tear slips down my cheek. My heart stutters, clenching with anguish. With his thumb, Zak gently brushes the tear away. His lips hover over mine, his soft, even breaths blanketing me in warmth. He stares at me like I'm the center of his world, his anger replaced with empathy and understanding.

He's like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, so I don't know how long I have with his humane side, but I will cherish every second until it's replaced by his evil alter ego again, as it always is.

I need the humane side right now.

I need *him*... even if he doesn't feel the same way about me.

"Don't cry." He sweeps a hand down the side of my face, capturing my lips with his own. His tongue dips between them, plunging deep into my mouth with a ferocious hunger. I wrap my arm around his neck, dragging my nails through the back of his hair because I know it drives him absolutely crazy.

He snakes one hand around my back and lifts me slightly, never moving his mouth away from mine. Our tongues tussle and tangle, hot coiling heat invading every cell of my body. I drink in everything he has to give, digging my fingertips into the slope of his spine.

I let out a moan when his hand moves between my thighs, grazing my prickled flesh. His fingers tease my seam before driving deep inside of me. They graze my clit, dragging against it with each push and pull. My body writhes and spasms as he works my pussy, the explosion of pleasure in my core almost too much to bear.

Reluctantly, he pulls his lips away from me and carefully slides my sweatshirt over my head without hurting my injured arm. He dips his head

over my breasts, taking one nipple at a time into his mouth and suckling until they peak. His hand works my clit tirelessly at the same time, launching me right into a cloud of euphoric bliss so powerful, I almost forget my own name.

I let out a breathless yelp when his greedy tongue navigates a very devious path south and replaces his fingers inside of my pussy. My walls quiver, carnal desire pooling between my legs in anticipation of what's to come. He reaches around to my ass, sliding one finger between my cheeks. He circles the tight rim of muscle before pressing it into my hole. Nerve endings immediately spark at the delicious intrusion. Lightning flashes across my eyes, sparks ignite deep in my belly, and that's just from his mouth. My heart thrashes in my chest, so hard and so intense it could crack ribs.

"I need to feel you inside of me," I rasp, my pulse hammering a hole in the side of my throat. "Now. Please. Fuck me."

Zak doesn't know anything other than fucking. He's always cold and closed off, yet his body just instinctively knows how to create the most incredible kind of pleasure known to humankind. The first time we were together, it was hot as hell but strictly physical. On his side, anyway. I pretended to play it the same way because I didn't want to freak him out about it being my first time.

If he knew what was really going on in my mind and heart that night, he'd have taken off and run as fast as he could without a single look back. Maybe that's what I should have done myself. I could have saved myself a lot of agony if I'd have just walked away.

But the hold he has on me is too strong. It's like trying to look away from an impending train wreck. Impossible to ignore.

With warped speed, Zak frees his cock from his sweatpants and kicks them off. He dives back onto the bed and wraps his arms around me. My whore of a pussy screams his name when the tip of his cock grazes my slit. He digs his fingers into the small of my back as he sinks into my pussy, stretching me wide with each thrust of his hips. The delicious burn when he first penetrates me makes me simultaneously drip with desire and cry out with need.

It's amazing, heart-stopping, and mind-bending, and I want to scream and cry as he fucks me hard with long, deep strokes that taunt my clit. His cock slides in and out of my wet lips, the erotic cloud hanging over us fogging up my mind with bliss. He grips my ass, pulling me into him so he can drive

harder and faster.

I dig my fingers into the globes of his ass, and he takes a sharp breath before plundering me like a man possessed. Tingles in my groin morph into a full-fledged fireworks show, blasts ricocheting and sparks flying.

Heat floods my insides as the slow eruption rumbles and roars, raging through every cell. I don't hear myself scream. All sounds are drowned out by the static fizzling between my ears.

My body seizes, paralyzed by the intense pleasure consuming every inch of me, sizzling my skin as well as every nerve ending in its path. I don't want to move and risk losing a single second of this magical feeling that I wish I could bottle up and keep with me forever.

“Open your eyes, baby girl.”

And when I do, staring into his cold, vacant ones, I know it's the only part of him I'll ever really have forever... for better or for worse.

CHAPTER 25

ZAK

I toss and turn for hours after whatever the hell happened between us, not getting a single wink of sleep. Skyla sprawls on the mattress next to me, her sling resting on her chest, other arm flung above her head. I don't know how long I stare at her still form. Blonde hair spread over the pillow, lips slightly parted, the sheet tangled around her long, lean legs.

She's a goddess, for sure. Just not the most perfect sleeper.

It makes sense that the girl who has to be in control of everything while she's conscious must have some crazy wacky sleep patterns. Gotta let loose sometime, right?

I roll onto my back and let out a deep sigh before peering at my phone screen.

Seven o'clock in the morning. Jesus. When the hell did that happen?

The room is still dark, though. Only the smallest slivers of early morning sunlight peek through the pulled blinds covering every window. But for as dark as it is in here, my mind is lit up by X-rated images that have looped for hours. A sharp tug in my chest makes me wince. I press a hand over my heart.

Dammit, I'm either having a heart attack or I'm starting to feel something.

I don't know what's worse, to be honest.

Feelings were never supposed to factor into this brilliant scheme of mine. It was a simple plan with lots of benefits. I wanted revenge on her brother for being a jealous prick who ruined my football career. I wanted to punish her father for being aligned with Denis Stepanov, who is one of the people responsible for Valentina's disappearance. I wanted to stick it to Tyson, who

is an entitled egotistical asshole who doesn't deserve Skylia. And I wanted respect and control over *something* in my damn life.

Then, after dodging killers, kidnappers, and death, we ended up here at the safe house, housed in a sweaty, steamy plastic bubble of lust, passion, and forbidden pleasure. And I don't even know how to start clawing my way out.

Maybe because I don't want to.

Maybe because out of all the goals I'd wanted to accomplish with my plan, Skylia is the number one spoil of this war.

She always has been, which is why the whole scam backfired on me in the first place.

Years ago, I got in close to the St. James family, just like I was supposed to. I used Kylian. And somewhere along my path of deceit, I fell in love with Skylia.

Scrubbing a hand down my face, I let out a low groan.

I want respect, right? Well, it's time to take responsibility for what I did, and for everything that went wrong because of it.

Kylian called me out on my bullshit. So did Skylia.

So the fact that I'm sitting around now, being Nik's bitch, an enforcer instead of an NFL quarterback, is my own fault. I could have had more. Hell, I could have had everything.

Instead, I gave it up for a taste of the forbidden. I let my dick think for me.

And I want to say I learned my lesson, but who the hell am I kidding? Forcing Skylia to marry me is gonna send me straight back to the goddamn Garden of Eden. Because, let's face it, I never got over her, and I was never supposed to be there in the first place.

Fuck my life and the pieces I'm still trying to put together.

I roll out of bed and pace the length of the room when my phone buzzes in my hand. Unknown number. My brows furrow but I stab the Accept button.

"Yeah?"

"Zak, it's me."

"Val, fuck." I let out a breath. "Where are you? Did you get into the safety deposit box in the Bahamas?"

"Not yet."

"What the hell are you waiting for? There's stuff in there we can use to find—"

“Not yet.”

I roll my eyes. I love and hate it when Val calls. I love it because I know she’s still alive after being on the run for the past few years since her almost-wedding. And I hate it because I never get details out of her. It’s always one- or two-word answers, probably because Alek Severinov programmed her that way.

Screw you, Alek, for always keeping us in the dark, you fucking control freak.

“Tell me why we can’t.” Patience isn’t really my strength, so it takes everything in me not to lose my shit when she pauses again.

“Alek is working on something. He’s had his guys doing research on a company. I can’t tell you more than that now, but he’s getting close to finding some information. We need to connect the rest of the dots before any of that stuff is touched. Right now, we don’t know who might be watching and waiting for us to access it. And we need to make sure we have them under our surveillance before we open that can of worms.”

My eyes widen. “Do you realize that’s the most you’ve said to me since your wedding day?”

She chuckles. “I think it’s the most I’ve said to any of you since then.”

“Yeah, I’m kinda pissed about that. I thought you originally reached out to me because I was your favorite brother. Now I know you play all sides of the fence. Typical woman.”

“Don’t be salty. I love you all, and you each bring something to the table. I tap into what I need when I need it.”

“Sounds dirty.”

“You’re sick. Soooo...” She takes a breath. “How’s everything with Skyla?”

“Oh fuck, you, too? When Sev wants to talk, he has everyone’s ears, yeah?”

“He mentioned something about the safe house. There are sensors and cameras all over the place, so it’s not like you’d ever go undetected. Which you might want to tell Skyla, since there’s enough data of you two on the system to rival Pornhub.”

“Is that why you called? To warn me we’re being filmed?” I climb on a chair near a window and feel around the top of the blinds. My fingers don’t hit anything but dust bunnies. No cameras there.

“She might not like knowing you made her the star of a virtual show for

the second time.”

“Yeah, well, the first time wasn’t supposed to happen.” I jump off the chair and take a look around the room. If I know Alek, the cameras are probably so small and obscure, the human eye would never be able to find them.

“But it did.”

“So that’s why you called? To rub my nose in my mistakes?”

“Nah, I don’t have that kind of time. I called because what we’re chasing will put a big-ass target on your back. Yours, Skyla’s, mine, the rest of the family’s. This is going to be huge, but hella dangerous.”

“You know I love danger.”

“That’s because you’re a sadist and thrive on pain, sicko.”

“Is that what I bring to the table?”

“One of the things. But, Z, we’re so close to getting a location on our guy. Once we find him, this nightmare will finally be over. We’ll make him pay for everything and then some. We’re not going to let anyone have died in vain.”

Her voice cracks. She may have become a badass operative over the past few years, but she’s done it alone, away from us all. To be honest, I’m not even sure why. She disappeared before Dad and Dima were killed, before Luka and Mom were hit. It’s like she knew something before anything even happened.

Something she’s never confirmed anytime I ask.

And it’d be just like Sev to reel her in and use her for his own purposes, another reason why I think he’s a total prick. She’s a kid, for Christ’s sake. She shouldn’t be hunting people like Branko Ivanova.

I should be.

I swallow hard.

And I was doing my part, until I fucked up the plan.

Then all hell broke loose.

“I’ll be in touch as soon as I know something for sure. But watch your back. The further we dig, the more we find that tells us he’s close.”

“Until he finds some other schmuck to fuck with us because he’s never had the balls to do it himself.”

“Something tells me the next time will be the last. If he shows up, his weapon will be deadly. Just remember that.”

“Val, tell me what you need.” The hairs on the back of my neck spring up

at her ominous tone. “If he’s close, does that mean you’re in danger? Does Alek have your back? Because if I find out he doesn’t, I will kick his fucking vodka-soaked ass all the way back to the goddamn Kremlin and—”

“I can’t say anything more. Be careful. I love you.”

Click.

A deep roar erupts from my lungs, and just as I’m about to hurl my phone at a window, it buzzes again. Skyla moans and rolls onto her good arm before sitting up in bed, a look of confusion on her face.

“Val?” I shout, holding the phone up to my ear.

“Zak, this is Stuart St. James.” My eyes narrow at the resignation in his voice. And he has my number because Skyla sneaked a call to him last night. Fucking great.

“What’s up, *Dad?*”

Skyla leans against the backboard of the bed and drags her hand down the front of her face. The sheet slips down to her navel, her perfect tits just watching me, begging me for a rub and suck. My dick jumps, despite the sound of St. James’s voice in my ear. It doesn’t even come close to deflating the hard-on I suddenly have buried in my sweatpants.

“We need to talk. As soon as possible.”

“Oh, do we? Well, I don’t have any time on my calendar to do that today. Why don’t you call my assistant and tell her to set something up? Have her mark the meeting. ‘Stuart St. James Can Suck My Fat Cock.’”

“You’re a real prize, you know that, Malikov?” he spews. “This is my daughter’s life we’re talking about.”

“It’s about her now? Interesting, ’cause I thought it was always about *you.*”

“Much as I’d like to pummel your prick ass into the ground, I’m not risking Skyla. I’ve already lost enough.” His voice catches. Like I’m supposed to buy that shit.

“Aw, poor you for picking money and empire building over your own family. Too bad you can’t see me strumming the world’s tiniest violin right now.”

“Zak,” Skyla hisses. “Stop being an asshole.”

I fire off a glare at her and turn my back, my fingertips digging into the phone like they’re St. James’s eyeballs and I’m trying to gouge them out of his skull.

Which I’d very much like to do in real life.

“You’re a scumbag, St. James. You know it, I know it, and so do your enemies. I just wonder how much dirt they actually have on you to make you desperate enough to call *me*, since I’m one of them.”

“You kidnapped my daughter, you son of a bitch. I’m not asking you to meet me. I’m telling you,” he growls. “This isn’t a social call. This is life or death. *Whose* is up to you, and trust me, there’s a long list with names on it, names you won’t like reading.”

CHAPTER 26

SKYLA

“How is this bikini top supposed to help me fly under the radar?” I tug at the string tied behind my neck. “And it doesn’t even fit my boobs.”

Zak gives me the side-eye. A chill ripples through me, despite the heat in his stare. “Look around. You blend. That’s the idea.” He pauses to lift his sunglasses, his gaze locked on my chest. “And your tits are great.”

“They’re totally popping out.”

“I know. That’s why they look so good.”

It’s the longest he’s spoken to me since he got off the phone with my father, which basically tells me what I already suspected. I’m nothing more than a pawn in this empire-building game to him. He fooled me once, but he can’t fool me a second time.

Damn him for sucking me back into the darkness.

And damn me harder for allowing it.

We walk down Brickell Bay Boulevard in the sweltering morning sunlight. Sweat pebbles pop up all over my exposed skin and drizzle down the sides of my face. A Florida Panthers baseball cap covers my hair, sunglasses shield my eyes. Zak found a dresser in the safe house with all kinds of clothes and accessories to disguise us before heading out to meet my father. I don’t even know the reason why Dad called Zak, and it’s not like my *fiancé* shared any details. The call can’t have been about Kylian since I know he’s okay. It was the whole reason why I made that call to my parents from Zak’s phone.

Maybe Dad wants to apologize for ruining my life.

He has no idea how much worse it's gotten since Zak snatched me.

And I'm still fuming at the way everything around me has crumbled. He can apologize, but I sure as hell don't have to accept it.

I pull up the light-blue cutoff shorts hanging around my hips, my borrowed bikini bottom peeking out of the worn waistband.

"When are you going to call my father to let him know where to meet us?" It was one thing I caught while listening to Zak's side of the conversation. He just gave my dad a time and told him to wait for a text when we're at the meeting location. I ask in a hushed voice because even though nobody has tried to kill us yet as we dodge beachgoers along the sidewalk, there's no saying they won't make an attempt if they can get close enough to figure out who we are and what we're doing.

"Once we get there." He stops in front of the City Diner and pushes open the creaky glass door. A bell jingles overhead as we walk into the dingy restaurant. "And now we're here."

A pretty young waitress takes a long, appraising look at Zak and then leads us to a booth. She tosses two menus on the table, but Zak points to the back corner.

"Can we go to that booth instead?"

He interrupts her licking her lips while checking out his dick, and a deep red flush colors her cheeks. She forces a smile. "Sure, go ahead."

Once we're seated, Zak pushes the menus toward her. "Coffee for me and orange juice and chocolate chip pancakes for her with a side of well-done turkey bacon. And bring lots of syrup. Strawberry flavored."

The waitress jots it all down and runs off. I just look at him, my jaw nearly hitting the table.

He jabs some things onto his phone screen and looks up at me. "What? You didn't think I remembered?"

I shake my head, still flabbergasted that he remembered every last detail after all this time. "I didn't think you cared enough to."

His lips pull into a tight line. "It's just breakfast."

But it's not. Not to me.

I shift in my seat, peeling the backs of my sweaty thighs off the cracked green vinyl. "Why did you agree to meet my father? What if it's a setup?"

"You think I didn't already consider that?"

"I don't know." Frustration laces my words. "It's not like you've been so open about your thoughts, other than the fact that you hate him, Kylian, and

the Van Dynes.”

“And for good reason.” He flicks a piece of Formica hanging off the edge of the table, avoiding my eyes. “Besides, I know we’re safe. I sent Nik a text. He’s got guys outside, just in case your father does something stupid.”

“You and your vendettas. Too bad I didn’t find out sooner that I was just a fucking chess piece in your game. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised that you’re keeping all the details from me again.”

He raises his gaze from the table, latching on to my angry one.

I lean toward him. “You really have nothing to say about the fact that you led me on for weeks, pretending to be someone you most definitely are not, all because you had a grand plan to take down my father?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t I?” My lower lip quivers with contempt, rage seeping out of my pores. “You think I didn’t hear you on the phone with Val before my dad called? You think I didn’t connect the dots? After so much time passed, you show up right before my wedding to Tyson and snatch me before it can happen. I’m supposed to believe that’s a coincidence? You’re a fucking liar. You always were. And you’re using me now just like you used me four years ago. Just like Val wanted you to. You didn’t think I knew that?”

His eyes blaze with ire. “Don’t fucking bring up Val.”

“Why not? Is she not an approved conversation topic? How the two of you fucking duped me to get close to my father? And how you’re pulling the same fucking game again?”

“Val had nothing to do with me taking you yesterday.” His voice drops to a scornful growl. “And don’t tell me you were sad about it, either. You were staring into an empty, hellish future as Tyson’s wife. I fucking saved you.”

“Saved my ass. A future with you? I’d rather stare down the barrel of a loaded gun.”

I clench my fist under the table, blood coursing between my temples.

“That can be arranged.” He glowers at me, and despite everything I know, everything I’ve experienced, my thighs quiver. I lock my knees together, urging my body to please get on the same page as my head. But my conflict-riddled heart plants herself in between both, rooted in obsession that has plagued me for years.

It should be hatred and disgust, but somehow, lust trumps it all.

Lust and love.

Because even though those flames died down to flickering embers, they

raged the second I saw him the other night at The Surf Club.

A bell jingles and my gut sinks into my flip-flops.

He's here.

I can't see him, but I can feel him walk toward our booth. A familiar scent wafts under my nose, his favorite aftershave. Ever since I was a little girl, that fresh, clean scent always comforted me. I missed it so much when Dad would go away on business trips. And I'd know when he was back home the second I'd walk into our house.

It doesn't comfort me right now, though. It turns my stomach. And when Dad leans toward me, his arms outstretched, I pull away, lancing him with a glare instead.

"Don't."

His face falls, but he recovers quickly and grabs a chair from a nearby table since it's clear neither Zak nor I want him anywhere close to either of us.

"I'm sorry, Skyla." His voice is quiet. "I didn't mean for any of this to ever happen."

"Really?" I seethe. "Do you think that makes up for anything I've been through? Kidnapped from my sham wedding that you finagled because of your greed, shot, almost kidnapped by more people who want to hurt you because evidently that list is damn long. And... Laney..." My voice cracks, and I squeeze my eyes shut.

I won't do it. I won't cry.

I have to be in control here, or else I'll shatter like broken glass.

Dad looks from me to Zak.

"You wanted to meet. Why?" Zak leans toward him. "And just so you know, I've got guys surrounding this place. So if you have any plans to take me out, cancel them or you die."

Dad's eyes widen and he places his phone on the table. "I didn't come here for that."

My eyes narrow. "Then why are we here?"

He looks at me, his light-blue eyes dull and weary, the skin below them sunken in. I study the deep frown lines etched into his skin. I don't remember them being so defined a few months ago. His skin is sallow despite being an avid golfer and in the sun often.

But now that I think about it, when was the last time I'd heard he played?

I guess when you find out that all the horrible things you've done in your

life have finally caught up with you, it's exhausting to outrun them and the resulting carnage. Maybe you don't have energy for golf when you're too focused on keeping secrets that can kill your family.

That may have *already* killed part of your family.

Dad ignores Zak's question and nods at my arm in the sling. "Are you okay?"

I give a quick nod.

He sighs and rubs his forehead. "Trust me when I say nobody knows I'm here right now. If Nathan and Tyson found out, they'd kill me on the spot."

The waitress picks that second to bring over our drinks and food. My stomach is in knots, and what sounded so delicious only minutes before makes bile rise in the back of my throat.

"Is that supposed to win my trust? That you're doing this behind their backs?" Zak takes a sip of his coffee and toys with the chipped handle of the mug that probably used to be white but is now more of an ecru.

I press my fingertips to my temples. Jesus, why am I evaluating a fucking mug so hard right now when my future is as bleak as the greasy windows behind Zak?

"I'm here to tell you that you need to get Skylia far away from here. You need to protect her." He rubs the back of his head. "Those men who tried to kidnap her, the ones who hit Kylian... they're not my enemies. They work for Nathan, to guarantee that he keeps me under his thumb. You can't let them get to her."

"You didn't seem so desperate for me to be anywhere near her when I spoke to you the first time." Zak lifts an eyebrow. "What's the urgency now?"

"I only just found out about Nathan's plans. I overheard a conversation he had when we were at the hospital with Kylian." Dad lets out a dry chuckle and shakes his head. "Supportive business partner, making sure my family is 'safe' when in fact, he put Kylian under fire in the first place."

Zak's face pinches with anger. He puts the coffee mug on the table with a loud clink. Coffee sloshes over the sides, pooling on the tabletop around it. "Guess you didn't do much due diligence before you jumped into bed with that scumbag, huh? Not the greatest business decision you've ever made."

Dad turns to Zak and folds his hands on the table. "I've made so many mistakes. I don't want to make any more. Save my daughter."

"Why the fuck should I trust you?" he sneers.

“I won’t lie, Zak. I wanted to gut you when I found out you took her from the resort yesterday. But when I found out about the danger she might be in, I knew you were the one to help her avoid it. I’m sure it won’t surprise you to hear that I don’t think much of you and never have. I didn’t like you hanging around my house, didn’t like your influence on my kids. But everything I despise about you can help Skyla now in ways I can’t.”

“Why would you agree to the arrangement?” I finally speak up, squeezing the words past my throbbing pulse. “How could you do it? After everything he’s done to you?”

“I’m so ashamed of everything that happened. The danger I brought to my family because I wasn’t smart enough to dig deep into Nathan’s dealings. My business is under fire. If Nathan goes public with my involvement, we’re finished.”

“So you offered up your daughter? Was it worth it to put her life in danger like that?”

I turn a surprised eye to Zak. Red spots creep into his cheeks, his eyes spewing hatred.

“I never thought things would turn out like this. Your mother is sick with worry. Kylian is lying in a hospital bed with pins holding his leg together. I can’t bear the thought of Skyla hurt. Please. Help her. I hate that it’s you, but what I detest so much about you is what can actually save her.”

“Wow, I’m not sure how to take that.” Zak rolls his eyes. “I mean, is it a compliment? An insult? A little bit of both? And how do I say no to such a glowing review of my skills?”

Dad turns to me. “I’m so sorry for everything, sweetie. You have to believe I never wanted any of this to happen. I will make it right. I swear to you.” He stands up, taking extra effort to hoist himself out of the chair. He pushes it against the table where he took it from and turns to me with a weak smile on his face. “I love you and will do everything I can to fix this.”

He pauses for a second, almost waiting for me to make a move.

A gaggle of tears catches in my throat.

It’s only when he walks away that I jump out of the booth and run toward him. “Daddy.”

He pulls me into his arms and I breathe in his aftershave, filling my lungs with his scent and my heart with memories.

“I love you, too,” I whisper. I stare after him for a long minute after he leaves the diner.

Zak puts a hand on my shoulder. “We should go.”

I blink fast to hold back the tears that threaten to fall. “Okay.”

I can’t even think about looking back at my food. Even though I was starving only a little while ago, my stomach is twisted like a lanyard right now.

We walk back into the Miami heat, my head spinning like a top. So many thoughts swirl between my ears I can barely hear anything going on around me. Voices are muted, cars silent. It’s just me, alone with my agony.

My heart thumps, pounding like a gong inside of my rib cage. I stop in front of a nearby nail salon, drawing in a deep breath. Tiny tingles shoot down my arm. I press a hand against my chest.

Too much. It’s all too much.

Zak realizes I’m no longer next to him and turns to see me panting against the building. His forehead creases, his pace quickening toward me. “What’s wrong?”

“Are you seriously asking me that right now?” I rasp. “What the fuck is *right*?”

His eyes cloud over. “Nothing. Absolutely fucking nothing about this is right.”

I take a shaky step toward him, longing for the love and comfort that walked out the door of the diner a few minutes ago. But I don’t want it from my father. I want it from Zak.

A sob bubbles in my chest, but I choke it back. “This is *my life*. And you’ve made it clear over and over that I mean nothing to you. So why the hell were you so angry about my dad giving me up to the Van Dynes?” I shiver under his heated gaze, my shoulders quaking in anticipation. “Why would you care what happens to me and then risk your own life to save me? Are you going to lie and tell me it really is all about revenge? Or are you going to finally tell me the truth?”

And why do I have to be so goddamn desperate to hear him say it?

CHAPTER 27

ZAK

The anguish in her tone makes my gut clench. She thinks she never mattered to me at all. She has no idea that she branded my soul forever.

I want to tell her the truth. She started out as a pawn and ended up owning my heart.

She wants to know why I care so much now?

I never fucking stopped.

The words are on the tip of my tongue, stinging my lips. But I can't bring myself to say them. I ignore Skyla's devastated expression, grab her hand, and wordlessly stalk back to the safe house.

She wrenches her hand in an attempt to pull away from me, but I hang on tight.

I won't let her go.

Can't let her go.

Heat floods my body, my blood boiling as it courses through my veins.

I tricked her. I hurt her. I broke her trust.

And I betrayed my own family, too. Because of me, we lost Val.

The plan was simple. Plant a recording device in Stuart St. James's office the night before the football game. But I was too caught up in Skyla. I missed a text from Val warning me that the coast was clear and ran out of time before I could hook it up.

Val never told me why she needed to listen in on St. James, other than the fact that Dad was looking for information about a business deal that was going to cripple our weapons trafficking ring. St. James was a key player.

It wasn't until a year later that the pieces started coming together.

Turns out Dad knew Denis Stepanov was linked to a sex trafficking ring that he'd been after for some reason we've never been able to figure out. So he hooked Val up with the guy's son, Dmitri, so she could investigate from the inside.

She never told me why Dad tagged her in, only that it was her responsibility to help.

Snippets of me talking to Val on the day of her wedding reverberate between my ears like clashing cymbals.

"Don't be mad at Dad, Zak. This is what I want to do."

"The fuck it is. Why would you give up your whole life, Val?"

I rake a hand through my hair. This is on me, because I didn't follow the plan. Now Val is the one who's gonna suffer.

"Because I have to make things right."

Val had to make things right. What things, I have no fucking clue. Neither do my brothers and sister.

She wouldn't let me stop that damn wedding.

And I blasted my father for it... right before he was killed.

I never found out the truth behind it all. And we're all still guessing about a lot of things.

Once I found out Stepanov was going to be at Skyla's wedding, I knew I had to take over for my sister and destroy any plans he had to decimate my family's livelihood.

I remember looking at Dad's lifeless body in the coffin, rage tearing my insides apart knowing that Val was gone and that I couldn't stop the hellfire that rained down on my family afterward.

All because I was too pussy whipped by my target.

And I still am, all these years later.

Tension hangs in the stagnant air between us. It constricts my throat like a boa constrictor looping around and around and around.

"How much longer are you going to avoid my questions?" Skyla snarls at me, her eyes stuck on my face. I pull my gun out of my shorts and set it on a table, heaving a deep sigh. She stares at me so hard, I can almost hear her mind willing itself to make my head explode. Then she lets out a scream of frustration and shoves a hand against my chest.

"Fuck you for being such an insufferable bastard." Her chest heaves, voice cracking with anger and torment. "You're a pathetic piece of shit for what you did to me four years ago, and you're even worse now for forcing

me into this situation. I hate you and I will never marry you. If you try to make me, I will cut my own throat.”

“Really. Death is preferable to a life with me?” My temples throb as I take a step closer to her.

“Yes.” She clenches her fist tight. “One thousand percent. I’ve wasted too much on you. You aren’t getting any of me this time. I’m done with you, so just let me go.” She growls those last words at me through clenched teeth.

“If I let you go, what do you think will happen to you?”

“I don’t care. My life is over anyway. One way or another.” A tear slips from the corner of her eye. I reach out and brush it away, the pad of my fingertip sweeping over her cheek. She jerks away from me and smacks my hand away from her face. “Don’t pretend to give a shit now. This isn’t real. Just like it wasn’t real when you duped me the first time.”

My chest tightens.

It was real. So fucking real.

“I want to leave.”

“You don’t mean that.”

We stand toe to toe. Her eyes blaze, her lips quiver.

“You destroyed me when you left that night.” I can hear the sob catch in her throat, threatening to break through her lips and drown out her words. “You pretended to care about me. You pretended to be Kylian’s best friend. You crawled under my skin and made me fall in love with you before you pulverized my heart. I hate you so much for that.”

Each caustic word stabs my heart with the truth.

“I did what I had to do.”

“You did what?” Her jaw drops, an incredulous laugh piercing the air. She throws up her hand and paces in front of the bed. “You latched on to Kylian with the football bullshit, promising to help make him a star. You seduced me and tricked me, all to get close to my father. You took my virginity. Did you even know that? Do you even care? I gave you that part of me, and in exchange, you blackmailed me. You son of a bitch. Don’t you dare say you ‘did what you had to do.’ You don’t get off that easy.”

“I had to help my sister. I did what I could to get her out of a bad situation.” I grab Skyla by the wrist to stop her from pacing. “It was the only way to get the information I needed. I had to save her.”

“I betrayed my family for you. I never said a word to them about what happened that night.”

“Bullshit. You told Kylian.” My pulse jumps into my throat and punches a hole in the side. “That’s why he sabotaged me on the field.”

“No, I didn’t. I never said a word because of what you threatened to do to me. I couldn’t take any risks, knowing what a low-life bastard you turned out to be. Oh my God, I still can’t believe I was so blind.” She smacks her hand against her forehead. “You did those crazy, dirty things to me and filmed it all as insurance against me. You knew I’d keep your secret if you threatened to use that video.”

This time when she launches her fist against my jaw, I let it happen.

“You ruined my life. You broke my heart. You’re a selfish liar. And what pisses me off the most is that even now, knowing everything I do, I still can’t stop myself from falling back into those feelings again. For as much as I want to see you dead, I...”

I reach behind her and let my fingers wander into the back of her hair. Her eyes float closed for a split second before they crack open, pooling with tears.

“I still love you.” She sniffles. “Fuck my life.”

Hearing those words makes my heart clench. I fucking love her, too. More than she knows. But she’d never believe me if I told her that. She already thinks I’m a liar who used her to get ahead.

Which I did.

So those words... they won’t mean shit to her. She needs more, and hell if I know how to give it to her.

“You asked me why I was so angry at your father.” I grind my back teeth, my jaw tensing. “It’s because he did the same thing to you that my dad did to Val.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“He used her. Brokered some sham marriage agreement, pretending it was a business deal. He sold her off so she could spy on her in-laws and get information for him. And she fucking agreed to do it.”

I stab a finger at my chest. “I tried to convince her to stop it, but she wouldn’t. She said she needed to help. So I went to my father right before the wedding and told him what a piece of shit he was for marrying off Val.”

“What happened?”

“I begged him to give me another chance to get what he needed. Val was barely nineteen, and he chose to ruin *her* life. Then my family was attacked. Val vanished. Dad and my brother Dima were killed. That argument was the

last exchange I had with my dad.”

“And you still don’t know why he made the arrangement?”

“Nope. And it doesn’t seem like we ever will, not until we track Denis Stepanov. That’s why I ended up at your wedding. I needed to do something to redeem myself in the eyes of my family. I needed to do something right for once. Stepanov wants to take down my family, and anyone who works with him is our enemy. Including the Van Dynes.”

“So you took me to stop them from banding together and against your family’s organization.” Her face free-falls. “You used me again.”

“I let my family down too many times before. I saw an opportunity and I took it. I needed you to fix them.”

My heart hammers, the pain in her expression making my stomach roil.

“You railed on my father for completely disregarding me, for handing me over on a silver platter. But you don’t care about how he hurt me. You only care that he was wrong for doing it, just like your father was. You hate him for betraying his family just like you hate your father for betraying you all.”

Her voice shakes with anger, rising with every strained word. “I hate you all for treating me like a useless, helpless damsel who’s been manipulated and coerced. I guess that’s my fault, though. I didn’t fight hard enough. I didn’t protest enough. I didn’t care about myself enough. Or at all, really.”

“I have to do something, too.” She takes the gun I left on the table near the door and holds it out in front of me, her arms stiff, eyes steely and cold. “Fuck my father. Fuck your father. And fuck *you*. I have to take care of *me*.”

I stare down the barrel of the gun. “You don’t have a chance out there without me.”

She shakes her head, tears spilling out of her eyes. “I don’t have a chance in here with you, either. So I choose *out*.”

CHAPTER 28

SKYLA

My eyes drop quickly down to the gun in my hand. I've never actually shot one before, so I'm not a hundred percent sure what the fuck I was thinking when I picked it up in the first place.

Maybe it was the sting of rejection that followed my confession of love. Or maybe it was out of desperation for a future on my terms.

Scattered thoughts pelt my brain. I could disappear, somehow. Run away, forget my dreams of becoming a surgeon. It would suck to walk away from everything that I've ever known and loved, but I'd be alive and in control.

All I'd have to do is pull the trigger. One shot could get me at least some of the freedom I crave.

I clutch the gun tight. A cramp creeps into my arm and it shakes the smallest bit.

"You really want to do this?" Zak's eyes bore into me, lancing my soul. "You want to kill me?"

"You deserve it." I swallow hard past the giant lump in my throat.

He raises his hands over head and takes a few steps toward me. "I don't believe you want me dead."

I roll my eyes, a sarcastic laugh slipping from my lips. "Maybe I need to do something to convince you that I'm telling the truth."

"You just said you still love me."

"There's a fine line between love and hate." I lift an eyebrow. "And right now, I'm straddling it."

"I'd rather you be straddling something else." He inches forward again.

Sliding my finger over the trigger, I grit my teeth. "My life as I know it is over. Either way, I'm someone's pawn. Forced to play a role. Forced to give

up my dreams. Forced to carry the crimes of my father on my shoulders.” Tears sting my eyes. “Forced to live a life where I won’t be loved, only used and manipulated.”

“You think running away is gonna change any of that?”

“If I disappear, the noose around my neck disappears. I don’t have to suffer because of my father’s fuckups, and whatever the hell he did to get on your radar.”

The lump in my throat balloons up to what feels like grapefruit-sized, and my words get caught.

“I hate your father for doing this to you.”

He’s so close now that his scent tingles my nostrils.

“Don’t.” I back away, the rubber soles of my slippers squeaking on the shiny tile floor.

I can’t let him in any further than he already is. Otherwise, I won’t be able to leave.

Guilt swarms my mind. If I go, it’ll destroy my mother. But then again, maybe she shouldn’t have buried her head in the sand for so long. She’s just as much to blame as my father is because she let it happen.

And Kyl... even though our relationship changed for some reason when he had his falling out with Zak, I never got the chance to make things right. If I go now, I never will.

“He took away your choices.” Zak’s lips twist, a grimace darkening his disdainful expression. “Just like my father did to Valentina.”

“You’re no better. You did the exact same thing to me, punishing me for things my father did and for people he associated with.” My pulse hammers hard, drowning out my words. Goosebumps pebble my arms and legs as Zak closes the space between us. “You broke me. Shattered me into the tiniest pieces because your loyalty was to your family. You’ll always choose them, just like my father will always choose himself.”

Blood rushes between my ears, my finger stuck on the trigger. “Either way, nobody chooses me. And that’s not the life I want for myself. *I* choose me. So fuck all of you.”

A loud crash right outside the door makes me jump. I yelp, whirl around, and squeeze the trigger hard. My hand flies into the air as the shot fires, an unexpected force knocking the wind out of me. I drop the gun on the floor, a scream tearing through my chest.

Zak darts past me and peers out the window next to the door.

“Did they find us?” I whisper-shout, cowering against the wall.

He crawls over to me. I slide my hand over his hard pecs. Still inked. Not bullet-torn. “Thank God you’re okay. I didn’t hit you.” I let out a shaky breath, my head collapsing back against the wall.

The corners of his lips lift. “Nah, you got the ceiling instead. Alek is gonna be pissed about that hole.”

“What the hell was that crash outside?”

“Iguana. He ran right into a potted plant. That’s what you heard. It must’ve fallen over and cracked against the concrete.”

I hang my head. “I could have killed you.”

“That’s what you wanted, right?”

Shaking my head, I look up at him. “No. And I hate myself for even saying that because I really want to hurt you the way you hurt me. But instead, I keep letting you do it. I’ve been telling you what a pathetic piece of shit you are but really, it’s me who’s so pathetic because I can’t get over you, no matter how hard I try.” I cover my face with my hand and let out a groan. “I’m obviously a glutton for punishment.”

“You *have* been a very bad girl.” He grazes the bottom of my chin, tilting my head upward. “I’m gonna enjoy punishing you for all of it.”

“Just stop, okay? You don’t need to. Zak, you don’t need me to protect your family.” My voice is barely above a whisper, my heart clenching harder with every word I croak out. “My father needs someone to save his ass. Make him a deal. He’ll do anything to clear his name. Band together with him, get access to his network or whatever you need to take down Van Dyne and that other guy, Stepa-whatever. You can do it without me.”

I suck in a breath, unable to blink back the tears. “Just let me go. You don’t want me and you don’t need me anymore. Give me a chance to live my life the way I want, away from all of this. Don’t I deserve that?”

“You deserve to be happy.”

“Fucking-A right, I do.”

“And you deserve to know the truth.” He slowly rises to his knees and pulls me up by my hand, staring into my eyes so intently, a rush of heat floods my cheeks. “So here it is. Nothing that ever happened between us was bullshit. It started out that way, and I tried like hell to stop it, but I fell in love with you. And fuck me if I haven’t fantasized about you for the past four years, because for as much as I tried, I couldn’t forget you.”

My ears clang so loud, still ringing from the gunshot, that I question

whether I really heard him say those words. I'd wanted him to say them for so long, now that they're out there, I don't even know how to react. My heart flutters in my chest, my belly alive with butterflies at the possibility that what he says is real.

But he still lied to me. He still broke my heart. And he still betrayed me and my family.

Words are just that. Meaningless without action.

He may have saved me from the men who came after me yesterday, but he had an ulterior motive. His agenda trumps my safety. It always has.

And sure, he can fuck me from now until kingdom come, but that's just sex. It doesn't take love to sizzle someone's mind and body with otherworldly orgasms.

"I fucked up." He trails his fingertips along the side of my face. "Too many times to count. Stay with me, baby girl. Let me make it right."

I bite down on my lower lip to keep it from trembling. "You can't. Too much has happened. I'll always be a tool in your arsenal, nothing more."

"No. I want you, Skyla. Forever." He drags his fingers down the front of my neck and stops when they wrap around the string bikini top. "But I won't make you stay. You still wanna go? I won't stop you. I'll make whatever arrangements you want, send you wherever you want to go so you're safe and out of Miami. I'll do that for you if it'll make you happy."

He rubs my nipples through the flimsy fabric. They tighten and tingle at his rough touch. My pussy clenches, wet with anticipation.

My God, I hate that bitch.

"Do you want me to stop?"

Don't stop. Please don't stop!

I choke on my response, my heart thrashing in my chest.

My skin prickles under the pads of his demanding fingertips, legs buckling as he presses his cock against me and grinds against my pussy. His stormy irises capture me and pull me in deep, away from any possibility of a lifeline. I flail and flounder to keep my footing, but my heels slip and my body reluctantly follows.

I should go. Now, before anything else happens. Before I lose my nerve and mind.

Adrenaline floods my insides; a fog of carnal desire settles around me. It chokes me to the point where I can barely breathe. He reaches behind my back and gives a quick tug, releasing the knot holding the bikini top together.

The fabric slips from my breasts and flutters to the floor.

He grabs the back of my head and pulls me toward him, crushing his lips to mine. Our teeth clash and crack as we devour one another like starved predators. His tongue coils around mine, so deliciously devious. My fingers claw at his shorts in a frenzy. I try to unbutton them with my one working hand but fail miserably.

Without breaking our kiss, he pulls the button open, pushes them to his ankles, and kicks them off. He heaves me onto the mattress and slides my hips toward him until my body teeters at the edge of the bed. Then he takes his time unbuttoning my shorts and sliding them down the length of my body along with the bikini bottom. He dips his head between my thighs, blowing a stream of air against my pussy. I squeal, fisting the comforter.

His tongue runs up and down my seam, teasing and taunting me. Punishment, because he's a bastard like that. My head clouds with lust and desire, eyes falling shut as the sensations command every cell in my body. I roll my hips toward his mouth as he fucks me viciously with his tongue, my legs trembling as they tighten around his head.

My mind screams for him to stop, but my body is on a completely different page in another novel. She doesn't want to hear a single protest. All she wants is *everything* because she's a greedy little slut for Zak Malikov and has been ever since she had her first taste of his sin.

He alternates between flicking my clit and suckling it. Ripples of pleasure build in my core, ready to consume me whole. His stubbly beard grates against my skin, heightening the bliss. My heart stutters, thrashing wildly as the orgasm builds. I writhe on the mattress, gasping for air while waves of euphoria pummel me, one after another. I fist his hair, pulling it tight, but he never stops. He only drives harder.

"Zak, make love to me," I rasp.

My eyes float open, his hooded gaze latching on to them as he slides up the length of my body. The head of his cock grazes my slit. He slides a hand underneath the small of my back and lifts my hips to meet his before driving into me.

"Don't close your eyes. Look at me, Skylia."

And just like that, I'm his captive again, unable and unwilling to break free of his hold on me.

His cock stretches me wide as he thrusts hard with long, deep strokes, each one making me cry out. He presses his thumb against my clit as I roll

my hips against his, meeting him thrust for thrust. My pussy throbs and quakes, slick with desire, screaming for a release that only he can give me.

“Let me feel everything you do right now,” he murmurs.

Before long, bright bursts of light soak my vision. I scrape my nails down Zak’s spine as he ravages my body and soul. My sex tightens around him, pounding a rapid beat. Our bodies rock against each other, pebbled with sweat, frenzied with need.

I part my lips to scream, but he captures the sound with his mouth. Ecstasy swells within me, sizzling every nerve. A roar rips from Zak’s throat. My pussy clamps down on his throbbing cock, dragging him back to the spot that ignites every last sliver of desire swirling in my core.

When Zak collapses onto his back beside me on the bed, we just lie there, the room silent aside from our panting. He runs his fingers over my goosebump-pebbled skin. I shiver at his gentle touch.

He’s never touched me like that, like I’m a treasure to be cherished and protected.

A flash of anger jolts me.

He’s right. I do deserve more.

I deserve everything. I will have everything, too. It’s just a matter of time before I get it.

So when he flips over to kiss me, I let him.

Because I know the end of our story... and he’s not in the sequel.

CHAPTER 29

ZAK

I collapse back against the leather seat in Nik's Range Rover. Sunlight streams in through the window. My gaze drops to the diamond ring that's still on Skyla's finger. The huge stone glitters, making my blood boil. "I thought I told you to take that fucking thing off."

She lifts an eyebrow at me. "What if it got lost? I might need to sell it."

"Sell it for what?"

With a cool smile, she says, "For money, dipshit."

I twist toward her, a sharp pain exploding down my side. I choke back a groan. Goddamn stress is making my sciatica rage these days. "Why the hell do you need money?"

"And why the hell do you two sound like an old married couple already?" Nik grumbles from the driver's seat. We're on the way to Luka's place for a meeting. Alek tapped into some of his tech geniuses and he's got information. Highly critical shit, from what Nik said.

And we drop everything for highly critical shit.

"Pull over." I smack the side of Nik's headrest. "City Diner."

"Of course, Miss Daisy." Nik swings the steering wheel to the side and the tires screech to a stop next to the curb. I jump out of the truck and run inside to pick up my to-go order.

Something's up with Skyla. I don't know what the fuck it could be, other than the fact that she didn't get enough sleep because we spent most of the night christening every inch of our bedroom and bathroom at the safe house.

I figured honesty would make her happy. I told her how I felt and meant every word. I thought that's what she wanted to hear. But instead of a happy Skyla, I woke up with the Wicked Witch of the East. She's been cold,

disconnected, and if I'm being honest, a total bitch.

I hope pancakes with strawberry syrup can fix whatever the hell has her panties in a twist.

She doesn't even look at me when I jump into the back seat with the bag. Shit, even my stomach is growling, and I hate pancakes. I drop the plastic bag onto the seat between us. Skyla just keeps staring out the window with a weird look on her face.

What the fuck? Is it a woman thing?

I rake a hand through my hair and let out a deep sigh. Nik doesn't say a word. Glad he got my telepathic message to choke back whatever sarcastic shit that was on the tip of his tongue.

The ride to Luka's is dead silent other than the hum of Nik's satellite radio. I tune out the sound, trying like hell to figure out how things with Skyla took such a nosedive after last night. She definitely didn't seem to have any issues while she was coming all over my cock and screaming for God.

Luka's place is at the end of a private beach road. We drive through the mile-high grasses on either side of the pavement. Gravel crunches under the tires when we get to the driveway. Nik pulls the truck up close to the house and stops next to Danil's car.

"Why are there so many cars?" I furrow my brow, not recognizing the shiny black Bugatti parked a little farther up.

"Alek Severinov is here, too." Nik turns to look at me. "And he called in Boris."

"Boris Vetrov? Luka got his ass here, too? I figured he was enjoying retirement way too much to let himself get pulled back into our quicksand."

Skyla picks that second to let out a snort.

Nik flashes me a questioning look. I just shrug. Whatever is up her ass will have to wait until later.

We get out of the car. I grab the white plastic bag of food and carry it to the front door. Luka opens it and narrows his eyes at me.

"What? Like my wife can't cook well enough for you?" He wrinkles his nose. "You hate pancakes."

"They're not for me." I push past him, a weird feeling churning in my gut. Something isn't right. I rub the back of my neck, the pain in my side amplified by the stress knot that's taken residence at the base of my skull.

Skyla barely says a word to anyone, which shocks the hell out of me. She isn't one to be at a loss for words. Luka's wife, Natasha, tries to introduce

herself, but she doesn't get more than a "hello" in return. I grab Skyla by the wrist and tug her into a hallway.

"What's wrong? You've been quiet and... I don't know... moody all morning. Avoiding me when I try to talk to you."

She gives a half shrug. "I guess I'm tired. It's a lot, getting shot, running from kidnapers and killers, not knowing what tomorrow will bring, if there even is a tomorrow."

"Hey, I told you not to worry about anything. I'm gonna take care of you, of all of this. You don't have to worry about tomorrow. I promise."

I tilt her chin upward. "Hey, I love you. I want you to be happy. I even got you breakfast—"

She jerks her face out of my grip. "You think you can make everything okay with orgasms and pancakes? News flash. You can't. So please. Don't even pretend to try."

"Z, let's go." Nik pops his head into the hallway and nods toward Luka's office. "The guys are waiting."

Skyla takes the bag from me and wordlessly heads into the kitchen. I can hear Natasha's high-pitched laugh a few seconds later. The rustling of plastic follows.

At least *someone* wants pancakes.

I walk into Luka's office, trying to ignore the sharp pang every time I take a step. I stand against the wall, bringing my hand to the base of my spine. I knead the muscle, gritting my teeth as I listen.

"The reason why we're all here today is because Alek dug deeper on Van Dyne and got some information we need to act on." Luka gives me a pointed look. "Fast, since lover boy here decided to step up and marry our leverage."

I roll my eyes. "Fuck off. It's a solid strategy."

Alek's blue eyes pin me to the wall. He's got a knack for that. And at almost seven feet tall, he doesn't need to do much else to intimidate people. But I'm not intimidated. I'm too focused on what the hell is going on in Skyla's mind to pay much attention to anything else.

"We know Van Dyne is linked to Denis Stepanov, although we can't link them through any transactions. *Yet.*" Alek steps toward me, like I'm his only audience. "You had one job to do, steal the bride so we could make sure to crush whatever plans Van Dyne and Stepanov had for taking down your family since we know that as part of Red Ladro, we're all associates and all vulnerable to an attack."

“Why the hell do you care now, Sev?” I straighten up. “You’ve always pushed our shit back on us, saying that Red Ladro is a separate entity. What changed?”

His jaw tenses, dark eyebrows pulling together. “What’s changed is that this involves more than just the Malikov family. Two other members of Red Ladro have a vested interest in tracing the information we found. There are a series of shell companies with transactions from several countries in Eastern and Western Europe. All of them track back to a parent company in Switzerland called Strathmore Enterprises. We checked out the board of directors.” He pauses, making sure to look at each one of my brothers and Boris. “Tyson Van Dyne is listed as one of them.”

“And what does Strathmore Enterprises do?” Nik asks.

“They own hotels and run elite sex parties where they lure in young women and kidnap them for trafficking purposes. It’s a multibillion-dollar organization, one we’ve been investigating for a while. But we’ve always come up empty because the companies open and close before we can track any details. But once Tyson got assigned to the board, there was a delay in covering their tracks. They didn’t erase their trail fast enough, and that’s how we found them.”

“And who are the other members of Red Ladro who want in on taking down this sex trafficking ring?”

Alek turns back to me. “The Villanis and the Mulligans. Turns out one of the shell companies links back to the sex trade in Dublin, Ireland, and they have a vested interest in the man running the show behind the curtain. Same man you’re after. Branko Ivanova.”

“Motherfucker,” I mutter.

“I’d told your father about the Mulligan girl who’d been snatched in Dublin years ago.”

I look over at Boris who’s sitting in a black leather chair next to Luka’s desk. I haven’t seen him in at least two years and Jesus, it looks like he’s aged about twenty more. His skin is sallow and worn, blue eyes watery. You’d never know he lives in South Florida. Looks like he hasn’t seen daylight in years.

Boris clears his throat, his voice still raspy. “It was after I’d done some work with Patrick, the boss of the Mulligan family, up in New York. But all the searches for her came up empty. Your dad wasn’t able to locate her or the group who took her. It was supposed to be some act of revenge, but all leads

were dead. Until now. The information Alek found might lead to the people who took her. To Branko himself. And that son of a bitch needs to die. That's the priority now that we know he might be close."

"What about St. James? We stopped the wedding so we could kill their plans to fuck up our weapons distribution business." I look at Luka and Nik. "We have that exchange planned. We can't pull out."

"This is bigger than our weapons business. This means finally finding Branko Ivanova and destroying the threat to our future and the man who is responsible for our last three and a half years of hell." Luka sits on the edge of his desk. "And right now, we can't take any risks that will blow up our organization. We don't know what the hell Tyson Van Dyne is gonna do next, and if he's tracking Skyla, he's tracking us, too. We need Skyla to lead us to Branko."

"Yeah." Alek turns and points to me. "You said you snatched her to save your family. Now's when you need to make your move. Fuckfest 2023 is over." His voice drops. "Don't think I haven't seen the security feeds."

"You're a fucking sicko," I seethe. "Demented as everyone says you are."

His lips curl upward into a malicious smirk. "I'm evidently not the only one who holds that title."

"So what the hell do you want me to do?" My pulse jumps because I know exactly what he wants me to do, what everyone expects me to do, what I need to do to regain all the respect I've lost.

"It's time for you to take the princess back to her ivory tower." Alek points a finger at me. "And then we're gonna torch the fucking thing."

CHAPTER 30

SKYLA

My hand freezes on the bathroom door.
“...take the princess... back to her ivory tower... torch the fucking thing.”

And then Zak’s voice.

“Done.”

He’s giving me up. Taking me back to Tyson. He’s choosing his family over me... *again*.

Why the fuck can’t someone choose *me*, for once?

I grip the handle harder.

And why am I leaving it up to everyone else? When the hell am *I* going to choose me?

Chairs move, voices get animated, footsteps toward the door of Luka’s office get louder.

I push open the bathroom door and close it behind me. I flip on the light, plunged into a blinding sea of bright-white décor. Gripping both sides of the shiny pedestal sink, I lean toward the mirror and stare at my reflection.

Where the hell is the spark? The confidence and drive? The desire for independence and success? All the things that I was only months ago, before I was torn from my life. Now I look as worn and broken down as my father.

Helpless. Hopeless. Alone.

Because no matter what words Zak croons into my ear while he’s holding my body captive, he will never convince me that any of it is real. Lies and secrets are all he knows, and he’ll betray anyone to get what he wants. He wanted football and it was taken away from him. For the first time in his life, things didn’t work out. And he’s been scrambling ever since, hating his life,

detesting his work, and feeling lesser than when he knows he could have been so much more than a low-life thug.

I slam my fists onto the edges of the sink.

And by staying with him, I'm allowing myself to be the victim.

There has to be a way out. I just need to find it.

But I have to come up with a plan first. If I do this, if I run, I have to be prepared to leave everything behind... including my heart, as mangled as it may be.

I turn on the faucet and splash some cold water on my flushed face. The threats against me... against my family... are real and deadly. I can't for the life of me figure out what my father is so desperate to hide that he'd put us all in the line of fire like this. And there's no guarantee that Tyson will be satisfied with taking me as his wife. He will bleed my father dry, and Christ only knows what he'd do to me next. He's already proven himself to be a crazed, jealous lunatic.

Am I going to live a life of mental and physical anguish because my father wasn't smart enough to figure out who he was partnering with?

Fuck, no.

Dad gave me up. And even though nobody's kidnapped Kyl or Mom, he gave them up, too. All because of his greed and ignorance.

A life on the run is better than one chained to a sadistic monster who gets off on controlling me.

Jesus, if I run... no, *when* I run, it'll be from one version of that monster to another.

A few more deep breaths do little to simmer my blood, but I can't camp out in here forever. I twist the handle and push open the door, the scent of chocolate filling my nostrils. My stomach grumbles and my thoughts trip back to the pancakes burning a hole in that white plastic bag I left on the kitchen table.

But the second I think about food, my gut churns, even though the smell of freshly baked goods makes my knees quiver.

"Hey, are you okay?" Natasha, Luka's very pregnant wife, asks. Her face pinches with concern. "You're super pale right now. Sit down and drink this."

I take the glass of water she shoves into my hand and take a long gulp. "Thanks," I rasp. "I'm just worn out. Not knowing when the other shoe will drop."

She nods and places a tray of brownies on the table before sitting down next to me. “I understand exactly how you feel. Getting tangled up in this family is never a pleasant experience up front, trust me on that. But I’ve never met a family with the kind of loyalty that these guys have for one another. They’d go to the ends of the Earth to protect their own.”

My heart sinks into my slippers. That’s exactly the problem. His loyalty to his family is unquestionable. But to the woman he supposedly loves? It’s completely absent.

“How did you get ‘tangled up’ with them?” I feel like I have to make conversation since she’s been really nice to me and I’ve been a complete bitch since I walked into her home.

She hands me a plate with some brownies on it and I take it. The scent is pure decadence, and I can’t help myself from taking a bite. It’s gooey and warm and so incredibly rich, for a second, I lose myself in the deliciousness.

It’s a beautiful second.

And then I swallow and the bliss dissipates like a fart in the wind.

Back to reality.

Back to hell.

“My father was responsible for sending Luka to prison years ago. He was an enemy of the Malikov family. Once Luka was released, he kidnapped me as part of a revenge plot. I was to marry his twin brother, Dima.”

“I remember when Dima and his father were killed.” I take another bite of the brownie.

Natasha nods. “After that, things fell apart. Luka took over as head of the family and we fell in love.” She lets out a chuckle. “I know, it sounds so weird.”

“Stockholm Syndrome?” I force a smile and take a sip of water.

“It was more that he put everything on the line for me. I was the enemy because of what my father did, but he ended up saving me. Like you, I was a victim. But he destroyed the threats against me.”

“He put you first. He chose you.”

“Yes.”

“You’re lucky.”

“Zak hasn’t had an easy time over the past few years. I wasn’t around when his football career ended, but I know from Luka how hard he took it. It was pretty soul-crushing from what I heard.”

“He was amazing. So incredibly talented.” It hurts to admit it because it

just dredges up all the anger and pain I associate with that time in my life, but I loved to watch him play. He was a god on that field. He commanded the entire game.

“I also know how badly he wants to be respected by his family. He’ll do anything to get it.”

“Including ruining my life,” I grumble, toying with the corner of a paper napkin.

“I know it feels that way, but I see things.” Natasha leans closer and I get a whiff of something sugary sweet. “I also know from Nik that he’s never seen Zak so inside out over a girl before. You guys had a history, right? Didn’t you date awhile back?”

I almost choke on the last bite of brownie. “You could say that.”

“Kidnapping you from your wedding? The whole marriage thing he came up with?” Her lips curl upward and her aqua eyes glimmer. “That was all him. He may have claimed to use you as a way of getting close, but I think there was a lot more to it than just getting respect. I think it had everything to do with you.” She shrugs. “I’m not usually wrong about this stuff.”

A door opens down the hall and the guys trudge into the kitchen. Zak comes in last, his expression as deflated as a week-old helium balloon. My stomach clenches. He looks like a guy who’s about to lose his best friend.

Or the girl he claims to love.

My eyes find his and suddenly, I wish I hadn’t eaten that brownie because the look he gives me makes my stomach threaten to revolt right here in the kitchen. I gulp down the rest of my water and stand up. The chair legs scrape against the floor, but nobody looks over at me. They’re too busy scarfing down treats to give a damn about ruining an innocent person’s life.

A scream catches in the back of my throat, tangled with the latent sob that’s been begging to explode.

I look down at Natasha. “You’re really sweet and understanding. I appreciate you talking to me.” Then I raise my eyes to the rest of them, moving my gaze over each face until it lands on Zak. “But the rest of you are total and complete assholes. You claim lives to get what you want, and then you ruin them with no regard for anyone but yourselves. I didn’t ask to be a victim, and I sure as hell won’t live like one.”

With my one good fist clenched, I push past the group, giving Nik a hard shove as I stalk toward the front door. The air in here is toxic and I can’t breathe it anymore. My heart thrashes in my chest, my lungs squeezed tight

like they're being choked by a thick rope. Beads of sweat pop up on my skin, my flimsy t-shirt sticking to me.

I clutch the top of the handrail and jog down the steps, taking them two at a time and nearly breaking my neck in the process. Staring into the grass, I shudder and shake. The thought of running empowers me, but the reality of the unknown scares the living shit out of me. I say I want my independence, but am I strong enough to grab it?

A shiver scuttles down my back. Reality is out there, beyond the grasses and trees. My future. My own legacy.

It's there if I want it badly enough.

My leg muscles tense and tighten, apprehension paralyzing me. I take a few steps, my slippers digging into the gravel as I storm toward the cars.

"Stop." I gasp and stumble backward into Zak with a yelp, my face smashing into his chest.

His face is a twisted mask of fury and fire. "I am not my brothers," he growls, tugging me toward a nondescript black sedan. He clicks the alarm, opens the passenger side door, and shoves me inside before jumping into the driver's seat.

The engine roars under his heavy foot, the car skidding on the gravel as he swings the steering wheel in the direction of the private road. The noxious scent of searing rubber assaults my nostrils.

I pull on my seat belt, trying to avoid my injured shoulder. I snap it in and say a silent prayer to get wherever we're going safely as he speeds down the road.

"You're driving like a lunatic." I can barely squeeze out the words because my heart has lodged itself in my throat. "Slow the fuck down."

He just stomps the gas harder, like a petulant child.

I want to yell and scream at him, to tell him what a liar I know he is, how he's proven it for the last time. But I keep my mouth shut because I need him to believe I'm like all those other women the Malikov brothers have tethered to them. I need him to believe I'm his because if he doesn't believe it, there's a good possibility I might wind up dead.

Zak cannot think I'm going to run. He needs me as the bait to target Tyson, and he has to think I'll play that role. But fuck, do those accusatory words sear my tongue like acid.

We don't speak during the ride back to the safe house. I don't even ask whose car we're driving in because it would require opening my mouth, and

right now, that could be dangerous... especially for me.

Since we drove over to the safe house this time, he pulls into an underground garage accessible only with a code. I know he used a key to get in through the gated pool area in the past when we arrived on foot.

This time when he opens the door to help me out, I shove my hands at his chest. "I don't need you. I don't need anyone."

He bends down and grabs me by the neckline of my t-shirt and pulls me out of the car.

"You don't care." My voice quivers. "You just take, with no fucks given. That's who you are."

"No." His eyes darken, his jaw tight. "Not anymore. I told you I'd always protect you and take care of you."

I shake my head. Tears spill down my cheeks, but I choke back the words knotting in my throat. He slams the car door shut and presses himself against me. His cock, thick and hard, grinds against my shorts. He fumbles with the snap and tugs them open before shoving them to my ankles. Tears continue to stream down my face as he buries his face in my neck and devours me with his greedy mouth.

He frees his cock from his own shorts, and with one hard thrust drives into me so hard, I cry out. He loops his arm under one of my legs, lifting it so he can fuck me deeper. My pussy throbs with need as he ravages me. He rolls his hips, plundering me like a savage until he hits my spot. I drop my head back against the car door, a strangled cry escaping my lips. Everything I know, everything I fear, and everything I'm about to lose fizzles away as my body rides the blissful wave of the most intense euphoria I've ever known.

"That's it, baby girl. Come for me now. All over my dick. I want to feel what I do to you." He wraps his fingers around the back of my neck and digs them in as his thrusts speed up.

I clench my teeth, salty tears hitting my lips and tongue as the orgasm tears me apart and shreds what remains of my heart.

"Tell me you love me." The hum of his voice against my lips startles me, his breath hot against my face. I open my eyes, his pained expression blurred by my tears. "I need to hear it."

"I love you."

And I mean every word.

But I need to love me more.

CHAPTER 31

ZAK

I pull Skyla into my chest. She moans, then lets out a deep sigh as she melts into me. The sweet smell of coconut fills my lungs when I bury my nose in the back of her hair. For so long, I missed this. Missed *her*. I used my anger about my football injury to blunt the loss, but it never filled the void in my heart. I've been in love with her for years, and now that I have her, there's no fucking way I'm giving her up.

She belongs to me, and fuck anyone who tries to take her away.

I won't lose her again.

When Alek told me yesterday that I needed to take her back to Tyson, I told him I was done. And just as Alek's head was about to explode at my ballsy response, Luka interrupted with a question about Strathmore Enterprises that I know was more of a deflection than anything else. He probably saw that Alek was about to snap me in half with his bare hands and decided the conversation needed a quick change in direction.

But I'm no idiot. I know that's not the end of the conversation. At least, not from Alek's perspective.

I also know Alek is a pretty vindictive bastard who has a lot of creatively brutal ways of making people do what he wants. I'm ready for him, though. And if standing up to the vicious boss of the Severinov Bratva by carrying out a better plan doesn't earn me respect from my brothers, fuck me if I know what will.

Oh yeah, I still need to figure out that better plan.

"Are you hungry?" I whisper against Skyla's hair. "You must be starving after all the energy you used up last night fucking me like such a dirty little whore."

She lets out a breathless chuckle. "I think I'm good with sleep right now."

"I'll allow it because I plan on ravaging you again as soon as you're conscious enough to let me."

With a quick glimpse over her shoulder, she quirks an eyebrow. "Oh, you don't want me to beg this time?"

I slide my hand down to her pussy and dip my fingers between her slick lips. "Your pussy is already begging me." She lets out a gasp and bucks her hips against me, her clit throbbing beneath my fingertip.

"And I think I'm conscious enough now," Skyla rasps, wiggling her ass against my cock.

I rub the head of my cock up and down her slit a few times before I slide inside of her. Fuck, she's so wet. With long, slow strokes, I thrust into her heat, her walls clenching around me. She pulls me deep, holding me inside of her and beckoning me to find the spot that makes her come completely undone. I grip her hip with one hand, my other arm still snaked tight around her. The push and pull is agonizingly slow, her screams for release shattering the silence.

She bucks her ass against me in a frenzy, her body convulsing as she rides out a damn explosive orgasm. Her tight walls clamp down on my cock, muscles squeezing me tight as desire flows over me, drowning me in her sweet juices.

"I fucking love you so much," I growl against her ear through gritted teeth. My groin tightens, the ache in my balls so heavy. I can barely manage a few more pumps before my own orgasm erupts, filling her with everything I have to give.

"Fuck," she pants, leaning her head back against my chest. She presses my hand to her heart so I can feel it race like a thoroughbred.

I did that.

And I will keep doing it forever.

"If you say it again, I'm taking that ass." I grip one of her cheeks before giving it a smack. "Come to think about it, I don't need an invitation."

She lets out a breathless giggle. "Easy, killer. You want me to have big energy? I need more sleep."

I pull the sheet off her and spread her ass cheeks. "Screw sleep. Fucking is more fun."

I dip my tongue between her cheeks and tease her hole. Her spine tenses. I dig my fingers deeper into her plump flesh. "I know what I'm hungry for."

You. I wanna eat *you*, baby girl.”

Skyla carefully rolls onto her back, a seductive smile on her face. “How about an appetizer?” She lets her legs fall open and brings her fingers to her pussy. Then she starts to rub herself, slowly, tauntingly, never moving her eyes from my shocked face.

“You’re such a bad girl,” I murmur, bringing my hand to my hard cock and stroking it hard. “Are you gonna make yourself come again?”

She nods, biting down on her lower lip. “Yeah...” She sucks in a breath, her eyes squeezing shut. A mewl slips from her lips. Precum gathers at the tip of my cock and spills over my fingers as I drag my hand up and down the sides of my dick.

It’s gonna be a long day.

A long *fucking* day.

A few seconds of watching Skyla stroke her pussy is all I need to make me forget that there’s a rope wrapped around my neck with an invisible hand ready to pull it tight.

Her head lolls to the side, her chest heaving with stilted breaths. Mewls turn into cries, and just as I’m about to blow my load for the second time, a sharp ring yanks me out of the erotic haze.

Skyla yelps, as startled by my phone as I am.

I let out a frustrated sigh, lean over, and grab my phone from the nightstand.

“Yeah?” I glare up at the ceiling, wondering if Alek is watching.

Wondering if it’s him on the other end of the line, cockblocking me because he’s a total asshat.

“Come outside. Now.”

Click.

I recoil and toss my phone onto the desk before grabbing my shorts from where I left them on the floor yesterday.

“Who was that?” Skyla asks in a sleepy voice.

“Val.” I peer out the window at the pool. “She said to come outside. Jesus, what the hell is she even doing here?”

“I thought she was still gone.” Skyla rolls onto her side again.

“She is. Or at least she was. But I need to find out what’s going on and why she wants me outside.” I drop a kiss onto the top of her head and pull open the door that leads to the pool deck. I shield my eyes from the bright sun, peering around at the plants and trees.

“So my timing wasn’t great, huh?”

I twist around in the direction of my sister’s teasing voice. “I wish I could unsee it all but damn, it’s all branded into my brain now. I should have just called without peeking into the room.”

“Fucking pervert.” I shake my head, examining her new look. Straight black hair, black-rimmed glasses, and violet-tinted contact lenses.

“Holy shit.” I wrap my arms around her and pull her tight against me. “What’s with the goth look?”

“I change my look pretty much once every two weeks.” She lays her head against me. “My God, it feels so good to hug someone.”

“What are you doing here?” I pull away to look at her again. “We all figured you were somewhere in Europe.”

She shakes her head. “Not anymore. After we made the discovery about Strathmore Enterprises, I went to Switzerland to investigate. And then to the Bahamas to access the safety deposit box with Larysa’s key as the final layer of security.”

That’s right. Danil left the key in a specific location that Val gave him so she could pick it up. But that was weeks ago. “You said you hadn’t gotten into the box last time we talked on the phone.”

Val shrugs. “I have to be careful about what I say when I call. Someone is always listening. You should know that.”

She jerks her head left and right, then motions for me to walk with her. It’s not until we’re lost in a bunch of trees that she leans in to whisper in my ear. “I know you guys were with Alek and Boris yesterday. There’s another reason why Alek and Red Ladro are all over St. James. He’s saying it has to do with the abduction of the Mulligan girl, but that’s not all. And if he knows I told you, I am seriously fucked, so don’t say a word, got it?”

I nod.

“There are only a couple of spots around this area that don’t pick up sound, only images. Alek will know I’m here, but he won’t know what we talked about. Try not to move your lips too much. And if it’s not safe to talk, I won’t say anything until we’re clear.”

She takes a deep breath. “So here’s what I found out. Dad gathered a bunch of information on the sex trafficking ring run by Branko Ivanova. There was a lot of bad blood there, but we didn’t know exactly why. He sent it to Olek Moroz, who stuck it in that safety deposit box in the Bahamas. It was supposed to expose Branko, but what I found was transaction details that

tracked money sent from Dad to Strathmore Enterprises. There weren't direct paths, but I traced them through with the data guys."

"Okay, and we know the Van Dynes are in Branko's back pocket."

"Right, but instead of the documents tying Branko to Dad, they only tie Dad to Strathmore Enterprises. There was nothing linking him to Branko."

"Was there ever?"

Val shakes her head. "I don't know. What I do know is that Red Ladro also funded activities indirectly by association to Dad. That's why nailing Tyson is key. He's the loose cannon who can blow this all apart if we don't get Skyla back to him."

"I don't get it. Why would Dad fund those activities?"

"I don't think he did. I think the funds were ultimately transferred to Strathmore to make it look like he did. But we'll never really know now." Her shoulders slump. "And the other problem is that there are a lot of enemies who would have a field day with this intel. Enemies of Branko who would decimate us if they knew we were funding him. All it takes is a data leak and we're screwed."

I scrub a hand down the front of my face. "Shit. And all this time you've been chasing this down?"

She tilts her head to the side. "Not exactly. I mean, there are other enemies of Red Ladro that want what we've built. Like Luka, it's my job to end them before they end us."

"Fucking badass." I grimace. "But you shouldn't have had to turn into one. That's on Dad for forcing you down this path. For fucking pairing you up with that asshole Dmitri Stepanov."

Val peers around and motions for me to follow her. We approach the door to the room and she backs against a wall before answering. "I'm not finished with Stepanov. He will pay, Zak. I promise you that."

"Good, 'cause if you don't take care of him, I'm gonna use a mandolin and slice the skin from his decrepit body."

"Okay, but right now, you need to forget about Stepanov. If we're linked with St. James, we're all fucked because he's going down hard for funding Branko's trafficking ring, too. That's what the Van Dynes have on him. We'll take the fall if any of us are associated with him or Skyla. You want to run your own show? Prove to the family where your loyalty lies and get rid of Skyla." She puts a hand on my shoulder and squeezes almost in a warning kind of way. "If you don't, you'd better watch your back. If Alek finds out

you crossed him, I won't be able to stop what happens next.”

CHAPTER 32

SKYLA

“You have got to be kidding me.” I press my fingertips to my temples and pace the bedroom, away from the window overlooking the pool. First that guy Alek, and now Val? *Again?*

Well, I’m not waiting around to let any of these assholes dictate my future. I stumbled through my escape plans before, but this time, nobody will stop me.

A sharp pang assaults my heart, an icy hand squeezes it tight.

I want to fall into bed, grab the pillow, and bawl into it for almost falling into Zak’s trap for the second time. I’d hoped I was wrong for being suspicious of his motives. For so long, I’d wanted him to tell me he loved me. I fantasized about hearing those words. Then he finally said them, and all I could think about was his agenda.

Because Zak’s not the fall-in-love kind of guy.

He’s the kind of guy who’ll slit your throat for a nickel and revenge.

Those words must have tasted like poison on his tongue.

Typical man, thinking he can get what he wants by saying something completely disingenuous.

I ball my hands into tight fists and storm into the bathroom. Reaching into the glass shower enclosure, I turn the knob on full blast to buy myself a little time. Then I walk out and close the door behind me.

“Are there any people who *don’t* want to completely fuck my life?” I mutter to myself through gritted teeth. I grab the skimpy denim shorts I wore yesterday and quickly pull them on. With a quick glance around the room, I notice Zak’s wallet on the desk.

“Please have cash.” I pick it up and open it to find a bunch of fifties and

hundreds stuffed into the billfold section. Finally, a fucking break. Letting out a relieved breath, I grab it all and stuff it into my back pocket.

Then I stuff my feet into my slippers, put the baseball cap on, and run toward the door that leads to the parking lot out front. For a second, I stop to glance down at the car keys by the door, but knowing Zak and his family, they'd be all over me like maggots on rotten meat if I tried to steal it.

Then I remember the cameras that are supposedly set up all over the room.

"I hope you're watching this, Alek. Here's what I think of *you*." I flip him off with both hands before turning on my heel and darting out the door. Once I'm outside, I hunch over with my head between my knees. My chest tightens, each breath of hot and muggy air that I pull in chokes me more.

Of course he was going to choose his family.

Of course he was going to screw me over.

He'd done it before, and there were plenty of other empty promises preceding *that* betrayal.

Why the hell did I think he'd be any different this time? I mean, yes, he can still make my panties evaporate from my body with one flash of his eyes.

But the chip on his shoulder is bigger. Correction—it's the size of California.

And he's even more vengeful now than he was a few years ago, because now he doesn't have the promise of a hugely successful NFL career in his back pocket, an escape from his family obligations.

He has nothing anymore, including me.

It's all his fucking fault. He drove me to this. He begged for this hell when he barged into my bridal suite a few days ago.

At this point, I'm so devastated by loss that I don't even give a crap who's after me anymore. But what I do know is that anyone who tries to snatch me will be the focus of my wrath. I will fight like a hellcat for my freedom.

I drag myself to a standing position, push back my hair, and run. Tormented thoughts pop between my ears like gunshots.

I've never felt so alone in my life. Where the hell am I even going? It's not like I can haul ass back to Brown in Rhode Island. If they don't already have surveillance on my friends up there, they'll invade the campus and scatter like cockroaches, just waiting to swarm me if I'm dumb enough to show up.

It hurts to breathe. My lungs are so damn tight, I can barely gulp down air. I sob harder with each panicked step away from the safe house. Zak won't be outside forever, and he'll eventually figure out that I'm not actually in the shower. I can't stand around and lament about how my life is being sucked down the drain.

I can do something to stop it.

To save it.

My skin prickles with sweat. Brickell Bay Boulevard is crowded with cars, bikes, bikini-clad girls, and bare-chested guys. The sun shines bright in a clear blue sky, a perfect beach day for these people who smile and sway like they have zero fucks to give about anything in the world.

I wish I was one of them.

My calf muscles tense and tighten as I wind my way around the crowds of people littering the sidewalk and blocking my path. I ignore my grumbling stomach. The broken heart in my chest has pretty much killed my appetite. Right now, I'm feeding off my need for freedom.

That's the only thing I need fueling me right now.

Tucking my hair under my baseball cap to cool off the back of my neck, I run across the street in the direction of City Diner. Again, my stomach growls in anger at me.

But chocolate chip pancakes with strawberry syrup will just have to wait.

I have enough cash to get me by for a little while if I'm careful with spending it. I also have the diamond ring that I can pawn. And beyond that, my dad's stash will keep me under the radar for a very long time. It'll get me out of the country and keep me hidden away in a dark corner of the world where nobody will bother to look for me.

I swallow a sob.

My mother is about to lose her other daughter.

Guilt gnaws at my gut but I don't let it slow me down.

I did what she begged of me, I walked away from my dreams.

It didn't seem like she had any regrets about asking me to give up my life in exchange for silence.

So why the fuck should I feel anything but relief about getting far away from this life where I'm nothing more than a prisoner surrounded by smoke and mirrors? Luxury cars, couture, diamonds the size of boulders. I'd give it up in a hot second for freedom.

The blazing sunlight scorches my skin. I pull the t-shirt away from my

chest, fanning myself. Sweat drizzles down the sides of my face, a rush of heat invading my cheeks. I round a nearby corner, finding temporary peace on the quiet side street. I walk about a block, heading away from the beach. Suddenly an unsettling sense of dread washes over me, crashing hard like a wave against the surf in a storm.

I clutch a hand to my chest and back against a brick wall of a nearby building, panting, when a familiar, haunting scent hits my nostrils. My stomach roils and I clutch a hand to my midsection.

Lifting my head, my eyes open a crack wider because the sun is too damn bright and I forgot to snatch a pair of sunglasses from the safe house.

Fuck, no. It can't be...

A quick pinch in my upper arm makes me yelp before I can say a word.

“You didn’t think I was just going to let you run away, did you?”

The deep, husky voice slithers over my skin like the slimiest snake.

My knees buckle, all feeling in my lower body lost in a hair of a second. I slump against the wall with no ability to keep myself from crumbling to the ground.

He doesn’t let me fall, though. With one arm locked around my waist, Tyson pulls me close, his breath hot against my face. My eyelids flutter, numbness commanding every cell. But I can still hear his voice hiss against my ear, still feel his hatred infiltrate me like a toxic poison flooding my veins.

“Your bitch sister Laney made a fool of me and look what happened to her. What I made happen.” He tugs hard on my earlobe with his teeth. “I warned you, Skylá. I told you what would happen if you tried anything stupid. Too bad for you that I’m a one strike, you’re out kind of guy.”

CHAPTER 33

ZAK

“I have to go.” Val smiles at me before giving me a big hug. “I know you’ll do the right thing.”

I squeeze her tight, catching a whiff of something sweet. Like the Starbucks birthday cake pops she loves so much. It’s familiar and comforting, and right now, I need to feel both.

I need Skyla.

She’s what’s familiar and comforting to me, and I’ll never let her go.

Val walks toward the gate to the street. She puts a baseball cap on to cover her dark hair, and with one final wave to me, she disappears.

My heart sinks just like it did last time I saw her. She’s been tucked into Alek’s secret army for too long, and we all know what happens to most of those guys. They’re vigilantes and assassins who hunt the dredge of the Earth.

They’re expendable and constantly in the line of fire.

Val may have an advantage because she’s a woman and can slip in and out of places without suspicion. But luck only gets you so far in this life. Maybe that’s why she came to me about what she found. Maybe she knows her time is short.

My gut twists. I push open the door to our room, the shower spray muffled by the closed bathroom door. I rake a hand through my hair and strip off my shorts, my cock half-hard when the image of Skyla naked and soapy in the steamy glass enclosure floats in front of my eyes.

That’s all I want to think about right now, not all the shit my sister just unloaded on me. Not the threat of losing the woman I love again.

Val says she knows I’ll do the right thing.

Keeping Skylia in my life is the right thing. Figuring out whoever the fuck is behind the decimation of my family is the right thing. I need to figure out a way to do both without risking any more lives, including my own, because when Alek finds out that I'm gonna cross him and keep my bride-to-be, God only knows what kind of wrath he's gonna unleash on me.

I twist the handle on the bathroom door and push it open. The place is completely clouded with steam and stifling as hell. Condensation drizzles down the front of the mirror, the small space sweltering like a sauna.

I can barely see through the fog hovering outside the shower, much less anyone inside of it. I walk toward the glass door and pull it open to step inside.

My gut free-falls.

It's empty.

She's not here.

I shut off the spray and dart out of the bathroom, my wet feet skidding along the tile floor.

"Skylia," I yell.

She doesn't answer.

I fist the sides of my head, scouring the room until my eyes land in the spot where she kicked off her slippers yesterday.

They're gone.

She's gone.

A blaring ringtone jolts me. I run over to the desk and stab the Accept button on my cell phone.

"Yeah?"

"Very coincidental that your *fiancée* disappeared right after I told you to get rid of her."

My spine stiffens at Alek's accusatory tone. "You think I tipped her off?"

"I think you did something other than fuck her six ways from Sunday all night because she's gone. Do you want to know how I handle people who think they can outsmart me, Zak? Do you want me to explain to you exactly what I do to them? Because career-ending football injuries would feel like a massive orgasm in comparison."

"I didn't tell her anything." My eyes sweep over the room again. Where the fuck is he watching from?

"Then how much longer are you gonna stroke your dick for? She's fucking gone, so you'd better find her, because if I find her first, things are

gonna go down a lot differently than either of you want.”

Ire floods my veins, rumbling in my gut. “Fuck you, Alek. Maybe if you got laid every once in a while, you wouldn’t need to whack it watching other people screw through your stupid fucking security system. Then again, I can’t imagine who the hell would want to fuck your tired old ass anyway.”

“My wife doesn’t have any complaints about my tired old ass. And if you’d like to keep your ass in one piece, I’d focus on getting to Skyla. Otherwise, I can promise it’ll end up with a handful of skewers jammed inside of it. And that’ll just be the beginning of the torture I will inflict on your broken, busted ass.”

A rush of heat invades my limbs. If that motherfucker was here right now, I’d pounce on him like a goddamn jungle cat.

“Find her. Or I will.”

Click.

A guttural roar explodes out of my mouth. I sweep my arm over the lamp and assorted crap sitting on the desk. The lamp hits the floor, shattering on impact. My wallet flies into a corner of the room. I stomp over to it and pick it up. It’s lighter than it was when I put it on the desk. A quick check tells me why.

“Son of a bitch!”

I kick the desk chair, then pick it up and hurl it at the wall. It leaves a deep dent. I pick it up again and send it flying into a window. This time it bounces off the armored glass and hits the tile floor.

I can’t even get satisfaction from breaking a fucking window.

Her disappearance explains her bitch-mode mood. She must’ve been planning it since we left Luka’s. That’s when things shifted between us. All the fucking only made her pull away more. She knew what she was gonna do and probably fucked me as a distraction, a realization that makes my blood boil.

I grab my shorts and pull them on, my brain racing through possible locations where Skyla might have gone with all of my cash.

She wouldn’t stay here in Miami. She’s a smart girl who knows if she stuck around here, somebody would find her.

An icy hand tightens around my neck.

She’d get the hell out of the country.

Stuart St. James’s pleading words loop through my mind.

“Keep her safe. They’ll come for her. I can’t lose her, too.”

Skyla was pissed as hell at him, but would she reach out to her parents one last time before disappearing forever?

I slide my feet into a pair of sneakers, grab the car keys from a table, and run out the door. The St. James place isn't too far from here, but of course, South Florida traffic doubles the amount of time it takes me to get to the large estate gate outside their compound.

I stab the intercom button once I pull up to the wrought iron entrance. "It's Zak Malikov. Skyla's gone. Is she in there?"

Not even a second passes before a panicked woman's voice comes over the speaker. "Zak, this is Amelia. I'm opening the gate."

The black fence creaks open slowly, my pulse pounding into the side of my neck faster and harder with each second that ticks past. I stab the gas pedal with my foot once I can get through. Stuart and Amelia are already outside when I drive up to the house.

I push open the door and run up the steps. "Skyla's gone. She disappeared this morning. Did she get in touch with you at all?"

Amelia covers her mouth with her hand. "Oh my God. My poor baby. I can't lose her, too."

My lips twist. I glare at her. "Not for nothing, but you didn't seem to have a problem with your 'poor baby' getting married off to some scumbag to protect all this." I wave my hand around the outside of the huge house that looks more like a resort than a home. If memory serves, it's about as cold and unfeeling as a resort, too.

"Don't talk to my wife like that." Stuart glowers at me.

I twist myself around so that I'm facing him head-on. He seems shorter than he did the last time I saw him. The skin around his eyes and mouth are worn and etched with deep lines. He moves toward me, his body slightly hunched. Broken down.

But his eyes are alive and fierce with anger.

I glance back at Amelia. Her blue eyes are wide with alarm, tears skimming the edges. Her full lips quiver, hands shaking as she wrings them.

"Hey, don't come over here with your ignorant accusations, you selfish prick."

My fingers clench at the sound of Kylian's voice. Fucking A. I managed to get the trifecta of assholes.

Before I can turn to look at him, Kylian knocks his shoulder into me. I stumble a few steps and steady myself before I fall into the bushes along the

sides of the staircase.

“You’re lucky I didn’t whale you with the fucking crutch, jackass.” He hobbles over to his parents. “What the fuck do you want? Haven’t you done enough to this family?” Kylian balances himself on his one good leg and threateningly swings a crutch in my direction.

I stare at my former best friend. “Coincidental that you’ve done just as much damage to me and mine.”

Stuart shakes his head. “It was never supposed to happen.”

My eyes narrow. “Yeah, well, maybe next time you get into bed with a business partner, you find out what he’s all about first.”

“I thought I could manage things with the Van Dynes.” Stuart’s shoulders slump. “Once I found out what they were into and how Denis Stepanov was involved. All of those girls... all of those lives lost.”

“Including your own daughter’s.”

Amelia’s eyes spill over, a quiet sob quaking her shoulders. Kylian puts an arm around her, his murderous eyes still on me.

I don’t even know for sure exactly what those guys are into, but I have an idea since they’re both tied to Branko. And that makes me want to shred their flesh with a fucking cheese grater.

“Tell me what you know, Stuart.”

He sighs and sinks onto a bench. “The Van Dynes and Stepanov are partners in a sex trafficking ring. I don’t know the ringleader, but supposedly he works behind the scenes. Uses lots of different contacts all over the world to do his work and bring in cash. Nathan and Denis own a string of hotels used for elite sex parties. Some girls are brought in under the guise of working the parties as servers and bartenders. They’re drugged and then kidnapped. Sold to the highest bidder.”

Stuart runs a hand over his balding head. “I’d invested in the real estate deals, the places where the hotels were built, never knowing exactly what they were used for once constructed. It’s a consortium of investors, and Nathan is responsible for keeping us updated on our real estate ventures. One night I overheard him and Stepanov talking and making arrangements for one of them. I tailed them to the hotel in South Beach and saw the whole thing unfold.”

Kylian’s jaw drops. “Dad, are you fucking serious? Why didn’t you tell anyone?”

“I couldn’t. I got into my car and drove straight home. Nathan was

already here waiting for me. He had footage of me nosing around. Threatened all of you if I said a word. And then he told me my name would be attached to the whole sordid mess because of everything I'd invested. I knew my entire world would crumble if I came forward. That's why Skyla was promised to Tyson. Before her, it was supposed to be Laney, but then..." His voice cracks and Amelia cries into Kylian's shoulder.

I drop onto the bench next to Stuart and scrub a hand down the front of my face. Branko has so many different faces, so many operatives, so many plans being executed by just as many henchmen. How the hell are we going to find him and stop him from ruining lives?

"I'll never forgive myself for letting this happen and jeopardizing my family." Stuart places a hand on my shoulder and looks at me. "This is why you need to find Skyla and take her away from all of this. You're not the man I ever wanted for my daughter, but I know you're the only one who can keep her safe. I will take care of the rest of us." He raises his eyes to Amelia's. "For as long as I can."

"What are you talking about?" Kylian looks between his mother and father.

"I'm sick, son." Stuart wrenches his hands. "I didn't want to worry you or Skyla, but I knew you both needed to be protected from whatever the Van Dynes would threaten. That's why I agreed to the marriage. Once I'm gone, I needed to be sure that you'd be safe from their retribution. Skyla was the way I could protect you all. But now that she's on the run, everything may crumble. If that happens, you'll be left with nothing. And there won't be a single thing I can do to fix the mess I've made."

Stuart turns back to me. "How can we find her? If she's out on her own, I fear for her life if Tyson or those men he hired get a hold of her."

"Where would she go? I feel like she's smart enough to get out of Miami, but if Tyson's guys are tracking her..." Panic bubbles in my chest before I allow myself to finish the thought. I know I should call my brothers, but I have no idea what to even tell them. And once again, I'm on my own, making decisions that can fuck over my family. Besides, Alek is already on her tail. I don't have time to argue with Luka and Nik over why I made another unilateral decision.

"Find Tyson." Stuart's eyes glaze over, regret pinching his expression. "He won't let her go. He has too much to lose."

"Please find her," Amelia says, falling to her knees in front of me.

“You’re the only one who can.”

I nod and run back to my car before jumping in the driver’s seat. Kylian hobbles over on his crutches.

“Hey, don’t go. I’m coming, too.”

“What are you talking about? There will be danger and guns. What the fuck good are you to me on crutches?”

“She’s my sister.” Kylian’s face falls. “I wasn’t there for Laney. I can’t let the same thing happen to Skyla. I’m coming.”

I roll my eyes and nod toward the door. “Get in fast, hop along.”

Once he’s in the car and I stuff his crutches into the back seat, I spin out and do a one-eighty back down the driveway to the main gate.

Just as I’m about to turn out of the driveway, tires squeal to my left. I slam on the brakes just before a black Range Rover skids to a stop. Gunshots crack into the air. One hits the driver’s side mirror; one hits a side of the front windshield, shattering the glass. Of course, Luka would leave me a car that hadn’t been armored yet.

“Fuck,” I mutter, covering my head with my hand and ducking as I grab my own gun from the center console. “Kylian, get down.”

I pop my head up so my eyes meet the bottom of the windshield and point the barrel out of the hole in the glass. After firing off a few shots, the Range Rover speeds up and zooms down the long winding road.

“Who the hell is that?” Kylian yells as I throw the car back into gear and tear down the road in the direction of the Range Rover.

“Probably one of Tyson’s guys. If they knew I was here, they might know where Skyla is. Hell, they might already have her.”

“Slow down.” Kylian slams his hands on the dashboard. The Range Rover stops short in front of us, and one of the guys points his gun at us again.

“Fuck that.” I fire off a few more shots and pop the two back tires to keep them from getting away. “Stay here and keep your head down.” I push open my door, gun in hand.

“Are you fucking nuts?” Kylian grabs my arm but I shake it off.

“Look, I’m nuts about your sister, and I have to find her before anything bad happens. This is a worthwhile risk if it means I can find her before Tyson does.”

Sirens wail in the distance. Shit. Not much time before the cops show up. This is an exclusive neighborhood, and even silencers can’t muffle too much.

I fire off a few shots in the driver's direction. He slumps over, falling partway out the door.

One down.

How many more to go?

I crouch down and see a foot step onto the running board out of the passenger side. I shoot and hear a loud yelp. A guy dressed in black tumbles out the door, his bloody foot caught under the running board. He slams face-first into the concrete. Rolling around, he reaches for his gun a few inches away. I aim for his hand and shoot.

He flops onto his back, clutching his blasted hand. "Fuck, fuck, fuck," he yells.

"Don't be a pussy. It doesn't hurt yet." I kneel down next to him and fist the neck of his t-shirt. "But if you don't tell me what I want to hear, I will pull your lips through your asshole and then shove the barrel of my gun into your mouth before I fire it. *That* is pain, bro. That's what you're gonna suffer if you don't tell me where Skyla is."

The guy's head lolls to the side, his skin pale other than the streaks of blood staining it. "Suck my cock, Malikov."

"Not my bag, friend. I'm gonna ask again. Where the fuck is she?" I shove the barrel of my gun between his eyes.

"It's too late for both of you. She's already gone. And so is Tyson." He lets out a malicious snicker. "He won, motherfucker. You lost. And now everyone in your family will suffer because of it."

A sharp ping jars me. My eyes fall to the cell phone on the ground next to the guy. I peer at the screen, my chest tight. When I look back at him, a grimace tugging at my lips, his eyes widen.

"You should have been a little more polite to me before. I might not have pulled the trigger if you weren't such a dick. Too bad for you. Don't make the same mistake in your next life, asshat."

"No, please, don—!"

But I do.

So fuck you.

CHAPTER 34

SKYLA

I open my eyes a crack, then slam them shut when a thin stream of light blinds me. My temples scream. A paralyzing pain shoots across my forehead. I wince, a strangled cry slipping from my dry lips. Holy hell, my mouth is drier than a camel's asshole during a sandstorm.

My stomach twists, a wave of nausea crashing over me.

Oh my God, I'm going to puke.

I roll around on the mattress and struggle to lift my head from the pillow. The room spins, my head dropping back down like it's a lead weight.

Bile rises in my throat, and tears sting my eyes. I peek at my surroundings again, a shiver rippling through me.

Where the hell am I?

Memories blast my mind like paintball bullets.

Zak and Val talking about handing me over to my maniacal fiancé. Running away to save myself when, ironically, that was supposed to be a place for safe haven. Tyson drugging me and then throwing me into his car to kidnap me.

He took me... somewhere. To do... something.

Jesus, what a fucking day.

I squint at the clock next to the bed.

And it's not even noon, if my eyes can be trusted.

"Tyson." I mean for it to sound a lot more menacing than it does. Instead, because there is virtually no moisture in my mouth, it comes out as more of a pathetic squeak. I shake my hands, knocking them against the headboard. "Where are you, psychopath?"

Seconds stretch into what feels like hours before he finally appears in the

doorway. “The princess is finally awake.”

“What the hell is going on? How did you find me?”

Tyson walks into the room wearing only a towel. His lanky build is lean and toned, but not even remotely close to the masculine cuts of muscle that adorn Zak’s body. Tyson is all boy, Zak all man.

“Because I never trusted you. I knew you’d be just like your sister, so I had to come up with a way to keep tabs on you in case you tried to pull the same shit she did.”

“What did you do?” Oh my God, it wasn’t the hairpin after all, was it?

“I have a lot of friends who understand the need for discreet tracking devices. Every move you made, every step you took. That engagement ring recorded it all and alerted me to all of it.”

“Why would you kidnap me and tie me up? Is this all about your fucking ego?”

My lips twist when he moves closer to the bed. The scent of his nauseating cologne makes my stomach wrench. Fucking sandalwood. The threat of danger and malice chokes me and again, I try to raise my head off the pillow.

“This is about winning, Skyla. The world expects us to be married, and I’m not about to let that low-life scumbag fuck up my plans.” He leans closer and yanks off my shorts. A chill hits my naked lower half, and his eyelids droop as he runs a hand over my bare pussy.

“Did you let him fuck this sweet pussy? Did you let him come inside of you, you dirty whore?” His eyes flicker with anger and disgust. “Is that what you like?”

I blink fast. Something shiny behind his back catches my eye. My body stiffens when his hand appears, and the stainless steel tip glimmers in the light.

“I won’t have you thinking about that derelict while you’re fucking me.” His lips curl into a sinister smirk. “Wondering where he is, what he’s doing, why he isn’t doing you. He needs to die. I can make that happen. I can make anything happen.”

My brain is still cloudy, my body still limp like overcooked spaghetti, but his words slice through the fog like the sharpest dagger. “Don’t,” I rasp.

“Why? Because you love him? Because you think he loves you?” He pulls the hand clutching the knife out from behind his back, and the blade whizzes through the air as he stabs a corner of the pillow about an inch from

my head.

A bloodcurdling scream shatters the air. I try to squirm out of his reach, but he jams the knife into the mattress next to my hip, his maniacal laugh reverberating between my ears.

“You’re fucking crazy,” I yell.

“I am. And you don’t know the half of it.” He climbs onto the mattress, his towel falling open. I glance down at his dick. It’s long, hard, and dangerously close to my slit. I press my legs together, but he forces them apart.

Harsh, jagged breaths scratch the sides of my throat as I gasp for air.

“No wife of mine will ever think about fucking another man.” He hovers the knife blade over my wide eyes before dragging it down the length of my torso. It was sexy hot when Zak did it, but Tyson is more deranged than I ever feared, and he’s not doing this to be seductive.

He’s doing it because he’s insane and vengeful and jealous.

I yelp when a sudden stab of pain assaults my stomach. A dot of blood appears just above my navel. My heart thrashes wildly in my chest at the sight of the deep-red trickle slithering down my body.

“You filthy slut,” he growls. With a whip of his hand, he slashes my side. I scream at the sudden and fierce sting that follows. “You’re going to learn the hard way that I’m the one with the power and control. Over you, over him, over fucking everyone in the world. Once I take over for my father, I will be limitless, do you understand that? And if you don’t follow my rules, whoever is left of your family will pay. Just like Laney did.”

My pulse punches a hole in my throat.

Laney...

“What did you do?”

He smirks, moving the knife blade between my legs. My body is consumed by fear, the murderous glimmer in his dark eyes making every cell convulse with repulsion. “I killed her because she was a dirty slut, just like you. She fucked around behind my back when she knew she was going to be my wife. She kept resisting and humiliating me by fucking some asshole just to get me to walk away.”

He drives the blade into my inner thigh, deep enough to burn through my flesh like it’s being branded by a fire poker. I kick him in the head with my free foot, hitting him right in the jaw. Pain explodes down my leg, but I ignore it and roll off the side of the bed. I land on the tile floor, the side of my

head catching a corner of the nightstand.

The impact scrambles my brain for a second, but I push through the pain and haze.

My brain screams for me to peel myself off the floor and run my ass off, but my body is slow on the uptake. I stumble, staggering to my knees. Using every shred of energy I have left, I lurch forward, bare feet smacking against the cool tile.

I have no idea where I am or where I'm headed, but I can't stop to think. I just move.

Tyson's ominous laughter floods me with a sensation of dread, like he knows when I round the corner of the hallway that I'm two seconds away from pitching face-first into a cage filled with bloodsucking vipers and scorpions.

"You can't escape, Skyla." Tyson's voice gets louder. "What I did to Kylian was a warning. And Riley was an easy payoff. She delivered Laney on a silver platter. There are a lot of other money-grubbing hands that will do plenty to your mother and brother if I hand over a wad of cash in exchange. Stop running. You have nowhere to go unless you want to gamble with your family."

"You sick fuck," I sputter, my throat choked with sobs. I run into the front door, pounding on it with one fist. Where the fuck is the knob? The handle? How the hell do I get out of this prison?

My insides plunge into a deep freeze.

Unless I can't.

"There's no way out. It only opens from the outside, unless you have the code." Tyson grabs me by the back of my head. He yanks my hair, pulling me backward. His lips and teeth tug at my earlobe, his voice dripping with hatred. "I want what your father has, and I need you to get it for me. He'll never leave his little girl in the lurch, not when he knows what I'm capable of."

Tyson moves the knife blade to my neck, threateningly jabbing at my jugular.

He's so fucking unhinged right now. If he goes any further over the deep end, he's going to take me down with him.

An explosion of gunfire erupts outside the door. My knees quiver, buckling with relief.

He's here. He found me.

“Zak,” I cry out. “I’m in here!”

“Skyla, I’m coming in. Stay back.”

More gunshots pop against the door.

Tyson digs the tip deeper into my neck. “You’re too late, motherfucker,” he screams. “You can’t save her. And guess what else? This place is fireproofed. But outside the door... you’re fucked.” He reaches for a button on the side of the door and stabs it.

Not a second passes before an earsplitting explosion shudders the walls. I scream, my knees buckling. The noxious smell of searing metal making my eyes water and my lungs burn. My legs give out and Tyson loses his grip on me. I crumble to the floor, falling forward onto one hand.

Gagging, I crawl toward the small space under the door.

“No, please, God, no!”

CHAPTER 35

ZAK

S kyla's panicked screams flood my body with anger. I can still hear them. They make my ears ring, even over the sound of the blast, which I saw coming because of the flashing light on the outside of the door. As soon as Tyson's words were out of his mouth, I knew exactly what was coming next, so I rushed Kylian away from the door and dove to the floor.

I'd guessed the blast would be contained because otherwise there'd be no other way out. Thank fuck I guessed right.

His plan was to take out unsuspecting idiots who might want to break into his safe place.

I'm no idiot.

I also have Nik's fiancée, Kenzie, who's taught me plenty about explosives and switches and triggers.

"Are you okay?" I shake Kylian's shoulder.

He groans. "My fucking leg."

"Yeah, I said that a lot after you sabotaged me at that game. Suck it up." I struggle to my feet, soot and broken ceramic tile littering the area around us. The explosive was buried in the floor outside the door, and if I wasn't observant enough to see the blinking red light next to the door, we'd have been blown to shit. "I'm going in."

"How? The door didn't budge."

My lips lift, and I point toward the spot right above the hole in the floor. "The blast loosened the lock. See how it's hanging open? Bad design, but good for us." I jog around the rubble, smoke stinging my eyes. There isn't a lot of space for me to maneuver the door since the floor in front of it is now a gaping hole that plunges into the basement level.

Skyla's piercing scream makes my teeth grit. That son of a bitch. I'm gonna fucking gouge out his eyes with my fingers once I get in there.

I lean forward as much as possible without falling into the black hole of certain death, grip the space in between the door and the wall, and pull with every bit of strength I have. A loud growl erupts from my chest as the door slowly opens enough where I can slither through.

I won't ever forget the look of shock in his expression. I will relish that shit forever.

Holding out my gun, I step inside the large white room. It's pretty bare and has hardly any furniture except a desk and a chair. My stomach wrenches when I catch a glimpse of the handcuffs, rope, and candles scattered on top of the desk. A large glass window opposite the door lights up the space.

It's a regular fucking prison if I ever saw one.

Tyson moves into view with Skyla pressed against him. My stomach roils. Both of them are naked. And Skyla's body is streaked with blood.

A crushing wave of red floods my vision, and I clutch the handle of my Glock 19, pointing it straight at his head.

"Let her go." I raise my gun to his head. "She doesn't belong to you anymore."

Skyla's blue eyes are wide with fear, her teeth chattering as Tyson grips her tight with one hand.

"Fuck you, Malikov. She's the key to everything I want, and there's no way I'm letting her go." He holds a knife to her jugular with his free hand.

"I've got a gun and you have a knife. Who the fuck do you think is gonna win this battle?"

He lets out a maniacal laugh. "I dare you to pull that trigger. Do it and we both die."

"You're too much of an egotistical asshole to give yourself up like that. You're a winner, right? Isn't that what you say?" I take a few steps toward them. "You feeling lucky today? Because I sure am."

His eyes flash with rage, his lips pulled into a tight line. "You're a fucking loser. You and your family are finished. This won't end with me or my father. This is bigger than you know. And now that half of the Malikovs are gone, it's time for the other half to join them. Plans are in motion, motherfucker. You can't stop what's going to happen next."

I glare at him, and fuck, my finger itches to pull the trigger.

But I know he'll follow through with his threat and kill Skyla.

Only so that I can't have her.

Kylian grunts behind me. I turn to see him fall through the opening and onto the floor, his crutches in hand. He struggles to get his footing. "Tyson," he rasps. "Let my sister go. It's over."

"Not for me, Kyl. I only regret not shattering your leg in more places so that you'd really know the meaning of the word 'over.'" Tyson grins. "There's always next time. But Skyla stays with me. You know what we'll do if you try to take her away again. You know what your family stands to lose. Every-fucking-thing. So stand down and shut the fuck up!"

My eyes latch on to Skyla's. Something flickers in the pools of blue. Her hand drops from Tyson's wrist, but he's so focused on me and Kylian that he doesn't even notice. Her fingers ball into a fist and she launches it backward, right into his junk with crushing force.

He doubles over and drops the knife. It clatters on the floor. Skyla bends to grab it and runs over to me. Kylian hobbles over to Tyson where he whimpers like a bitch on the floor. Balancing on one foot, he takes his crutch and slams it against the side of Tyson's head.

"Now it's fucking over," Kylian mutters, stepping back.

"Not yet." I walk over to Tyson, kick him onto his back, and then step on his neck. He sputters, his eyes bulging as I cut off his oxygen. He clutches my ankle, digging his fingers into me. A deep-purple color shades his face, and only then do I let up on his throat.

I want him to take a final breath, knowing it's the last.

"This isn't the end, Malikov," he chokes out. "You're about to be fucked by the devil you already know."

"Yeah, well, this devil is gonna be sufficiently fucked in about five-four-three..."

I fire two shots, one into his chest, then one between the eyes.

His gaze clouds over as the life seeps from his body.

Skyla crumbles to the floor, sobbing as she covers herself with her arms and legs. I step around the pool of blood spreading around Tyson and fall to my knees next to Skyla. She huddles against me, shivering.

"What the hell did he do to you?" The words catch in my throat, my heart aching with every tortured cry that comes out of her mouth.

She just shakes her head, tears soaking through my t-shirt. "He's a monster. He... he killed Laney. And now... now he's gone, and his father will want revenge. He won't let this go. He'll come for you. For us." Her

teeth chatter. “He’ll never—”

“Hey, hey, hey.” I hold her close, my lips against her ear. “Don’t worry about Van Dyne, okay? I’m gonna take care of him, understand? I’ve got this.”

“What the hell are you going to do to stop him?” Kylian hobbles over to us and leans against the wall. “You going to kill him, too? Is that your answer for everything? Kill anyone before—”

“Before they get me first?” I smirk at him. “Fuck, yeah. It’s the only way to live.”

Kylian rolls his eyes. “You heard what my father said. Nathan Van Dyne is a vengeful bastard.”

“Nobody is more vengeful than the Malikovs. And you can watch me prove it.”



SKYLA

I wince when Dr. K pulls the final stitch in my side. He tugs at my skin, and it burns like he's searing the ends of the stitch with a blow torch. "You really couldn't have put me out for this?"

"You're a tough cookie. I knew you could handle it." He chuckles and puts the bandage over the last wound.

Everything hurts. My arm, my stab wounds, and most of all, my heart.

Hearing the truth about my father's dealings with Nathan Van Dyne and how he got himself tangled up in a horrific sex trafficking ring was harsh. But the worst part is knowing that we won't have him for much longer and that he was only trying to protect us from his bad judgment the best way he knew how.

He made mistakes, but he tried to fix them. He tried to fix us. But when he's gone, we'll still be left with the jagged pieces of his legacy, and holes in our hearts and souls over what we lost because of it.

Tears sting my eyes. I blink fast to keep them from spilling over, not really sure anymore which part of my rapidly unraveling life is most devastating.

Zak sits on the couch across from where Dr. K sewed me back up. He's silent, forehead pinched and fingers steepled, watching me cringe and moan every time the doctor stuck his needle into my flesh.

Dr. K packs his bag and stands up from the couch. "Just keep an eye on the bandages. Don't get them wet for the next couple of days. I'll be back to check in on you."

"Thanks, Doc," Zak murmurs, his eyes still on me.

Dr. K nods. "I'll see myself out."

He disappears out of the living room, and soon afterward, the front door opens and closes. Zak stands up from the couch and takes a step toward me. "How do you feel?"

I raise my eyes to his. "I've never felt worse in my life."

"I can understand that." He kneels down in front of me, his index finger grazing the bandage on my thigh. "Been there."

"Why did you come after me today?"

His brows furrow. "Because he was a fucking lunatic who was going to

hurt you. I'd never let that happen."

"Yes, you were going to let it happen." I push his fingers away. "You told Alek and Val you'd hand me over to him. I heard you say it. At Luka's house, I overheard you talking when I went to the bathroom. Alek told you to give me up and you said 'done.'" I narrow my eyes. "Don't try to deny it. I heard every word."

His blue eyes storm over. "Then you need to get your ears checked because I told him 'I'm done.' As in, I'm not fucking handing you back over to the Van Dynes. And whatever you think you heard me say to Val is wrong, too." He brings a hand to the side of my face. "I'm crazy about you. I was never gonna let Tyson have you."

I shake my head, tears spilling from my eyes. "I want to believe that, but I know you. I know how important your family is to you. No matter what, you will always do what they want, no matter who gets hurt in the process. And I can't let that be me again."

"Skyla, I told you I'd never let anything happen—"

"Look, you saved me from the guys Tyson hired. But it didn't mean you were giving everything up for me. You did it to save me for something bigger, something that could save your family. You were feeding your own need for control and respect. How am I supposed to believe that you wouldn't choose them again over me?"

"Because I fucking love you. Do you get that? I've never said those words to anyone else in my damn life. And I've loved you for years. I was just too stupid to realize it until now." He reaches for my hand and laces his fingers with mine. "I want to be with you. I want you to be my wife. I want to make sure you have everything you need. That wasn't bullshit."

I pull my hand away from him and swipe away the tears running down my cheeks. "Too much has happened. And what I need right now is space so I can focus on *my* family and what's left of our future." I let out a deep, shuddering sigh. "I love you, but I just don't know if that's enough for me to grasp on to, knowing there will always be threats like Van Dyne hanging over you."

"Don't do this." His husky voice tightens. "Don't shut me out. Not now."

"I told you, Zak. Words are nothing without actions behind them." I finger the hem of my shorts, my eyes dropping to the frayed denim edging. "I don't want to hear you promise to choose me. I need to see it. And right now, I just don't believe it."

CHAPTER 36

ZAK

“If you think I’m going to let you get away with what you did to my son, you’re dumber than a fucking bag of rocks.” Nathan Van Dyne’s tan face screws up with some mix of disgust and disdain. He slams a hand on the top of Luka’s desk and points to him. “This will be on you, Luka. The fish stinks from the head. And guess what else? The body dies once the head is chopped off. Do you want to bring hell on your family? Because it’s coming. To you, Red Ladro. None of you are safe.”

Luka’s jaw tightens and he stands up from his chair. We’re all gathered in his “official” office in Miami Beach. He’d never let Van Dyne close to his home or his pregnant wife.

“Let me tell you what you’re gonna do with your empty threats.” He walks around to face Van Dyne, who is about five inches shorter than my brother. “You’re going to shove them up your ass, or I’ll do it for you. You don’t talk about my family; you don’t even think about my family. I don’t give a fuck what you think you have on us, but I guarantee we have bigger shit on you and your family.” Luka lifts an eyebrow. “I can expose it at any time. Wanna test me?”

Van Dyne scoffs. “What the fuck could you possibly have on me? And who the hell would believe you thug assholes anyway? I’m a respected member of the business community—”

“Who invests in hotels where innocent young girls are snatched and sold for the international sex trade,” I interject. “You pathetic piece of shit.”

Nathan turns to glare at me. “You little prick. I should kill you right now for what you did to Tyson. What you did to my whole family.”

“I did the world a favor.” I stalk over to him and give his shoulder a

shove. “Especially now that we know who and what Tyson was.”

Nathan’s face pales a little bit, but his eyes remain focused on me. “What the hell are you talking about?”

A nasty smirk plays at my lips. “I’m talking about the mile-long list of assault charges on Tyson that you had mysteriously expunged from the record. Must’ve cost you plenty to erase all that shit.”

“How the fuck do you know about those?”

“Us thug assholes have ways of uncovering the darkest kinds of shit, including the fact that it was Tyson who was responsible for Laney St. James’s death. The girl he paid off to position her in that wreck is ready to come forward and tell the world all about it. Even in death, Tyson will tarnish your ‘respected businessman’ reputation.” I shove a finger at his chest. “You wanna fuck with us? Ask your pal Denis Stepanov all about it. He was smart enough to stand down. Are you?”

“This isn’t over. You won’t get away with it.”

“Challenge accepted. Get ready to see your family name dragged through the shit, Nathan.” Nik lifts an eyebrow.

“And if you need proof of all the documentation we found on Tyson’s sex acts,” Alek says. “I’ll send you the website where they’ll all be posted.”

Nathan sinks into a chair in front of Luka’s desk. “Please don’t. He shamed us for too long.”

“Deal,” Alek says, leaning down to speak right into his face. “Now why don’t you tell us a little more about your friend Branko Ivanova.”

“Look, I invested in the hotels, okay? But that’s all. I never got involved with the girls.”

“You made money on the ones who were sold, yeah?” Luka folds his arms over his chest.

“Yes, but I didn’t have any say in what was done or how it was done. I was a silent partner.”

“You scumbag,” Alek growls, pulling out his Zippo lighter. “You supported the kidnapping and exploitation of innocent women. Women who were defenseless because they were drugged.”

Nathan’s eyes widen when Alek flips open the top of the lighter. “I told you, I had nothing to do with—”

Alek twists both of Nathan’s arms behind his back and holds his wrists in one of his massive hands. With his free hand, Alek holds the flame against Nathan’s crotch, setting fire to his pants.

Nathan screams like a little girl as the flame rises, spreading lower.

“Alek, for fuck’s sake. The fire sprinkler is gonna go off now,” Taras grunts.

Alek drops Nathan’s hands after a few seconds of his shouting, and he shrugs off his jacket to stomp out the fire scorching his cock. “You fucking lunatic!”

“Yeah,” Alek says, tossing the lighter into the air before sliding it back into his pocket. “You deserve to have your dick cut off for what you’ve done, but I’ll settle for singeing it.”

“I didn’t even know the guy who was running things,” Nathan yells, still smacking his crispy fried crotch. “You say his name is Branko Ivanova but I never even heard that name before now.”

“If we find out you’re lying, you know exactly what we’ll do.” I step forward. “And you’re also gonna drop any associations you have with Stuart St. James. Dissolve any contracts or agreements. From now on, everything you do is separate from his organization. And you won’t dare make a move to expose his involvement in any of that hotel shit, either. He’s innocent, and you know it. You used him to get leverage, and now you have nothing. If you’re smart, cut ties now and save your own ass. Be like your pal, Denis Stepanov. He knows what we can do. Stand down and keep what you have. Fuck with us, and we’ll blow everything to hell.”

Nathan stalks to the door of the office, his crotch thoroughly charred. I’m betting he wishes he wore a black suit today instead of the tan. He pulls open the office door and storms through it before slamming it shut behind him.

Luka collapses back into his chair and pushes his hair back. “Thank fuck you dug up all that shit on Tyson, Alek. Otherwise, we’d have nothing to bargain with.”

“He won’t fuck with you guys or Red Ladro if he knows he’s got something big like his empire to lose. But we need him in play for a little longer if we want to get close to Branko. He’s elusive as fuck and like a chameleon. You never know when he’s even close. We need Van Dyne and Stepanov to lead us to Branko, and with Tyson’s history, we didn’t need Skyla to put Van Dyne in a corner. He and Step will keep working with Branko, and we’re gonna find the bastard and end him once and for all.”

I keep my mouth shut about everything Val told me because there’s more behind Alek’s words that he doesn’t want to divulge. I’m not about to fuck over my sister by spewing a whole lot of accusations at him.

The smell of burning fabric stings my nose, a harsh reminder of what Alek is capable of if you ever speak out against him. My brother-in-law Konstantin can second that since Alek practically burned a hole in his hand when he mouthed off.

But fuck that. Now that we handled Van Dyne, there's something else I need to say.

And do.

As if he just read my mind, Alek turns to me with a cool-eyed stare. "You could have really fucking blown this thing wide open, Zak. You had a job to do and you ignored it."

"Yeah. I did. Because it was a fucking stupid plan."

"Jesus Christ," Nik mutters, pressing a hand to his forehead.

"You told me to use Skyla as bait. If I'd have done that, she'd have been hurt, or worse. You know what Tyson is capable of. He fucking stabbed her in four places before I got there. Dangling her in front of him would have fucked us all over. He'd have gotten what he wanted, and we'd have been left holding our dicks in our hands."

"Giving her up would have made him vulnerable. We could have hit him and ended all of this."

"She could have gotten hit in the process." I clench my fists and stand toe-to-toe with Alek.

"Sometimes that happens. It doesn't mean you stray from your objective."

"My objective has changed." I turn to look at my brothers. "I'm out. No more car restorations. No more gun running. I never wanted this. I fell into it because my football career got crushed. I want to keep my construction business and grow that. Legitimately. And I want to be with Skyla. I lost her once, and I'm not gonna let it happen again."

"You think it's that easy?" Danil rolls his eyes. "You think the target on your back will disappear because you decide to break away? Come on, Z. I know you're not that dumb."

"She thinks I chose you guys over her. She's afraid I'll do it again. I need to convince her that I won't." I wave my arm around the room. "And you guys have no legs to stand on with this. All your fucked-up relationships began the same way, and you all chose the girls. Now it's my turn."

"We chose them but didn't give up ourselves in the process." Nik takes a pen off the top of Luka's desk and spins it around his fingers.

“Last time I was really myself was when I was running into the end zone with a football under my arm. I haven’t known who the hell I really am for years. I finally feel like I’m getting back to being that guy when I’m around Skyla. I’m putting her first. And I love you guys, but I won’t be your bitch anymore. I’m gonna be my own boss.”

Luka’s lips lift. “You’ve thought this through?”

“Yup. It’s what I want. A second chance. Not the way I thought I’d get it, but life never goes according to plan, right?” I shrug. “I need her to know she’s it for me.”

“Pussy whipped.” Taras shakes his head. “Never thought I’d see the day.”

“You know you can’t just walk away, right? That’s not how this works,” Danil says.

“I’d never turn my back on you guys. You’ve always had mine. I just want to call my own shots now. It’s time. I’ve earned it.”

“Okay,” Luka says. “Maybe we can come up with a plan to get you what you want so you can have your pussy and eat it, too.”

I snicker. “Maybe. I’m open to negotiations. But right now, there’s somewhere I’ve gotta be. I have a hot date with some chocolate chip pancakes.”

CHAPTER 37

SKYLA

I sink onto the soft white comforter on my bed, my shoulders slumping in utter defeat. The past couple of weeks have mercilessly torn the scab off the wound that cut me so deep years ago.

I can't fight.

I need to fight.

It's the only way for me to survive. I know that from past experience.

Telling Zak to leave after hearing him say he loved me was the hardest thing I've ever had to do. Even harder than leaving school to marry a scumbag psychopath to save my family because Zak is who I want to be with more than anything. And to turn him away after everything we'd been through makes my heart ache with the kind of unending pain that numbs a person forever.

Staring at my open suitcase, I take in a few deep breaths and then let them go slowly. It doesn't help. I never believed in that meditation bullshit anyway. I slap my hands against my legs and stand up. The pile of clothes and shoes and assorted crap on my bedroom floor is still pretty massive, even after I stuffed two suitcases full of things to bring back to school for my last semester.

I bend down to pick up a few hoodies when a soft knock on my door jars me.

"Come in."

My door opens, and Dad's head pops inside. "Got a minute?"

I manage a smile and nod at him. "Sure."

The past three weeks since I said goodbye to Zak forever have been harder than I imagined. Reconciling with my father after learning the truth

about his dealings with Nathan Van Dyne, finding out about his prognosis, and dealing with the guilt, regret, and remorse that followed have been emotionally draining. And through it all, I wished Zak was next to me, holding me close, promising me that forever he spouted about when we were together.

I really miss his comfort, as crazy and weird as that sounds. For as beastly as he can be, I still felt safe and secure with him. The times when he looked at me like I was the center of his world are burned into my memory.

It hurts like hell to know he'll never look at me that way again.

There have been so many times I've been tempted to call but stopped myself. I made a choice to walk away, and I need to accept it, even though it feels like my entire world is crumbling down around me.

But I'm prepared to leave all of that behind and to finish the chapter I started when I began my freshman year at Brown. I'm ready to continue chasing my dreams, although that nagging feeling in my gut reminds me that no matter what kind of lies I feed myself, my dreams have shifted.

"How is the packing going?" Dad asks, walking into the room. He turns slightly to look at the clutter covering my floor and every other available space in the room. "Do we need to order more suitcases?"

"Nah, I can fit it all. I've become a master packer over the past few years."

He wrings his hands together. "Skyla, I can't tell you how sorry I am about everything. I let you all down. You, Mom, Kyl..." His voice cracks. "Laney."

I hop over the smallest pile and wrap my arms around him. Tears spill from my eyes, quiet sobs shuddering my chest. I squeeze him tight around the neck. "I miss her so much."

"So do I. Since you told us the truth about what Tyson did, I've gone through scenarios in my mind, what might have been if I hadn't stumbled onto what Van Dyne was really up to and who he was working with. How different our lives would be." He pulls away and shakes his head, tears glistening in the corners of his eyes. "I put Laney in the path of that psychopath. And then I did the same thing to you."

"You were trying to protect us." My words are weak because I'm still resentful over what he allowed to happen, the lies he told to protect himself from the Van Dynes.

"I should have been honest with you from the beginning. I made

mistakes, and I should have owned up to them instead of buckling over Nathan's threats. Tyson killed Laney, and he put Kylian in the hospital. He could have done the same thing to you."

"But he didn't." I pull out of my father's embrace and rub the sides of his arms. "Zak saved me."

Dad nods. "I'll be forever grateful for that. After the way I treated him, he put everything on the line and rescued you from a hell I created. And that's how I know he's the right one for you."

I let out a deep sigh and bend over to grab a pair of sneakers. "Yeah, except he's not. He proved to me a long time ago what was most important to him, and news flash, it wasn't me."

"What happened between me and Nathan opened you all up to world of pain. I was careless and ignorant about what I'd gotten myself involved with. Zak took you away from all of that. He called me out on my missteps, and as much as I hated to hear it, he was right. I was concerned about myself, and I let that cloud my judgment. When he took you from that wedding, he gave you a second chance to be free of my mistakes."

"Just so I could be the victim of his?" I snort and grab a denim jacket from another pile and toss it into the open suitcase. "No, thank you. He's got his own demons to battle. I don't want to be part of that."

"And you think you can avoid how you really feel about him by running back to school in Rhode Island?"

My jaw drops. "I'm not running away!"

"That's what you did four years ago."

"No, it's not. I wanted Brown."

"You wanted Zak, and when you couldn't have Zak anymore, you chose Brown."

"No. Not true. It was always Brown." But a tiny part of his words ring true. I wanted to go to Brown, but I wanted Zak more. And I even put an application in at the University of Miami, just in case.

He lifts an eyebrow.

"Brown was the best option for me and a medical career. That's what I really want. To become a surgeon. I have to go back. You know that."

"You never needed Brown. You're brilliant. You could have been successful anywhere."

"Dad, what is this really about? Is this because of your sickness?" My heart clenches. "The doctors feel really good about the experimental

treatment you're going to start. And I'm going to be home as much as I can before graduation because I want to be there for you every step of the way."

He shakes his head. "This isn't about me. This is about you and what you need to be happy. It used to be medicine. But now I think it's something... *someone*... else. And you need to be honest with yourself about that. He hasn't stopped calling. Every single day since he left the house a few weeks ago."

I nod my head. "I know. He calls and texts all the time."

"You might want to talk to him. He's persistent as hell, and you've got to give him credit for that." A smile stretches across Dad's lips, and he clasps his hands together. "Well, breakfast was just delivered, so if you're ready to take a break from packing, come downstairs and eat something."

"Breakfast? It's two o'clock."

"Is it?" He furrows his brow. "Oh. Hmm. The diner must have been pretty busy, I guess."

I roll my eyes and smile. "I love you, Dad."

He takes a step toward the door. "I love you, too, sweetie."

Letting out a frustrated groan, I whirl around to face my bed and the last pile of stuff taunting me. A furry brown leg sticks out from the bottom of the pile. What the hell is that doing here?

I pull out the stuffed bear and frown at him. He's wearing a white-t-shirt with a big red B on the front. His big beady eyes stare at me, his lips curled into a smile. I could have sworn I threw it out after Zak broke my heart the first time. I never told him I also applied to the University of Miami, so all he knew was that I was Brown-bound.

Running my finger down the front of the t-shirt, I can't help but smile when I remember Zak handing the bear to me. It was the same time I realized I could never go all the way to Rhode Island and be that far away from him.

How quickly things changed.

I toss the bear back onto the pile and hop over some clothes. My toe catches on the hood of a sweatshirt and I trip forward, crashing into the wall next to my door with a loud thump.

Jeez, I really need to get this floor cleaned up, or the only place I'll be headed is the Emergency Room.

I walk down the stairs and head into the kitchen when the delicious scent of chocolate hits my nostrils. "Mm, that smells so good."

Kylian sits at the kitchen island with an open Styrofoam container in front

of him. His mouth works in overdrive as he shovels in forkful after forkful of pancakes.

“I hope you left some for me.”

“Nmohph,” he mumbles, his mouth still full.

“Eh, it’s not like I was hungry anyway.” I snicker and turn to pull open the refrigerator.

“Hey, what the fuck, Kyl?”

I spin around, my hand still clutching the refrigerator handle. “Zak? What are you doing here?”

His jaw drops as he stares daggers at my brother. He holds up a few containers and steps into the kitchen. “The syrup must’ve fallen out of the bag.”

“Oh, were these not for me?” Kylian drops his fork and wipes the whipped cream from his lips.

“No, fuckhead. They’re for Skylia.” Zak rushes over to the container and mutters some choice expletives to himself. He takes the fork and pokes around the Styrofoam. “Did anything feel crunchy or hard in your mouth? Or did you just fucking swallow the food without chewing?”

“It wasn’t crunchy. They’re pancakes, bro. And yeah, syrup would’ve been good.” He plucks one of the containers out of Zak’s hand and opens it. He drizzles the syrup over what’s left, and Zak hurls the other container at his head.

“Step the fuck away from the pancakes,” Zak growls, giving him a small shove backward. “Or else I’ll break your other leg and take you out of the game permanently.”

Kylian flips him off but moves away.

“What is going on?” I put my hand on my hip and slam the refrigerator door closed. “Why are you here, Zak?”

He takes a pause from digging through the pancake carcass and looks up at me. “I know you’re leaving in a couple of days. Not from you, but from your dad. And there’s something I needed to ask you before you took off.”

“And you needed pancakes to do it?”

He digs around, his face pinched with anger and annoyance. It makes me grin to see him so flustered and over pancakes, no less.

His eyes widen after a couple of seconds of frantic digging, and he reaches into the mess and plucks out a scoopful of melted chocolate. “Got it!”

Kylian lets out a low moan. “So good. Another few seconds, and I’d have

devoured the rest.”

Zak glares at him. “It would have been a really rough time in the bathroom tomorrow if you did, jackass.” He walks over to the sink and flips on the faucet. When he turns toward me, he holds up what used to be a lump of chocolate and now...

I blink fast.

No fucking way. It can't be.

Taking a step toward him, my mouth falls open.

Holy crap on a cracker.

It is.

A glittering diamond engagement ring.

His lips lift into the widest smile I've ever seen as he crosses the room toward me and drops to his knee.

I put both of my hands to my heated cheeks. “What are you doing?”

“I told you I had a question to ask.”

“Yeah, but... but... I told you it's over. Whatever it was. I'm leaving. I have to go—”

Zak takes me by the hand and laces his fingers with mine. I'm not wearing the sling anymore, but my arm is still a little sore so he's gentle, gentler than I've ever known him to be.

“You don't have to go. You're gonna be a great doctor no matter where you graduate from. But if you don't agree, that's fine. I'm going with you.”

“What the heck are you even saying? I told you after everything happened that we're finished, that I can't come in second place to your family forever, wondering when another enemy target will land on my back. I don't want that life, Zak. It's not what I have planned for myself.”

“I had a lot of shit planned for my life, too.” His eyebrows knit together. “But it didn't work out. Maybe it wasn't supposed to because I needed to be here with you. There's a reason why it was your wedding I ambushed. There's a reason why I found my way back to you after all this time.”

“Yeah, because you wanted revenge for your family,” I groan. “See the pattern?”

He shakes his head. “I told them today I wanted out. For good.”

“You *what*?”

“Yup. I said you're my priority, and I want to have the freedom to choose you.”

“You can't just turn your back on your family for me.” I squeeze his

fingers the slightest bit, feeling a stab of pain at the pressure. I ignore it, though, because I'm too focused on his words. "I can't let you walk away from them."

He sits back on his heels. "So you aren't good with me working with them, but you're also not good if I walk away from them?"

"Welcome to Venus, bro," Kylian mutters, turning on his crutches and hobbling out of the kitchen.

"Look, I know you don't want to give up your family. And I'd never ask you to do it. But I deserve to be someone's top priority. Not because they think it's what I want, but because they feel it."

"You think I'm full of shit?" His eyes narrow. "Because you're wrong. I'm fucking crazy about you. I can't stop thinking about you. I saved your life because I love you. I did shit my family would never have agreed to because I love you. I want to marry you because *I love you*. And if you want to go back to Brown, I'm going, too. Because I don't want to spend another day like I have for the past three weeks without you. I need you, Skylia. And this whole thing that your brother fucking wrecked was supposed to show you I'm serious about a future with you."

He flashes the sexy smirk that makes my knees wobble. "I gotta make the big gesture. I never wanted to be like my brothers. Yeah, I'm fucking bomb at what I do, but it's not my dream. I lost out on one dream. I don't want to miss out on the other one."

"You sure know how to make a girl blush." I drop down in front of him and drag my fingertips down the side of his face. "I love you, too. And you're not the only one who's been miserable."

"Then tell me you'll marry me. Let's stop being miserable and finally be happy."

"I want that more than anything."

"Yeah? So what do you say? You wanna do this? Be my wife?"

I nod, a smile stretching across my lips. "But I can't let you cut off your family. They're part of you, and I need to come to terms with that."

"But you're my priority. I choose you, forever. Screw everything else."

"Nik and Luka are going to be okay with that?"

He shrugs. "Fuck 'em if they aren't. I don't care as long as I have you. I'll take care of you." He waggles his eyebrows. "In every way I can think of."

I giggle and graze my lips with his. "Well, then. How could I possibly say no to *that*?"

EPILOGUE

VALENTINA

“Daddy, I tried... to find her...” My breaths come in short, sharp rasps, sobs shuddering my chest. “But I couldn’t... I couldn’t get to her in time before she... before she...”

I collapse into my father’s arms. He strokes the back of my tangled hair. “You did what you could, Солнце.”

How can his voice sound so soothing when the vein in his neck throbs like it’s about to burst?

“I should have gone after her. Helped her get away from them. But my legs were like Jell-O. I couldn’t even move.” I squeeze my eyes shut. “And then she was gone. It was too late.”

“Not for you.” Dad pulls away and places both hands on either side of face. “You got away. You’re safe.”

I swipe at the tears that stream down my cheeks. “I was so scared. What if they’d gotten me, too?”

“They will never get close to you again.” His blue eyes darken with rage. “I’ll make sure of that, if I have to torch the fucking Earth to do it.”

I grit my teeth and step out of my rental car. Vegas dry heat, my ass. I’m still sweating like a whore in church.

It’s been seven years. I’m still hunting the man who wreaked havoc and hell on my family and so many others. I grasp the door handle to El Mariachi, a dingy Mexican restaurant in East Las Vegas. My stomach roils at the pungent smells of spices and herbs deep fried with beef and beans. Dark-brown ceiling fans spin lazily above my head, whisking the stench of grease around the room.

There are a few tables scattered around the restaurant. Looking around,

it's pretty clear that the word "restaurant" is really overstating this place.

Patrons are bent over their plates of food. They stare at me and talk quietly, as if they know something I don't.

But I already know everything.

That's why I'm here.

I step toward a thin wooden easel, which I guess is supposed to be the hostess podium. An eerie quiet settles over the place, and a shiver slithers down my spine when my eyes meet the young girl's terrified, sunken ones. Her stringy hair doesn't look like it's been combed for days, and her clothes are spotted with dark stains.

Anger bubbles in my chest. Even though I've walked into plenty of places just like this over the past few years, it never ceases to make me physically ill.

Because it could have been me standing at that cracked wooden stand. *If* I was lucky, unlike Charly.

I clench and unclench my fingers, my gaze sweeping over the cracked linoleum tile floor toward a set of double red doors that lead to the basement of the restaurant.

The others have to be close.

My instructions were clear.

Find them. Rescue them. Kill Jasper Colon.

But I need to get inside those doors first.

"El baño?"

The girl nods and points to the doors. Her teeth clatter together, her skin pale and sallow, a contrast to the dark circles under her eyes.

That motherfucker. I'm going to dunk his head in the deep fryer when I get my hands on him.

The Glock 19 stuck in the waistband of my jeans presses insistently into my back to remind me of what we're here to do. A trickle of sweat drizzles down my back, and my halter top clings tight to me.

Alek Severinov doesn't accept excuses. We find the targets who threaten Red Ladro and we end them. Period.

Nobody escapes.

For years, we've been cutting off heads of a hydra, otherwise known as Branko Ivanova. More always grow back, none ever lead us to the man responsible for the murders of countless, innocent victims. Every time I ambush one of these human trafficking cells, I pray he's there, that I can be

the one to end him and his reign of terror.

One day, he will be. And he'll die an excruciatingly painful death for what he did to us.

Because Charly was only one of his victims.

And the rest need to be avenged.

I slowly walk toward the doors, and with one look back at the restaurant patrons, I push through them. It didn't take long to get the information I needed from Jasper about his sex den. Posing as a dancer at his nightclub on the Strip wasn't my shining moment, but it got me in close. He assumed by looking at me that I couldn't understand his language. I spoke to him in Russian, fluttered my eyelashes a lot, and rubbed my boobs against him. It worked. He never suspected a thing. He's not known for being the brightest bulb in the chandelier.

And after he was high as a kite on cocaine, his mouth never stopped. I listened carefully, recorded every word, and got what I wanted.

A time and place for the next delivery.

Now he's mine.

I creep past the signs for the bathrooms, plunging myself into the darkness at the end of the hallway. The broken wooden floorboards creak under my feet. My head jerks left and right. The door to the basement has to be here somewhere. I run my hand against the tattered paneling and move past the empty office. A door opens behind me, and a young guy in a torn red t-shirt pops out of the refrigerator.

"Hey, lady, what are you looking for? Bathroom is up there."

I force a smile and nod. "Oh right, *gracias*."

I throw up in my mouth a little when he doesn't walk away, shuddering under his leering stare.

Blech.

I take a few steps toward the bathroom, and he finally disappears back into the kitchen.

I have to move fast.

Back down the hallway, tucked right next to the back exit is a steel door with a deadbolt. I pull it open and a tearful voice hits my ears.

"Please help us."

It's the girl from the hostess stand.

I turn and put my hands on her upper arms. "That's why I'm here. Show me where the others are."

She nods and stumbles backward, pointing at the door and shaking her head. “*No aquí.*”

I follow her around another corner, this one pitch black. She disappears into the abyss, and I put out my hand to guide me along.

“Wait, I can’t see,” I say in a loud whisper. “Are you there? Turn on a light. *La luz?*”

The space is suddenly drenched in light, and fuck me, I really wish it wasn’t.

Four men stand in front of me with AR-15s in their beefy hands. A tall, dark-haired woman dressed in a long red sundress slides between two of them. A rich perfumed scent mixed with fried plantains hits my nostrils and almost makes me gag.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

“Hello, Valentina.” Her lips quirk upward, an evil smile stretching across her tan skin. Her dangly gold earrings glint in the obnoxiously bright overhead light. “I see you’ve already met my daughter, Marisol. My brother Jasper said you’d be dropping by for a visit.”

How did that bastard find out my real name? Nobody else knew I was tracking this guy except...

Son of a fucking bitch.

“I heard about your enchiladas. Figured I should sample them myself. Someone told me they were to die for.”

“You heard right.” The woman nods, folding her arms over her chest. “And so today, you should be prepared to die.”

“I don’t know about that.” I take a step toward her. “It’s not on my list of to-dos today. But you know what is? Destroying your scumbag brother’s disease-ridden sex den.”

“And how do you plan to do that by yourself?”

With four AR-15s on me, I can’t exactly pull my own gun. But I can pull my knife.

Sudden and muffled gunshots crack into the air. Marisol’s scream shatters my ears. She falls to the ground like a lead weight. Jasper’s men twist around to see where they came from, but with a quick glance behind me, I can see we’re still alone in the room.

The men dart out the door, leaving us alone. She turns toward Marisol, a tortured cry escaping her lips. I yank her back by her arm.

“She’ll be dead in minutes if you don’t cooperate.”

In a hot second, my knife is in hand and pointed at the woman's jugular.
"Tell me where to find Jasper."

"Never." With one hand, she clings to my arm. Her eyes widen when I press the blade into her throat. "It's too late for you," she rasps. "And your sister. You'll never see her again."

For years, I've hunted the man who broke my family. Now I have a partner, a cocky loose cannon who was banished from Manhattan for battling with a ruthless drug kingpin. Quinn Mulligan is gorgeous, arrogant, reckless...and he's about to become my fake husband.

[Click this link or scan the QR Code below to read Valentina and Quinn's explosive and spicy hot enemies to lovers forced marriage romance, LETHAL LOVER, on Amazon —>](#)



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MEET KRISTEN



Kristen Luciani is a *USA Today* bestselling author of steamy and suspense-filled romance. She's addicted to kickboxing, Starburst jelly beans, and swooning over dark, broken anti-heroes. Kristen is happily married to her own real-life hero of over 20 years.

In addition to penning spicy stories, she also has a part-time job as her three kids' personal Uber driver, which she manages to successfully juggle along with her other tasks: laundry, cleaning, laundry, cooking, laundry, and caring for her adorable Boston Terrier puppy. Mafia romance is her passion...and her poison.

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