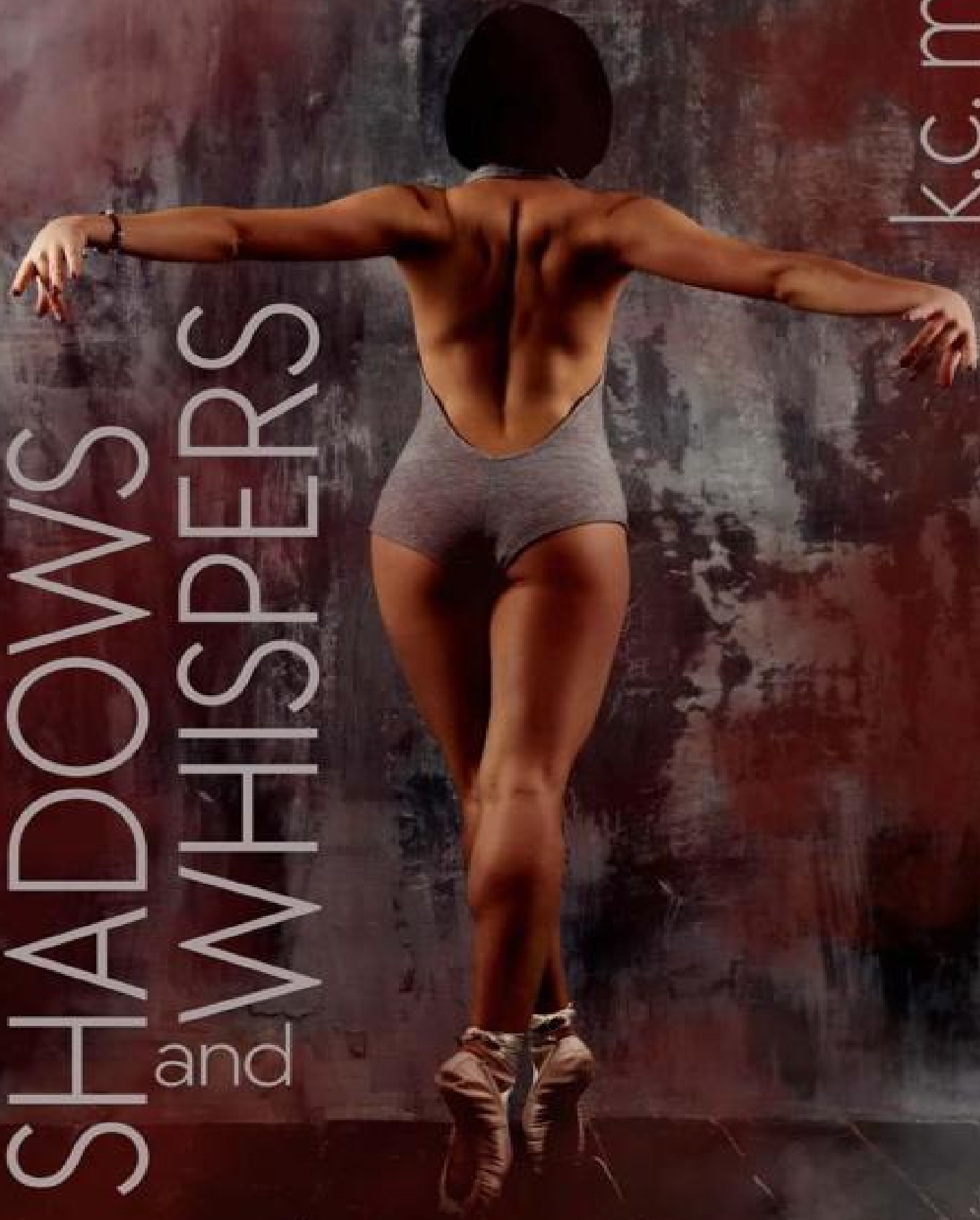


SHADOWS and WHISPERS



k.c. mills

shadows and whispers

K.C. MILLS

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note to readers:

Hello, beautiful people:

If you're returning, welcome back. If you're new... welcome to my crazy world.

Shadows and Whispers is a standalone novel that highlights two families who have a complicated past but are now forced to come together with an intended goal of strengthening their legacies.

This novel is not connected to any prior novel/series. All main characters are being newly introduced so you will be meeting them for the first time.

Trigger Warning:

Mental Health Issues

Language

Mature Content

Please be mindful that the foundation of this story is simply learning how to love and be loved. For those of you that prefer my more urban/street-lit stories, this one might not feed your soul.

However, it is not void of my signature style with that alpha male who isn't afraid to show his heart. If you're open to falling in love with love, then please proceed!

As always,

Crafting Romance with an Edge!

Sincerely,

K.C. Mills ♥

prologue...

“THIS IS ON YOU, son. You will have to spend the rest of your life making this up to the family.”

My chest constricted. I glanced at the casket that held my baby brother Lucas. At twenty-five, a life was lost and the blood was on my hands. I was there with him that night. I was the one who should have protected him.

But he died.

“No, I’ll spend the rest of my life knowing that I can’t.”

I couldn’t stomach the accusatory looks on my family’s faces so I avoided them altogether. With one last glance at the grave where my brother now rested, I walked away from my family and the only life I’d ever known with no intention of ever returning...

ONE

elias

“HERE.” I cringed as I tugged the black tee over my body. My ribs and kidneys hurt like hell and the muscles in my arms were sore as shit but the high had settled my mind.

At least temporarily.

I accepted the black envelope that held my payout. Thirty grand. Brawler would have cleared at least ten. Not enough for the beating I’d put on him but I understood that everyone’s circumstances were different. He needed the money and likely wanted a chance to try and take down the one person no one had the ability to beat.

Me.

Wouldn’t happen. I would never lose. The darkness and internal rage that crawled through me would guarantee a win each and every time I stepped in the cage. I didn’t do it for the money. I needed to feel and this was the only way I knew how. At least without damaging anyone in the process.

“Boss has a job for you. You gonna be able to manage after that?” Kev smirked and I glared at him briefly before grabbing my hoodie which I pulled on, grinding my teeth from the sharp pains that vibrated through my body.

“Yeah, what’s the job?”

“Reg. He’s late again. Second time in a month. Needs a reminder of how stupid that is.”

So fucking hardheaded. Arrogant and stupid. You didn’t get to be both. Especially not when you relied on others to survive.

“How much of a reminder,” I muttered, slipping into my black jean jacket. Fuck, I might need to get my kidneys looked at.

“Enough that he can still cover his weekly payments but will be mindful about being late with them.”

I tossed my chin and was on my way to the door. The chill of the night air brushed across my face as I made my way to my bike. It was parked near the back of the building like always. No one fucked with my shit. They didn't want the consequences. Most knew who I was and my role working for Reno. He was a business professional and criminal. Pushed massive quantities of illegal drugs through his legal businesses and I was the reason no one fucked with him or his money. If they tried, they dealt with me, the devil in human form. The menace with no conscience. The dark soul who didn't mind getting his hands dirty.

My father would be so fucking proud.

Astride my bike, I pulled my helmet down on my head, then braced through the soreness of my body. I needed a long hot shower then my bed. The last thing I wanted to do was go beat the shit out of Reg but that was where I was going. Reno wouldn't care if I handled it tonight or tomorrow as long as it was handled. I didn't like things lingering.

My foot hit the kickstand and I leaned forward, balancing my bike while I twisted the throttle, embracing the vibrations of the engine. Twenty-minute drive. Ten minutes with Reg. I could be home in an hour max.

* * *

“The fuck...” I yanked Reg away from the bar, fisted his shirt with one hand, while my other cracked the shit out of his jaw. His eyes went wide then settled into anger as he tried his best to maneuver his way out of my grasp. Security headed our way but I landed another meaningful punch and growled at the jolt of pain that pierced through me.

“Tell them to move the fuck around or this will be worse than it already is.”

“Go. I can handle this.”

He knew better than to be placed into the position to deal with the consequences of his security's bad choices. Their faces tensed and I watched as they paused, attempting to decide what their next move would be. Reg noticed too and made sure that move wasn't to intervene.

“I said I fucking got this. Go.”

They exchanged words between each other and walked away. Not completely but they moved back.

Loyal fucking lap dogs.

“You’ve got them well trained. Too bad it’s not going to help you out of this.”

I delivered back-to-back punches. Lost count of how many but when Reg was slouching to the point of me struggling to hold him up, I felt he’d gotten the message. I let him go and he stumbled to the floor. I cringed at how dirty it was when his hands met the grimy tile.

“I’m gonna pay.”

“When?” I growled.

“Now. I can pay now,” he muttered, spitting blood as he wiped his mouth.

“Then why the fuck are you wasting my time?”

“This isn’t on me. I’m not wasting your time. Reno sent you here.” He struggled to stand, narrowing his eyes. One was swelling. That was going to be pretty nasty in a few hours.

“Because you’ve been late, twice. So again, why the fuck are you wasting my time?”

I knew why. Reg was the type to pretend he was more important than he truly was. He made decent money at this strip club. The one that Reno fronted most of the cash to open. Instead of a loan, Reg chose to make Reno a partner. Not like he had much say in the matter. The money was paid in cash, off the books because Reno didn’t want traceable ties to Reg. He was into some pretty bad shit. He kept it out of the clubs but was rumored to keep a team of women he pimped out. He only took on legal aged women and didn’t abuse them beyond using their bodies for money and favors. Wasn’t my concern so I didn’t make it my business.

“Come to my office. I’ll get the money.”

“No, I’ll wait here. You go get that shit and hurry the fuck up.”

“Aight, aight,” he muttered. His lip was split, teeth bloody, and face was swelling. “Can I offer you something to make up for you having to come here?”

“No.”

“You sure? I can get you a private room. She’ll take care of whatever you want.”

“Money first.” He smiled smugly, thinking that offering me pussy was winning him favor. It wasn’t. If he was late again, I’d be back. The only reason I considered accepting the offer was because it had been a while. I couldn’t really recall the last time I’d fucked. Months possibly. Sex wasn’t something I typically sought out or needed. Women rarely understood my

lack of engagement. My disconnect often presented as a challenge and caused them to work harder to gain my approval. Sex for me was about a release. That was it. I didn't want a connection. There never would be one. I simply needed the exchange.

"Here. Twenty grand." I accepted the money and shoved it into the pocket of my hoodie. Reno's cut was sixty grand a month. A little over half the profit but enough for Reg to pretend he was running shit and Reno got untraceable cash to do as he pleased.

"How about avoiding all this and just pay the fucking money. On time."

"Yeah." He nodded. "You want that room?"

I glanced around before my eyes landed on Reg. "Yeah. Make sure she knows how to follow rules and that she's clean."

I wasn't fucking behind any of his clients.

He nodded. "Follow me. Got one that just started her shift."

Ten minutes later, I was in a small room, standing in the center of it. There was a small sofa I refused to sit on. There was no telling how many people had fucked in that same spot. The thought made my skin crawl.

My eyes shot over to the door when the woman walked in. She was topless, wearing a thong. My eyes crawled over her body, taking in her oiled brown skin and subtle curves. She had a natural shape below the waist but implants up top. Breasts were too perfect.

"What are the rules?" she asked, moving to me but pausing her steps before our bodies met. She smelled sweet like strawberries or some type of fruit. Not smoke or sweat. And if she was asking for my rules, then Reg had filled her in.

"Don't talk. Don't touch me. Just do what I say."

Her face shifted into confusion. "This doesn't work without touching."

"Do I need to get someone else?"

She frowned, shaking her head. "No."

"Take that off." I pointed to her thong and she hooked her fingers in the sides and pushed the thin material over her hips. When it reached the floor I pointed to the wall.

"Over there. Bend over and put your hands on the wall. Keep them there at all times."

Her eyes shifted to the leather sofa and I shook my head. "I'm not using that. Over there." I tossed my head to the wall and she hesitated for a brief moment but did as I asked. When her hands were on the wall, palms flat and

her body bent at the waist, I joined her. She flinched when I pressed my palm into the small of her back then smoothed my hand over her exposed skin, slowly dragging my hand lower until it moved between her legs. The tip of my finger glided across her pussy before I pushed it inside.

She shuddered and rocked her hips back, eager for more, so I obliged. I had no issue making this good for both of us. I pulled my fingers back and pushed two in the second time. She was wet and eager so I got right to the point. After unzipping my jeans, I removed a condom from my pocket and rolled it down my dick. She jerked again when I grabbed her hips with one hand, holding her steady. The other I used to guide myself into her with a slow crawl before I rocked into her hard, pulled back, and slammed into her again.

“Fuck, baby...”

“No talking,” I growled and she glanced back at me and bit her lip.

“Face the wall, not me,” I demanded, pausing my thrusts until she did, then I took care of what I needed.

Hard, sharp plunges landed without reprieve as I fucked her. Eyes closed, focusing to stay in the moment. She wasn't important. The only thing that mattered was the way her pussy gripped my dick. My thrusts weren't easy. My length and girth were far above average. I knew that. Didn't care. The way she pushed back against me, offering moans of approval, meant she was getting what she needed out of this too, not that it mattered. Her job was to fuck for money. Not pleasure. Even though Reg sent her to me, I would make sure she was compensated for my use of her body. This was an exchange. Not a connection.

When my balls tightened and I felt the muscles in my stomach clench to the point of pain I prepared for my release. I landed hard over and over again. The tip of my dick grew overly sensitive and I let go. I came in a blur of frustration, landing my last thrust into her so hard her head met with the wall.

“Fuck,” she hissed but that was all I got.

I eased out of her, noticing the way she flinched as I backed away. She was sore, would be for a minute after being with me. I looked around the room noting there wasn't anything in here. I eased the condom off, tied the end, and tossed it on the sofa before I swiped up her thong from the floor to clean myself.

“Glad I wasn't using that.”

I removed cash from my pocket. Two hundred dollar bills I extended her

way. She shook her head, turning the money down.

“Reg covered this.”

“He put the money in your hand?”

She frowned, looking down at the cash which she decided to accept. “No. Thank you.”

“And don’t give it to him. That’s yours.”

She nodded, watching me closely like she was trying to figure me out. She wouldn’t. “That’s it? We’re done?”

“What else is there?”

Small talk. Making plans for me to see her again. Exchanging numbers. I’d fucked her for money. What had she expected? She smiled, pulling her lip between her teeth and lowering her eyes to my dick. “I can think of a few things.”

“Not interested.”

“So just fuck, cum, and go. That’s really your thing, then?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve heard about you.”

“Whatever you heard doesn’t mean you know shit about me.”

“I heard you don’t like to be touched. You fuck like a champ because your dick is impressive and you know how to use it and you don’t make friends.”

All true.

I chuckled.

“Then maybe you know a little something.”

She pushed off the wall and extended a hand. “Beauti.”

I looked at her hand and tilted my head to the side. “Not interested in that either, Beauti.”

Her smile was cute. “So I heard, *Elias*. Just in case you ever are, you at least know my name.” She winked and walked out the door. Once she left, I wasn’t far behind.

I wouldn’t see her again. She thought personalizing the experience would get her something the others had tried and failed with.

My attention beyond their pussies.

It was time for me to take my ass home and get some rest.

* * *

I pulled up to my building and something felt off. I felt it in my bones which was why I did a quick sweep of the parking lot and my eyes landed on the black Escalade-V. I felt a wave or irritation flooding my system. They'd promised to leave me alone.

He'd promised.

My first thought was that my father had sent him but that passed quickly. My father had washed his hands of me four years ago. His ego and pride would never allow him to belittle himself enough to send for me. That would mean owning some accountability for what'd happened and that also would never happen. I was to carry sole responsibility. It was easier for him that way. For all of them.

As expected, when I entered my apartment my brother was sitting at my kitchen table. He had a bottle of bourbon opened and the amber liquor filled the glass. He'd brought it with him because I didn't drink so there was no need to keep it in my apartment. I could see his head from the dim lights that filtered through the skylight above him but his body more or less faded into the darkness.

"You make a habit of breaking into people's places," I murmured, bypassing him and heading straight to the kitchen. I removed two bottles of water from the refrigerator and joined him at the table. He hadn't bothered turning on any lights so neither did I. My goal was to get him out of my apartment, then shower and sleep until my body allowed me the luxury of moving without unbearable pain.

"I'm your brother, Elias. Am I not welcome in your home?"

"No," I responded bluntly, untwisting the cap to the water. My eyes remained fastened to his as I turned it up and emptied half. My brother's stern expression shifted slightly. His eyes also remained fastened to mine. He searched my face slowly, introspectively, before eyes that matched mine moved down my chest and back up again.

"You're hurt."

"I'm fine."

He chuckled bitterly. "Still torturing yourself I see. It won't help."

"It's not your business."

"You are my..."

"*Family, brother*, what term would you like to use to convince me I matter to you, Ezekiel? I don't. You made a choice and it wasn't me. Go home to your family."

“I wasn’t the one who chose, *brother*. That was you. You walked away. You cut us off. You denied us because of your misplaced guilt.”

“I did all of the above, *brother*. But it was never about my guilt. It was because you all needed someone to blame. I gave you that. You accepted, moved on with your life and didn’t think twice about me. I left as a favor to *you*, Ez. I made it easy because I love you. Love me enough to leave me the fuck alone.”

“I can’t do that.”

“You *can* and you *will*.” I slammed my fist down on the table but he didn’t flinch or react out of fear. Men who knew me feared me but never my brother. He knew with certainty I would never hurt him. He would never hurt me, *purposely*. We would die for each other. It was understood.

“I can’t,” he said quietly. Totally out of character for the man I knew my brother to be and alarms blared in my head.

“What happened?”

Quietly he spoke again. “He’s gone.”

“When?”

“A few weeks ago.”

“How?”

“Cancer.”

I refused to care. He’d stopped being my father four years ago. “Why are you here, Ez?”

“You have to come home. The family needs...” He paused and lifted the glass to his lips tossing back what was in it. “*I need you.*”

“No. Lock the door when you leave.” I groaned as I lifted from the chair. My brother didn’t move.

“You’ll deny me? Stand by and watch me lose everything I’ve worked so hard to gain. You would do that, Lias?”

“It’s his. I don’t want any parts of what that man stood for.”

“You don’t think I know that. I wouldn’t be here if that were the case. It’s been mine since you left. My name, my voice, my leadership.”

“Then I don’t know why you’re here.”

“I won’t bore you with all the details. I know you don’t care. There has to be an alliance. One that proves that we can uphold the expectations placed on our family.”

“I don’t know what that has to do with me.” I started down the hallway and my brother said two words that I damn sure didn’t expect.

“A marriage.”

I chuckled lightly. “Go home, Ez. You wasted your time.”

There was no way I was marrying anyone. Least of all for some fake ass alliance that would never truly eradicate any of the existing issues. My brother’s failed marriage was proof of how disastrous those unions could be. I hadn’t been in touch, but I knew what my family had been up to. I always had my hands on connections that gave me insight on what Ez was into. If it came to it, I would be there to make sure he lived through any of my father’s bad decisions.

“It’s Jona Devereaux.”

My body stilled. I turned, catching the shadowy image of my brother standing a few feet away. His hands were in his pockets, body stiff with tension.

“You want me to marry the *sister* of the man who killed our *brother*.”

“I do.”

“I thought you said your voice, your leadership. Not much has changed. You’re just as fucking twisted as he was if you think I would marry anyone from that family.”

“I’m a businessman, Lias. We have worked too hard for too many years to lose everything. You were selfish then and you’re selfish now. How the fuck can you say you love me in one breath then walk away from me like you did four years ago? Stop fucking running, Elias. You’re hurt? Well I’m hurt too. He wasn’t just your brother. He was also mine. I lost him too and I lost *you*.”

I turned and charged my brother until we were face-to-face, noses almost touching. “You let him make me the villain and I accepted that because I understood your position. *You* were his one. *You* were the leader he groomed to walk in his light. Not me. It was never me because I didn’t want it then and I don’t want it now. You need an alliance then you fucking marry her,” I gritted through clenched teeth.

“I’m already married, Lias.”

I laughed hard. “To a woman you don’t love. Hell, I’m fairly certain you don’t even like the woman. You married her because *he* needed her family in his pocket. How did that work out for you, Ez? Not great, right? Why the fuck would you think I want any parts of that same dysfunction in my life?”

“Because it’s different. Your marriage will *be* different. If I could be the one, I would...”

“Divorce your wife then you’re free to marry her. Problem solved.”

I turned to walk away and he caught my arm. A pain shot through my shoulder and he quickly let me go from the grimace on my face. “My marriage is complicated. There’s too much to sort out and by the time I do, it will be too late. This is bigger than you and me. This is bigger than just *our* family. I need you, Lias. I fucking need you. Come home.”

“No.”

He lifted his chin and slipped his hands into his pockets again. Pride. We both had the same quality or curse pending how you looked at things. My brother would ask me but he wouldn’t grovel. I had to respect him for standing his ground.

“I’m going home tonight. The jet will be here tomorrow at noon. The pilot will wait for you until nine. Chapter House Eleven p.m. Dress respectably. When you get to the door, give your name. They’ll let you in. I’ll be waiting. Two days, that’s all I need. Come home for two days and give me time to plead my case. If you still don’t agree, I’ll let this go.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Good enough.”

“But it won’t change my mind.”

“I didn’t expect it would. Just come. Give me two days.”

“I said I’ll think about it.”

Ez nodded and turned to leave. Just before he reached the door I asked one last question.

“Does *she* know you’re asking me to come home?”

Our mother.

“No. I didn’t want to complicate things any more than they already would be. She’s traveling right now.”

Nothing else was said.

TWO

cress

I PULLED off my extra layers and tossed them toward the wall in the back. My body was sore which had me regretting the additional hours I had put in that morning prior to the rest of the dancers arriving.

I was the one expected to shine. As principal dancer of Liberté Abstraite I would never be granted the luxury of having an off day. I accepted my role and position with grace because what else was there.

Complaining got you nowhere because everyone had a struggle or story. In the grand scheme of things, mine was no more important than theirs.

“Two rows...” Kenneth Shilo, the company’s director’s voice cut through the low murmurs of chatter that flowed from the dancers. Twenty corps de ballet and two principals, me and my partner for the performance, Adler Li. “Li. Devereaux. Up front. Let’s go.” His hands met in a sharp manner. Three quick claps. His first attempt at order. If we didn’t move, he would no doubt begin yelling obscenities.

“Cress...” He took the spot in front of me. The smooth, icy delivery of my name a prep for the insults that were no doubt on the tip of his tongue.

I was his favorite. To antagonize that was. My family’s name and wealth either brought me favor or criticism. With Shilo it was always the latter until he’d needed my family to cut a check to the company to fund whatever new production he wanted to imagine.

“Yes.”

“Your steps have been off this week. Will you be ready for this weekend?” I tensed my jaw and bit down on the inside to keep my words and tone even. I was in no way interested in a sparring match with him. Not today.

“I will.”

“Good. Let’s see what you’ve got.” He turned sharply, giving me his back. I rolled my eyes and caught Li in my peripheral view when I was focused again which had me glancing at the mirror. His smile was smug, which meant he’d read my thoughts. A quick wink followed and I let go of a ghost of a smile as I settled into my position.

“From the top, people. Let’s try to present like the professionals we are and not the fumbling amateurs I’ve been dealing with all week.”

Shilo stepped away from the three line formation. Li’s six-four, lean athletic frame immediately curved into position. His facial features were schooled, dulling his Black and Asian ethnicity, drawing an emotionless palate to his face.

I inhaled and moved to him, leaning into his back with my shoulder blades, preparing for the music to begin so I would be ready to lift into pointe and extend my leg at the perfect angle.

From the corner, the pianist came to life and my mind shifted into the space of natural ability. Muscle memory guided my motions. I rarely had to think, only do. Once I learned a routine it became as simple as breathing, guided by the notes that danced through the air then my head.

With a trained ease I moved through the movements in time with the music. This was my happy place. My escape. Even here where I wasn’t allowed to be as free as I liked to be, I was still able to get lost. The music poured through me and I took flight.

“Cress, a moment...”

Almost made it.

I wasn’t in the mood to deal with Shilo. After repeating our duet and my solo performance no less than ten times, I was ready to go home, soak, and rest for the evening.

“Yes...” I paused just outside the studio, tugging my bag further up my shoulder.

“You were here early?”

“I was, yes.”

“Extra personal hours might not be a great idea right now. The weekend is quickly approaching...”

“I’ll be ready,” I gritted defensively. Shilo only smiled smugly.

“If today’s practice was any indication of what ready means to you, then I would have to disagree.”

My chin lifted as I rolled my shoulders back. “My performance was...”

“Decent, not your best. Grand jetes were off, your timing was delayed, and you were lazy and lacked power. If we need to consider an alternative for Saturday...”

“I don’t need anything. If you want to make that decision, then by all means. I never want to present the appearance that my solos come from anything other than my skill and hard work.” My eyes met his in challenge and he backed down, slightly.

“Very well then. I’ll expect tomorrow’s practice to be flawless.” He turned to leave without another word and I glared at his back, cursing him under my breath. Shilo was a brilliant choreographer and great director to everyone but me. I understood why but didn’t care about his personal issues with my family. They had never asked to become silent investors in his company, he’d begged for their help. Shilo’s ego wouldn’t allow him to be gracious which meant I was the target of all his spite and venom.

“You realize he’s full of shit. Your practice was flawless today and I personally know that to be the truth otherwise I wouldn’t have been flawless. We both know, no world exists where I’m not always at my best.”

I grinned at Li who moved beside me. He lingered like he always did as if I needed him to protect me from Shilo the big bad wolf. I didn’t. I chose my battles but I was a Devereaux which meant I had been raised to be strong and a leader. My parents always made sure I could hold my own and now my brother had taken over in my father’s place since his health was not great. Early onset Alzheimer’s. It was hard on all of us but more for my mother than anyone. She was losing her husband day by day and couldn’t do anything about it. And as sweet as that sounded, it was nothing more than a well-orchestrated, personal press release. She put on a good face for the world because it wouldn’t be socially acceptable to bail on your husband whose health was failing. Trichelle Devereaux was all about image.

“Lord forbid anyone ever accuse you of not being best.” I offered a quick glance before we fell in step, heading out the building. I had everything I needed in my bag and would change and shower once I got home. I needed out of this place.

“Exactly, so fuck him.”

My smile was subtle before I stated confidently, “I just don’t understand why he has a hard on for making my life a living hell. I’m one of the best dancers...”

“*The* best. Not one of,” Li interrupted and I rolled my eyes but smiled

softly.

“My point is, I’ve earned my spot. I’ve worked my ass off to get it long before he bought this company. He needs to chill the fuck out.”

“He does, but men and pride. You know the end result. A toxic combination.”

“No one knows any of the details. There’s no need for that man to have a struggle with his pride.”

The deal was kept quiet at my insistence. My brother wrote a check and became a silent investor while Shilo got to pretend he hadn’t been close to losing the company because of mismanaging the finances. Now, my brother’s people kept up with the accounting. Shilo got to parade around and pretend he was the reason we were so profitable. No one knew my family was connected to the company beyond me being a dancer here. I hadn’t wanted that detail made public. Regardless of how hard I worked to get where I was, the narrative would be I’d bought my position. I was principal a year before Shilo had purchased the company, however no one would remember or care.

“He knows and that, my love, is a hard pill to swallow. So again, fuck him.”

We stepped out of the building and the sunlight immediately warmed my face. “I don’t like being the source of his attacks and there’s only so much patience I have left with him and this company before I…”

“You’re not leaving.”

“No, I’m not but I will respectfully put him in his place,” I stated bluntly, which earned me a wide smile from Li.

“Just make sure I’m around to record it because that shit is going viral.” His eyes moved past me and he pointed with his forehead. “I’m assuming that’s for you.”

I glanced over my shoulder to find a black on black Escalade-V pulling up to the curb. Sure enough one of my brother’s drivers stepped out and tipped his head to me while he waited beside the rear back door.

“I’m sure it is, but I don’t know why he’s here. I was taking the train.” My brother sending a car for me wasn’t a good sign. Typically that meant he was demanding my presence and that always made me anxious. I dug my phone out of my bag and checked the screen.

No missed calls or texts.

“Well your chariot awaits so no train for you today. I’ll see you tomorrow and make sure you bring your A game. This half assed effort you’ve been

putting in is not going to cut it, Cress.”

I punched his arm and Li moved out of my reach sporting a cocky grin. “You hit like a girl.”

“Because I am a girl.”

His smile stretched wider. “No, you’re a woman so I need you to work on that.”

Before I could hit him again, he was jogging down the stairs heading toward the small parking lot that was exclusively for the dancers and staff of Liberté Abstraite which I rarely used. I liked taking the train. It allowed me the time to decompress after hard practices. I could read, listen to music, or people watch which happened to be my favorite thing to do. On nights when I had performances, I left last so my brother scheduled a driver. A precaution of his I had to abide by to keep the peace. He loved me, which I understood, but at thirty-two I wasn’t a child nor his responsibility but he would surely disagree.

“Ms. Devereaux.”

“Cress...” I corrected and Miles nodded. His cocky grin had me adding, “And if you add Miss to that I’m going to punch you too but a lot harder because I know you can take it.”

He chuckled lightly before stepping around me to open my door. After I slid onto the leather seat he stepped back, moving the door as if he were about to close it but pausing.

“You did hit him like a girl. You could have done better.”

He shut me in and rounded the rear of the vehicle until he reached the front driver’s door and got comfortable behind the steering wheel.

“He’s strong as a dancer but you’re strong as a protector. I didn’t want to bruise my partner. He’s responsible for lifting me several times a day. Not smart if he’s injured.”

Miles chuckled again. “True. Because there would be consequences for dropping you.”

His eyes met mine in the rearview.

“Which leads me to, why are you here?”

He glanced at me again, offering a pointed look. The one that said I’d have to find out when we reached my family’s estate. My brother didn’t give details in most situations like the present. Christian likely would have only told Miles to come and get me. That was all.

“Is it my father?” I still decided to try.

“No, your father is the same as always. Nothing new to report.” I relaxed a little.

“Does he have company or...”

“Cress...” Miles warned and I narrowed my eyes at him when his lifted to the rearview again, issuing a warning of my own.

“He had company a few days ago. From what I can tell, his request for you has something to do with that.”

“Who?” I felt my anxieties building again. My family was involved in so many things there was never a warning if and when my brother was dancing on the dark side. I chose to keep myself disconnected but the stigma would forever be attached to my name. I was a Devereaux.

“You know I can’t tell you, Cress. Christian will tell you what you need to know.”

“What he wants me to know,” I huffed.

Miles didn’t disagree. “You can’t have it both ways. If you choose to stay out of the family business then Christian will filter what information he gives you. It’s for the best.”

“It is.” I still had a bad feeling in my gut. I wasn’t going to like whatever my brother had to tell me, whether it was a need to know or what he wanted me to know. Christian sending for me wasn’t something I looked forward to.

Forty minutes later, Miles extended a hand to help me out of the SUV. My body felt weighted from the long drive. The exertion I placed on my body had caught up with me and my stomach had begun to knot with a need for nourishment. I wasn’t one of those dancers who starved myself which allowed me to keep my natural curves. Although I was long and lean with somewhat of a dancer’s body, I didn’t have the physique of a twelve year old little boy. I loved my shape and refused to starve myself into industry standards of what a dancer should be. My five foot nine height was already enough of a contradiction so I’d decided early in my teen years of training to be who God created me to be. I made it work even if most in the dance world weren’t too thrilled about it.

“Are you coming in?”

“No, I’ll be waiting to take you home.”

“You don’t know how long I’ll be here.”

He shrugged. “Doesn’t matter.”

It didn’t. My brother paid his people to do their jobs. If driving me was assigned to Miles for the day, he would wait as long as necessary. He could

also come in, usually did, but not today which had me nervous about being summoned.

I was already wanting to be anywhere but *here*. My ties to the family were something I couldn't change but my association with them based on what time I offered was an entirely different story.

"Cress..."

My eyes trekked up the center of the massive staircase and landed on my brother Christian. He stood looking every bit of our father, dressed in a black suit. No tie but the black shirt beneath the tailored threads of his jacket gave him the dark professional look that our father demanded of his son.

"I'm here, what do you want?"

Christian chuckled lightly, shaking his head as he descended the stairs. I waited, arms folded, posture perfectly stiff and expression unwelcoming. I loved my brother, was happy to see him for the most part. Only the circumstance of his current demand lingered with an open ended demand making me feel uneasy.

"Nice to see you too, Cress." I was forced into a hug and a kiss was dropped on my cheek. I did relax into his embrace momentarily before I pulled away.

"Why am I here? What do you need?"

"Is it too much for you to believe that I simply wanted to see you?"

"Yes, now what do you want?"

"Come." He turned, heading toward the back of the house down the hallway that led to our father's office that now belonged to Christian. He was the head of the family which made sense considering our father's current state. I missed the man my father used to be but was still grateful that at times we had a piece of him. Our mother, however, was an entirely different case. She was counting down the days until she could stop pretending to care about him. I had a feeling that day would be sooner rather than later. There was no doubt she loved him, but she loved the distinguished man who doted on her, provided a lifestyle that allowed her to shine. Not the weak helpless man he had become.

I followed my brother inside the office and while he settled on the corner of the massive oak desk that took up one side of the room, I moved to the shelves of books, grazing the spines with my fingers. I had done this since I was a child but back then my other brother was here. I paused at his framed photo and lifted it into view.

“His birthday was last month.”

We didn’t honor or celebrate Cole which at times made it feel as if our brother had never existed.

“It was.” Christian’s tone was level. Too calm but they always pacified me when it came to our brother.

“I miss him.”

“I do too.”

I cut my eyes toward Christian over my shoulder. “Not like I do. You two never got along.”

Christian sighed. “We got along just fine when Cole wasn’t causing problems.”

“What you mean is when he followed yours and dad’s rules. Cole didn’t cause problems unless he disagreed with the two of your demands.”

“You have no clue what problems Cole created. We kept those things away from you and Jona for a reason, Cress. What you think you know, you don’t.”

“I know he killed someone because of family business.”

“Cole killed a man because he couldn’t control his temper. That had nothing to do with family business.”

“And *they* killed him. Regardless, we lost our brother,” I gritted through clenched teeth.

“They retaliated, yes.”

“You agree with the outcome?”

“No, but I understand how things work in our world. You don’t. Never have and you never will, which is why I asked you to come.”

“You didn’t ask me anything. You sent a car. I didn’t have a choice.” I turned my back to Christian to place the photo back on the shelf. When I had his eyes again I could see he was struggling with something.

“Just fucking say it. I can tell I’m not going to like whatever it is that you need to get off your chest. I’m tired and ready to go home. The sooner you tell me why I’m here...”

“Jona is going to marry Elias Omari.”

“What did you just say?”

“You heard me,” he clarified, dryly. I had, but I couldn’t believe that I had heard him correctly.

“I did but you have to be high or losing your mind like Dad if I heard you correctly. Jona is not marrying that monster.”

“She is. The details are set.”

“And what does she have to say about all this? I assume you told her or did you just make plans with her life and future like she doesn’t matter.”

“She knows and she agreed. It’s not a big deal...”

“It’s a huge deal. She’s twenty-two years old. He’s what, thirty something and hell he killed our brother.”

“Allegedly.”

“Allegedly, right. He did it. You know he did. I heard you and dad that night. You yourself said he killed Cole right before Dad had to talk you out of going after him because of it.”

“There’s no proof, unlike the proof we have that Cole shot Lucas in the head over an argument that had nothing to do with him.”

“I don’t care.” I threw my hands up. “Jona is not marrying him. Why would you even want that?”

“Because we need to show an alliance with our families or we lose everything we’ve worked so hard to build. If we can’t stand together then it becomes a majority against one. We’ll be the one, Cress. Do you know what that means?”

“I don’t care what it means. I care about our sister, *our* baby sister being tied to that family and you should too.”

“I have it covered. Jona will not be at risk. She’ll be well taken care of and the marriage will show that our families are once again a united front.”

I laughed arrogantly. “This is not some mafia movie, Christian. This is real life.”

He crossed the room and got in my face. “This *is* real life. A very privileged life. One that you’ve lived for years without truly knowing how it works. You don’t have to understand it but you will respect that your privilege and mine has been granted because of *this* real life shit. Our family is a key factor in businesses being controlled, presidents being elected, and lives being spared. We are a large part in guaranteeing that the evils of the world are kept to a minimum. The *balance* of good and evil. You can’t have one without the other.”

“What does that even mean?”

“It means, there are drugs being sold all over the world. There are women and children being taken from families and sold to horrible people who don’t give a damn about their lives or innocence. Governors, senators, hell even the President of the United States play a role in who has the right to buy and sell

whatever they want. Our influence ensures that the power isn't tilted in one direction or the other. It's impossible to end those things in their entirety but we can control them to a certain degree. Men of power make the decisions about how things operate. Those men are given power by families like ours controlling their presence in offices, in politics, in business. We *are* the balance, Cress. The puppet masters pulling the strings. We control what men gain advantages. Can you imagine what would happen if the power existed solely with men who had no ethics or morals? Is it all good, no, fuck no because it's impossible to live in a perfect world. We have to give a little, turn our heads with some instances, overlook others but in the end the balance exists. Without it, the bad outweighs the good and if that happens *our* sister, you, and so many other innocent women and children suffer grave consequences. The streets are flooded with enough drugs to kill small nations. The rich continue to add to their portfolios and the less fortunate grow in numbers. The banks no longer see *us*. Businesses for *our* people are nonexistent. No voice for *our* people. We fall under their control. *This* is necessary. Jona is doing her part. You do yours. Stay the fuck out of it."

I didn't know all the rules but I did know that my family was connected. Law enforcement, political figures, corporations and shell companies, all of which were backed by our money. Favors exchanged hands to put people in positions of power. I never understood all the reasons behind what was happening but I did understand that my family played a role in the political game of chess that was happening around the world. It was necessary. I still didn't approve.

"Right, because she wants to please you and Dad so badly that she'll do anything you say."

"You'd do well to learn from her. Like it or not, it's happening. I've asked you here because I need you to understand that you not approving won't change a damn thing. You need not try to convince Jona to fight this, not that I feel like she will."

"What did you promise her?"

"Nothing..." He shrugged. "She made the decision on her own. Like I said, she understands her role as a member of this family."

"And I don't?"

"You've never had one, Cress. You never wanted it so we never forced you. You're living your dream. I respect the freedom you demanded. You need to respect what that freedom means to everyone else in this family."

Me following my love for dance meant that Jona had stepped into the role that should have naturally been mine.

“I don’t want this for her,” I said quietly.

“Are you willing to take her place...”

No.

When I didn’t respond, he nodded. “That’s what I thought. She’ll be fine. It’s a marriage of convenience. That’s all. Jona is not being forced into anything she doesn’t agree with.”

“She’s agreeing because you asked. You shouldn’t have asked her.”

“It’s not like I had a choice. We do what we must for family, Cress. That’s how things work in our world.”

He walked over to me, placed a kiss on my forehead, and left the office.

My sister was marrying the man that had killed our brother and there wasn’t anything I could do about it.

* * *

“I don’t understand why you agreed to marry a complete stranger. And given the history between our family and theirs.”

“I’m doing it because it’s necessary, Cress. Christian wouldn’t have asked me if it wasn’t.”

“He shouldn’t have asked you.”

“Maybe not but the alternative is...”

“Me.”

“Right and we both know you wouldn’t have agreed.”

“Because it’s insane. *You* shouldn’t agree either.”

“Why not? What’s the big deal?”

“The big deal is that it’s an arranged marriage. The guy is ten years your senior and you’ve barely started your life.”

“I’ll be living *my* life and he’ll be living his. Aside from a few appearances to make it look official, I’ll get to do whatever I want.”

“You can do whatever you want now, Jona. I can’t believe you would be okay with any of this.”

“It’s family business.”

“Family business is you taking a job at the Devereaux Corporation or opening your own branch of some type of business. Not a pretend marriage to

a killer. What about Cole?”

“What about him? You have no clue who he really was or what happened that night.”

I froze, clutching the phone. “And you do?”

“I know enough and I’m going to do whatever needs to be done.”

To make him proud. To make him love you.

“It changes nothing, Jona. He’s not going to all of a sudden be proud of you. He barely knows who you are. Who I am. So if you’re doing this for him...”

Our father.

“This isn’t about him. You wouldn’t understand. You’ve never understood. It’s my life, not yours, Cress. Stick to dancing. Leave the family business to me and Christian. You made your decision years ago. You don’t get a vote in what I do with mine now.”

She hung up on me and there was no point in calling back. Jona was just as stubborn as her namesake, Jonathan Devereaux. My sister wanted his approval so badly that she would do just about anything to feel like he loved her the same as he had before she’d messed up all those years ago. Truthfully, he did. She had disappointed him, sure, but our father loved us fully and wholly.

We all had our moments where we didn’t live up to the image of the children he expected us to be but that never took away from our place in his heart. Even Cole whose carelessness could have cost our family everything still received our father’s love. Jona simply didn’t believe that. She felt she had something to prove when she didn’t. I hated that our brother was using that desire to be loved to his advantage. One thing was for sure, me and no one else would change her mind.

I couldn’t worry about that right now. I needed to eat, rest, and prepare for my show tonight. The one thing that allowed me to feel free of the weight and stress in myself.

THREE

elias

EVERYTHING about this moment felt stifling. Being back in Crescent Falls and memories of why I'd left caused the air around me to become thick with a weighted tension I wasn't prepared for. I had been managing just fine, being away. My mental health had been stable, aside from a few flare ups where I allowed myself to be pushed to the point of reacting.

"Mr. Omari, we're here."

The hour drive from the airport somehow managed to fly by with me being lost in my thoughts but now I had to actually deal with people. My brother's people, which made this that much more annoying. He lived for family business. It had never been my desire to walk in my father's footsteps which was what made it that much easier for me to sever ties. My brother lived for this shit.

"You can park nearby. I don't plan on being here long."

"Yes, sir."

He reached for something and lifted it into view. A business card. Black with gold print. I extended an arm to take it from his fingers. "Call when you're ready."

Instead of responding verbally, I offered a tight nod and stepped out of the vehicle, sliding the card into my interior jacket pocket. I smoothed my hands down the front and exhaled the cleansing breath to relax my sore muscles. My body was still in recovery from the beating I'd taken in the ring.

In the back a large metal door painted black with two men standing guard greeted me with hard stares. This was the shit I didn't like. But it was a necessary evil. Whatever was going on inside required discretion.

Last time I had been here, it was to stand guard with my brother while he did our father's bidding. None of these people had seen or heard from me in

years, which meant I would have to toss around my father or brother's names until they were familiar with my face again.

"Can I help you?" the first one asked, the second took a step forward in preparation.

"Elias."

"And?"

"I'm here to meet my brother, Ezekiel Omari."

Recognition flashed in his eyes. "Yes, sir, Mr. Omari. Please, step inside. Take the elevator to the left."

He offered up a sleek plastic card which I accepted without cursing him out like I wanted to. The door was opened and held for me. "Enjoy your evening, Mr. Omari."

I didn't respond. I traveled halfway down the hall, stopping at the elevator. Once I held the card to the magnetic strip, the doors opened. Inside there was an identical strip where I repeated the motion, the doors closed and I traveled down.

Once the car came to a stop and the doors opened again, I had to squint until my eyes adjusted to the dimly lit space I'd stepped into. A warm glow from chrome and crystal embellished sconces illuminated from the walls and glass cylinders on tables and around the bar. The ambiance was sexy. Men in suits were grouped in sections and naked women were either on their laps or being serviced. Out in the open men had their dicks down their throats or were flat out fucking them with no care for the eyes that watched. The emotions that spiraled into other heated exchanges.

Shit was crazy but not outside the scope of things of what I would expect here. These types of gatherings were specifically designed to cater to men with money. Men who wanted the appearance of looking and feeling exclusive. Women who served a purpose but looked and behaved a certain way while serving that purpose. High-priced pussy. That had never and would never be my thing which was why I wasn't sure why Ez asked me to meet him here.

"I expected you not to show." My brother stepped into view and offered me a cursory glance as he checked me out. "I also didn't expect you to play the part. You clean up nice, Lias."

"I know how to wear a fucking suit. *When* it's required."

"I never said you didn't. Only that I hadn't expected it."

"I'm not here to talk about my fucking clothes, Ez."

“No, you’re not. Let’s get right to it then, shall we.”

He extended an arm, motioning to the bar. Once we stopped, I frowned at my brother. “You know I don’t drink.”

Ez turned and stared at me pensively before offering a nod. “Water. They’ll assume it’s vodka. These deals are a combination of expensive liquor and inflated egos. You don’t drink, they’re on edge. I need them relaxed.”

“Why wouldn’t they be?”

“You’re you, Lias. You make people uncomfortable.” He smirked and turned to the bar. He ordered bourbon for himself, requested water in a glass for me, on the rocks. I accepted it but wasn’t in the mood for playing games. I did however decide to do my brother this one solid. I’d play nice. For now.

“Who are we meeting?”

“Forrester and Parker. The deal I proposed to you concerns them as well. We all agree to what it will cost if we can’t form an alliance to keep things balanced.”

Terrance Forrester and Kenton Parker were part of the two families that had control of the northern states. I half-expected representatives from all eight families to be here tonight so knowing it was only Forrester and Parker settled the building irritation. The one thing I never wanted; I was now being forced into.

“I haven’t agreed.”

“Understood. I just want you to hear them out. You don’t trust me.”

“I trust them even less.”

Ez chuckled, taking a sip of his drink. “I know. Just listen to what they have to say. If you still don’t agree, you go home, and I’ll deal with whatever happens.”

“How?”

“I don’t know but you wouldn’t leave me any choice but to figure that shit out. I’m hoping it won’t come to that.”

He tipped his drink to me and clasped a hand over my shoulder which caused a grimace to settle onto my face. I was still aching from the fight last night.

“How bad is it?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“You just flinched from my hand on your shoulder, Lias. It’s gotta be pretty bad. Should I have a doctor on standby?”

“I said I’m fine, let’s get this shit over with.”

He delivered one last cursory glance then led the way to a small room in the back of the club. Several large brown leather armchairs sectioned off faced a small round stage. There was a pole in the center.

“Elias Omari.” Parker placed his drink on the small black table, stood, and offered his hand. “It’s been years. You look well.”

I accepted his hand but didn’t smile.” He turned to Ez. “I didn’t think you could pull it off.”

Ez cut his eyes my way. “My brother is loyal to our family. I needed him, he’s here.”

“I see that.” Parker smiled as his eyes bounced between the two of us.

Forrester didn’t stand. He only nodded, offering a greeting. “Glad that you could join us, Elias. I assume Ezekiel has filled you in on the importance of you being here.”

“He briefly discussed an alliance between our family and the Devereauxs.”

I took a seat, balancing my drink on the arm of the chair. Ez sat next to me so that he and I were facing Forrester and Parker.

“Not just an alliance. A marriage to show unity between your families. And an heir that shares both of your blood.”

My fingers tightened around my glass as I quickly cut my eyes at my brother. I had no plans on having children ever. He understood why.

“A marriage is one thing, an heir...”

“You do understand that this alliance has to be maintained. Marriages end but a child shared between two families, an heir that carries *your* name...”

“Means nothing if two families truly want to sever ties.”

“Agreed, however it’s less likely that it will happen. All things considered, we need this to be as believable as possible.”

“Believable means that you don’t foresee it being more than a lie.”

“Isn’t that what it will be for you?” Forrester questioned with an arched brown.

“Given the history between your families, one can only assume that this option is on the table for the good of things, bigger than any of us. The balance of power needs to remain even. It will not if your families continue to harbor bad blood between you.”

“My family?” I questioned, narrowing my eyes at Parker. Cole Devereux shot my brother in the head because he allowed his ego to get in the way. Daddy wasn’t allowing him to be the man he wanted to be so he decided to

buck the system.”

“And you in turn tortured Cole for hours, beating him to death with your bare hands and delivering him to his family’s property with a note that said, we’ll never be even but this is a good start.”

“Allegedly. The Devereaux family had far more enemies than *just* my family.”

“Cut the shit, Elias. We all know you were the one to kill Devereaux.”

“Allegedly,” I repeated. “Cole shot my brother in a crowded club with hundreds of witnesses. To this day, not one has spoken up about who tortured and killed Cole.”

“Which isn’t relevant to our situation at the moment,” my brother cut in and I turned to him.

“Isn’t it though? He killed our brother and you want me to marry his sister.”

“I thought you said you could handle this, Ezekiel.”

“Handle him.” Forrester pointed to me and I chuckled lightly.

“I never said I would *handle* my brother. Only that I would ask if he was ready to return and if he would be willing to marry a Devereaux. Please don’t mistake my agreeing to ask him here as me handling him or even choosing sides with any of this. My loyalty *is* and always will be to my family. Make no mistake about that.”

“Your father...”

“Is no longer in charge. I am. Now shall we focus on the importance of why we need this alliance or will my brother and I be walking out of here to figure shit out on our own?”

“Speaking of, if neither of you plan on giving into the money being offered by smaller, less relevant parties who only intend to abuse the power we hold, why is this alliance so necessary?” I asked looking both Forrester and Parker in the eyes.

“We’re businessmen. We don’t fight wars in the streets like common thugs. There’s only so much we can do to ensure that the balance isn’t disrupted. Your family and theirs left an opening for them to strong arm us into accepting terms that don’t benefit the greater good. I will not ever put my family at risk.”

“No, you’ll just accept the money they offer, turn a blind eye, and put your family in a gated community on the hill while pretending you don’t know the rest of the world exists and is suffering,” I gritted through clenched

teeth.

“Can you blame me?”

“For leaving the door open for men like Samson to slide in back doors taking control from you, us, the Devereauxs? Yes, I can blame you, because if that happens, what the hell do you think those forced partnerships will do to the state of things? They don’t give a damn about rules or business. They only care for their personal agendas. We collectively maintain balance. No decisions are made without the approval of all eight families. If we can’t come together on this, everything changes.”

“He has a point. We’re not the problem. Our alliance is strong. Our control is not in question. This marriage has to happen because yours *is*.” Parker’s fair complexion showed his anger by exposing a red flush that crawled up his cheeks from his neck. I could have easily argued that he not speak so harshly about our league of honorable Black families that he barely qualified for with his mixed heritage. There were times when his ice blue eyes passed down from his white mother annoyed me. We all eluded certain struggles because we came from wealthy families but he didn’t always understand or encompass the weight of being a Black man. He slipped back and forth between the two worlds when it benefited him most. Colorism existed even amongst the wealthy.

“Understood. But you need to understand that marrying into their family is a choice. *His* choice. I stand by whatever decision Elias makes.”

“*If* I agree, I will only agree to a marriage. There will not be an heir. I’m not having children.”

“But...”

My brother quickly cut in. “The marriage is enough. As long as the union is believable there will be no issue. They won’t see our alliance as fake or weak and we keep things as they’ve always been. The balance remains in place. A child is not necessary.”

“It helps.”

“It won’t happen,” I added with finality.

My condition was hard enough to manage for myself. I wouldn’t dare put myself in the position to pass that down to a child. No one knew of my disorder. I planned on keeping it that way. As far as everyone in our world knew, I was just erratic, irrational and a little crazy at times. The reason why Ez mentioned that these two men would be uncomfortable around me. Being the eldest child, the shift in power should have gone to me, not my brother. I

would bet my ass they were overjoyed and relieved that hadn't been the case. All they knew was that I didn't want the responsibility. The commitment that came from holding a position of power.

Ez took over. "Elias and I will meet with Christian to map out the details and if we all agree, then we move forward."

"And if you don't agree and end up killing each other?"

"That won't happen," Ez clarified but didn't hide the warning glance he delivered my way.

I chuckled lightly because I couldn't be sure how things would go at the moment.

"How soon can you meet with Christian?"

"Tomorrow," I stated bluntly.

"That soon?"

"I don't see a reason why we need to prolong this. Either I'm in or out. I will make the determination after meeting with Christian."

Parker and Forrester looked at each other. I knew they were silently communicating their unease with me holding all the cards. That was exactly what was happening. I made the decision on what happened next. Ez would back me publicly. Behind closed doors was another issue but he would always stand by whatever decision I made in front of the others.

"Okay then. I guess we're done with business until tomorrow. I guess we can get to the entertainment part of the evening."

My brother extended to his full height and moved to the door. He pressed the intercom on the wall and announced to the Wiz that he could send in the entertainment. Dancers. The reason for the stage and pole between us. High class strippers who would do whatever these men asked of them. I wanted no parts of any of that and didn't care that they would find it rude for me to walk out.

I did however lift my glass and down the water. *Show respect*. I could hear my father's voice in my head and I hated how much I was programmed to want to do what he trained us to do. Never disrespect a man by not sharing a drink with him when offered.

They hadn't offered but it was expected. I understood how things worked in our world. So I obliged.

Once I placed the glass on the table that sat between my brother and me, I also stood. "Gentlemen. Enjoy the rest of your evening."

"You're leaving?" Forrester looked put off.

“I am. I have a few things I need to take care of.”

“Suit yourself but you’re missing out. These ladies are top tier.” Parker brushed away thoughts of me not joining them. I was sure he didn’t want me to.

“Not my thing.”

“Women or the women here,” Parker taunted and before I could move toward him, my brother was between us. “Lias, let’s go.”

My eyes remained on Parker until I felt my brother’s hand on my arm. I looked down where we were connected and inhaled, reeling myself back in enough to walk away. I left, not caring about anything else I was leaving behind me.

“Lias.”

“What?”

“What the hell was that?”

“That was me doing what you asked. I came. But I can’t change who I am. *What* I am. How I react to someone questioning my sexuality.”

I had never in all my years been attached to a woman. No dating, no long-term loves, not even as far back as high school. Being diagnosed as bipolar kept me guarded most of my life. I fucked women, sure. Plenty of them but I never shared myself with them. Had I chosen to, at some point, they would have learned about my disorder. For my father it was a weakness and you didn’t expose weakness. I became so accustomed to hiding who I was that it became a habit. Even after I no longer cared about his opinions of me, I continued to hide that part of myself.

Ez searched my eyes and I laughed arrogantly. “I’m fine. My head is clear. *That* had nothing to do with whether or not I took my meds this morning.” *This week, month, or year.* Consistency was the thing with bipolar. “That was strictly about me not liking that muthafucker. Move.”

Ez lifted both hands in surrender, palms facing me and stepping out the way. I left.

“You’ll still meet with Christian tomorrow?” he said to my back.

“I gave you my word,” I answered honestly, not bothering to halt my steps.

As soon as I was back in the main area of the club, I exhaled the frustration which had been coiling in me since the minute I’d walked into that room with them. I hadn’t been completely honest. Sure, Parker was a dick but my reaction wasn’t just about that. Being here, back in Crescent Falls,

submerged in my father's world, was the underlying factor to my reaction. This world that now belonged to my brother and by default me, challenged my restraint. I wasn't completely sure I could handle what that meant without compromising everything I had accomplished since I'd stepped away.

I looked around trying to find my exit but before I could make sense of where I needed to go, something else caught my attention, or rather *someone* else. Across the club, separate from the individual sections, was a main stage. Red lights illuminated it and there was a woman. Diamonds covered her skin and the way they reflected from the light made them illuminate red.

The devil.

But the way she moved was heavenly. Only an angel could move the way she did. But only a devil could make it look so sinful.

I was drawn in. Couldn't take my eyes from her. The heat that pooled in my gut, warming me from the inside out, was such a foreign feeling that I barely recognized the reason behind the change. This woman. She seemed oblivious to anything around her. All that appeared to matter was the way she moved, glided, across the stage. She was fluid, her body moving in motion seductively. She had the attention of all the men in the room. Even those with their dicks sliding between other women's lips along with those enmeshed in pussy focused on her, thinking of her, wanting *her*, and that made me angry.

I wanted her too and that meant they weren't allowed to have those thoughts.

A low growl rumbled in my chest and I could no longer see them or someone would feel the pain of my irrational thoughts. She had me. All of me. My attention, everything else fell away. She was so fucking beautiful and every part of me awakened with awareness.

Of her.

And there I stood while she enchanted everyone else in the building until she finished her dance. The lights went off then she was gone. My head moved left to right. My eyes traveled from body to body, face to face, but she wasn't there. A shockwave of energy pushed through my veins and prickled over my skin.

That was all her.

Once I stepped out the club, I inhaled a deep breath, trying to regain control of myself. It had been years since attraction and lust paired in a combination. I was completely taken by surprise.

How the fuck did this happen.

It had been so long since anyone had my attention. Since a *woman* had my attention. And it lingered past the moments my eyes left her. Thoughts of her lingered so much that I stood in the dark for God knows how long until I caught the flicker of something in the corner of my eye. A woman moving toward the parking lot. She hit the locks to her car and from the way she moved I knew it was her. I watched her until she slid into the driver's seat of a pearl Range Rover and it took every bit of restraint I had not to follow, but I watched. Watched her through the windshield while she tossed her bag in the passenger seat then turned. The gods of favor worked with me because her phone illuminated her face, giving me a glimpse of the angel without her mask and fuck if I hated being here in this moment.

“So fucking beautiful.”

Definitely an angel.

She pulled out of her spot and out of the parking lot, passing me. I watched until her taillights disappeared in the darkness.

Who the hell are you?

Never mind.

Instead of going back inside to find out more about the mystery woman, I removed the card from my pocket and dialed the number for my driver. Ten minutes later, he was pulling up and I still hadn't cleared my mind from thoughts of her.

* * *

I was restless last night. Barely slept more than a few hours because my mind kept circling back to the woman from Chapter House. There was also the very heavy reminder of why I was back home. *Arranged marriage*. By late afternoon, I was still anxious so instead of allowing my mind to remain in a loop of thoughts I couldn't do anything about, I decided to burn some energy. Ez was calling by the time I was a few hours into my routine at the hotel gym.

“Yeah.”

“What are you doing?”

“Running.”

“Running?”

I hated the question mark at the end of the word.

Why are you running?

Is your mind unbalanced?

Are you searching for something to ground you?

As much as I understood the lingering questions, questions that could possibly only exist in my mind, I also understood where the inquisition was rooted. My past behaviors. Living with a sibling who was diagnosed with a mental disorder at such an early age, fourteen for me, forced everyone around me to be guarded. My brother loved me but he was always concerned.

I changed the direction of things because I didn't want to travel down that road. Over the years I had become an expert at diversion.

"I'll be back in my room in ten minutes."

"Good. Can you be ready in an hour?" I glanced at my watch. It was just after four.

"I can."

"We meet Christian at six."

"Where?"

"His family's estate."

"No."

That left us exposed and made me uncomfortable.

"My idea, not his, Lias. We can't be seen together until we figure out what's next. Don't want anyone getting the same idea I have before we can lock it down. I also don't want him at our home. Christian wants this alliance just as much as I do. He won't do anything stupid. If he does, we're prepared."

There was a plan in place. I expected nothing less from Ez. Our father hadn't always done right by others with business but not for lack of knowledge of how to do good business. His training now lived in Ez. Our father was a brilliant man. His greed however sometimes overpowered his intelligence.

"If you're sure."

"I am. One hour. A ride will be waiting for you."

"I assumed you would come."

"There's something I need to take care of first. I'll meet you there. You will ride back with me."

"Okay."

The line was quiet for a long moment. I waited, gave my brother the time to get whatever he needed off his chest. "Thank you for this, Elias."

"I haven't agreed yet."

“No, but you’re here. So, thank you.”

The call ended and I lifted my eyes to the mirrored wall on the other side of my treadmill. Today I recognized the man staring back at me. He was sane, level. That wasn’t always the case. I prayed being here didn’t shift the person I could see now.

FOUR

eress

WHEN I PULLED up to my parents' estate, I did a quick scan of the Maybach Pullman parked in the circular drive. It was sleek, new, and expensive.

Christian has company.

I should have called but he wouldn't have entertained what I needed to say over the phone. One last attempt to convince my brother to find an alternative to Jona marrying Elias Omari was why I was back at my family's estate for a second day in a row. I didn't know very much about Elias but what I did know bothered me.

I was, however, familiar with his family because until the incident between our brothers, the Omari had been closely linked to the Devereauxs. Our fathers and brothers handled business together. When our families divided, a shift happened in Crescent Falls. No one outright spoke about what happened but they whispered amongst themselves. They also had quiet discussions about Elias after it was assumed that he had killed our brother Cole.

They didn't hide their acceptance of those rumors considering Elias's past. He was the wild one of the Omari brothers. Most called him crazy, others deemed him reckless, but none spoke either title to his face. He had a reputation. As a trained fighter he was lethal with his hands and as a son of Josiah Omari he had an in-depth understanding of business which rendered him equally skilled with destroying the lineage of those who crossed him or his family. The guy was scary. I'd only been in his presence a handful of times at mutually hosted events and as scary as the guy was, he was equal parts sexy.

Both Omari brothers were, however, Elias had that edge to him, whereas

Ez was more refined and polished. Neither of them were men a normal father would be putting at the top of the “marry my daughter” list. My father could barely remember he had daughters and on a good day when he could, he remembered us as children not grown women who were of age to marry.

I climbed out of my Range prepared to offer one last argument for why it was insane of Christian to want Jona to marry Elias Omari but that would have to wait until he no longer had visitors. I glanced at my wrist before I keyed the code to enter my childhood home, realizing it was just after six. Hopefully his company wouldn't be here long and if that was the intention then maybe I would get lucky and they would tolerate an interruption. Not that I cared. I would demand that my brother give me his time. That didn't mean I would get it, right now at this very moment, but it was worth a shot. I had a performance in two days. Our last show before the off-season. Adequate care to my aching body and rest was imperative.

Please let the odds fall in my favor, so this can be quickly resolved and I can go home and tend to my aching muscles.

Once inside, I stood in the foyer, listening. The house was quiet, but that didn't mean much. The estate was massive and my brother often did business in his office. That was my first stop. In and out.

“Cress, is that you?”

Damn it.

I tilted my head to the floor, forced a smile, then turned to face my brother's wife. Another reminder that I didn't want an arranged marriage for neither myself nor my sister. “Aja, hey.”

She cleared the arch that led to the corridor where the kitchen was positioned at the rear of the estate and made her way to me. “Christian has visitors. Was he expecting you?”

Her smile was soft but her eyes were curious, accusing almost. “He hadn't mentioned you would be stopping by.”

“This is my parents' home, Aja. I wasn't aware I needed a reason to visit.”

Her eyes expanded just a bit before they settled back to their natural state. “I wasn't insinuating that you did. Only that you're rarely here and mostly only to see Christian.”

Not me... was the part she left off. If Christian had company, that only left her.

“No, he's not expecting me.” I relaxed a little. “Do you know who he's

with?”

Her eyes darted to the corridor that led to my brother’s office and she quickly shook her head. “He doesn’t discuss business with me.”

“Right,” I huffed. “How are you? You look well.”

She looked like shit. Her clothes were neat, expensive, her hair flawless in long spirals layered over her shoulders but Aja looked stressed, tired, and weary. She was thinner than she had been the last time I saw her, a few months back at one of my performances. I was a dancer, had been all my life, yet I had more definition and curves on my body than Aja.

“I’m fine and you don’t have to pretend.”

“Pretend?” I frowned and she smiled wryly.

“You and I aren’t family, Cress. This is *your* family home, not mine. You don’t need my permission or approval to be here. You also don’t have to pretend that I matter. We’re not close. I understand.”

She turned to walk away and I caught her arm. Her eyes lowered then quickly darted up to my face. I still didn’t let her go when I spoke. My fingers remained firmly wrapped around her forearm. “We’re not family because that’s not what you want. We’re not close because you keep me and everyone else at a distance. Don’t pretend like Jona and I haven’t tried. You are our brother’s wife.”

She snatched away and leveled her eyes with mine. “I am no more important than those men in there with him right now, Cress. *Business*. I’m not here because I want to be. I don’t love Christian and he doesn’t love me. We are a consequence of our families’ actions. I’ve accepted that. You should too.”

With her final decree, Aja turned to leave and I spoke my final thoughts to her back. “Christian loves you. He’s been trying for years but you don’t make it easy. *Three*, Aja. You took three children from him. You let him love you and in return you took something he thought wasn’t possible. But it was. How is he supposed to feel? Why would he give you any more access to his heart only for you to crush it with your lies and false promises? You hurt him and you hurt us, but we’re all still trying to love you.”

“Yeah well, don’t,” she hissed and moved away from me, her heels creating footfalls across the pristine marble floors as she quickly made an exit from the truth she didn’t want to accept. She’d killed three of my brother’s children and let him believe it was God’s doing.

Aja was yet another reason why arranged marriage was insane. An

expectation that would never work and a reminder that Christian shouldn't want this for our baby sister. I had a good mind to follow Aja out into the garden but I wasn't in the mood to argue with my brother's wife. She wasn't happy and in turn wanted everyone around her to be just as miserable. My heart went out to her, however I couldn't forgive her lies. I tried because I understood but she hurt Christian in ways neither of us could ever forget.

Once Aja was gone, I refocused on my reason for being here. I navigated to my brother's office and stopped outside the door, listening to the voices inside.

"You understand my hesitation."

"As you should understand mine. We are both in a predicament with things as they stand. Two lives were lost. Not one," Christian spoke dryly.

"Your brother was reckless and out of control. He wanted what had never been promised to him. He shot my brother."

"And you tortured and killed mine."

"Where is your proof?" The callous and arrogant tone delivered had my muscles locking. Elias Omari.

"It's there, in that cocky grin of yours," Christian replied.

"We're getting off task. The goal is to focus on what's happening now and what that means for our families," Ezekiel said.

"I've lived peacefully for four years without the nuisance of our family or theirs hovering over me," Elias said.

"You've been an enforcer to a man who is so far beneath us that you should be ashamed to be associated with his organization, Lias. You were his hired help," Ezekiel chimed in.

"My choice. I lived the way I chose to live without any of this..."Elias said.

"This is your legacy," Ezekiel shot back.

"If you two want to hash out family business then do it on your own time. We have issues bigger than the two of you. Samson has been meeting with people attached to Parker and Forrester for months now. They have done well to keep it under wraps but we all know what the discussions are about," Christian piped up.

"We do, which is why we need to prove that we are together on this. They've been watching, waiting for years now. The divide between our families makes us weak," Ezekiel said.

"Speak for yourself, Christian. My brother has been proving his ability to

stand strong with or without you,” Elias said.

“If that were the case, he wouldn’t be here. You wouldn’t be here. Three against one means that things shift and that shift affects us all. We become the minority. Our hands aren’t completely clean but there’s no comparison to the blood on our hands versus theirs. If they gain control...” Christian responded.

“They won’t,” Elias said.

“Our families are on opposing sides of things. It’s hurting business...” Christian said.

“Yours more than ours. We don’t handle drugs, weapons, or women...”

My jaws flexed with tension from Elias’s statement.

Drugs. Weapons. Women?

I wasn’t naïve. I was aware that my family dealt in illegal things, but women? Did that mean trafficking? Prostitution?

Christian didn’t deny the accusation.

“The point is business is suffering on both sides. And even more than business, our past and the divide that happened weakened our voice. The only thing we have is bringing our families together. A show of power proving that the past is the past and that we stand together again,” he said.

“Then that’s what we do,” Elias said.

“You’re agreeing to the marriage,” Ez said. He sounded surprised.

“Yes,” Elias replied.

I’d heard enough at this point and barged into my brother’s office. “You’re not marrying my sister.”

All eyes were on me. Christian’s from across his desk and both Omari brothers from over their shoulders as they swung their heads toward the direction of my voice. I tried my best to ignore the blazing burn from a pair of brown eyes that felt so much different from the others on me. *His* I felt more intensely.

“Jona will not be marrying this man.” I pointed to Elias but kept my hostile stare on Christian.

“No, I won’t.”

Huh?

“Lias, you just said...”

“I know exactly what I said and that was yes, I agree to the marriage. A union between our families as a show of faith that we’re standing together once again. Even if it’s all bullshit.”

“Then you’re agreeing to marry Jona?” Christian stated with a hint of irritation. He wasn’t fond of Elias and frankly neither was I.

“No, I’m agreeing to the marriage but not to Jona...” His eyes singed me. “I’m agreeing to marry Cress.”

“No,” Christian immediately disagreed.

“Hell no,” I emphasized.

“What the fuck, Lias?” Ez chimed in.

I swallowed back my anger and braved a look at him. His voice sounded dark. Hardened and cold but also arrogant and entitled. I didn’t care, this man didn’t scare me...*much*.

“I’m not marrying you.”

“The decision is not yours, Cress,” Elias said smoothly.

The way my name rolled off his tongue was unfairly sinful and I couldn’t help but wonder if those brown eyes blazed with just as much arrogance when he fucked or loved as they did right now with this expression of arrogance.

“You’re insane if you think it’s not my decision. I’m my own person, regardless of what Christian might have convinced you to believe.”

“Cress...” Christian warned but I never looked in his direction. My sights remained on the man who I had placed in the category of enemy. The hard chiseled line of his jaw lessened as he stared back at me, exposing a smugness that forced something heady to wash over and through me.

“No offense to either of you but Jona has nothing to offer.”

“No offense? You just insulted my sister and I take offense to that on her behalf. She has plenty to offer.”

“I’m sure she does but let me clarify what I meant. She has nothing to offer *me* or anyone else for the purposes of this negotiation.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Christian’s tone was just as dark and angry as mine had been.

“Jona is barely of age and has no life experience or value to offer at this stage in her life. The only thing she truly has is your family name...”

“My sister is young. She’ll have plenty to offer in the future.”

“Future maybe but as of now, she has nothing to lose. Nothing that would make anyone believe that she was more than just a line item on a business deal. You, Cress, are quite the opposite. You have a well-established career as a decorated dancer. You’re beautiful, smart, and accomplished. A marriage compromises everything you’ve worked so hard to build in your life.” His

eyes were on me with every word spoken until he switched them to Christian to land the final blow. “Marrying Cress seems more of a choice than a family obligation. You could easily convince your less accomplished sister who is still figuring out life to accept the terms of an arranged union. It’s not as believable as it would be if I marry Cress.”

I watched my brother’s face and the way his eyes darted from me to Elias. “He has a point,” Ezekiel said from my right.

Then I saw it. Christian agreed.

Fuck.

“Can I have a minute with my sister...”

“No,” Elias spoke swiftly. “You want them to believe we’re once again a united front, then I marry Cress. There’s no private discussion needed to agree on what makes sense. Either she says yes now or I’ll be on a flight first thing in the morning and you two figure out how to do this without me.”

A demand.

One that my brother was considering yielding to. I could tell from the look he gave that he wanted my cooperation. He was silently demanding that I agree.

“I’m not marrying him. You will not change my mind.”

“You will,” Elias said.

His declaration, *demand*, rolled through me with a promise of reward if I conceded. Had he not been so attractive, I wouldn’t be at war with myself or this decision.

But I was.

“Lias, we can give them a moment to discuss this privately.,” Ezekiel said quietly after extending to his full height and only then did Elias agree. He stood with the appearance that he was in some sort of pain. The tension in his jaw only surfaced for a brief moment but I caught it.

I wonder what that’s about.

I also didn’t miss how he presented as a complete contrast to both my brother and his. They were in suits. Elias was wearing dark washed jeans and a fitted black V-neck. Short sleeved so there was exposure of the dark lines that created the tattooed sleeve peeking out from the black fabric.

“Nine p.m.”

That was only a few hours. Is he insane?

My eyes shot up to his and he continued. “You have until then to decide. After that, I’m leaving and the option is no longer on the table.” His eyes left

me and moved to my brother. The muscles in Christian's jaw flexed as he growled his response.

"You'll have our decision before then."

"Our? You mean *my* and I'm telling you no. It's a firm no. I'm not marrying him."

The corners of Elias's mouth lifted but only for me in a condescending manner before the smile disappeared as quickly as it came. "We'll see ourselves out, so the two of you can *talk*."

Across from me, Christian moved around the desk. I watched him offer a nod then both Ezekiel and Elias were gone, leaving me with my anger and my brother.

"No," was the first thing out of my mouth.

"You said you didn't want this for Jona."

"I don't and I want it even less for myself. I'm not marrying that man, Chris. Are you seriously considering this nonsense?"

"I'm not considering it."

"Good," I huffed.

"I'm demanding that you do this. You will marry him, Cress."

"No, I will not."

"Yes..." He approached, stopping a foot away from me. "You will. This family has given you everything and asked for nothing in return. Your studies, your career, your freedom to live the way you wanted regardless of what that meant to the rest of us."

"My *freedom*?" I hissed through tight lips. "Living a normal life is not a privilege. It's my right."

"No, it's not. We're not a *normal* family, Cress. Let's not pretend you haven't always known the difference. I need you to do this. It's important. If there were any other way..."

But there isn't.

He offered a silent apology and just like that, my life was changing.

FIVE

elias

“YOU GOING to explain what the fuck just happened back there?”

“You were there, Ez. You’re well aware of what happened.”

“You demanded to marry Cress. That part is clear. I would like to know why?”

Because I saw her last night and something in me changed. A calm I have never in my life felt before and I’d never spoken one word to the woman. I felt that same calm when she entered Christian’s office. Before I knew it was her, I *felt* that it was her.

How the fuck could I explain that to my brother when I didn’t understand it myself? I wanted Cress beyond something sexual. Why I wanted her didn’t have a reason at the moment but she was going to be mine for however long it took me to make sense of things.

“I gave you the reasons. You want this to be believable, then it has to be her. Not her sister.”

Ez cut his eyes my way as he navigated off their property. “Everything you said makes perfect sense and I agree but that has very little to do with your decision. You personally want her. Why?”

“Does the why matter or does me agreeing matter?”

“For me, both.”

His eyes were on me again. Cautious. Searching. He wouldn’t see what I couldn’t understand at the moment and I didn’t understand the draw I had to a woman I’d only been around a handful of times in my life. Even back then as teens and young adults, this, what I was currently feeling, didn’t exist. This was overwhelming and dangerous for a man like me. I didn’t fucking care.

“That was impulsive. Are you sure...”

“My head is clear, Ez.” I gave him my eyes. He couldn’t read my

thoughts but he could see my stability. He'd experienced the mania enough to recognize when there was balance. Right now, I had that.

"Okay then." He was quiet for a moment. "And if she says no..."

"Then I go home."

He wanted to argue. He wouldn't because he understood that it wouldn't do him any good. I settled into the silence and embraced my thoughts.

Thoughts of her.

Last night she danced for a room full of men. It felt like punishment regardless that she didn't know I was there. The diamond encrusted mask hid her identity, allowing her ambiguity from them. They could pass her on the street, share the same space in a coffee shop and never be the wiser. That wasn't the same with me. I felt her. How fucking crazy was that? Maybe not as out of the box for me. My mind wasn't like others. I didn't rationalize, see, think, or feel the way most did but I felt Cress. I needed to understand why. Marrying her would give me time and proximity to do so.

While my brother drove, I was lost in my head. The visual of Cress moving last night. The way my breath left me with no promise of returning. Everything in me became erratic and settled at the same time. Diamonds sparkled over her body, barely covering anything. Her breasts were on display, the valley between her thighs was shaded by a cluster of the jewels but not much else. Crystals scattered her arms and legs, and the rest were randomly placed to add the illusion of being rare and exquisite. She was a rare gem.

Her movements were magic, seductive, sensual and skillful. What I saw was freedom. On that stage last night, Cress was free. No restriction existed. I could imagine that being a dancer all her life had created a world of control. Much like the world I lived in but for different reasons. My disorder controlled me. The way I had to manage my bipolar was restrictive to normal life. I wondered if that meant she could understand me the way that I understood her.

"Lias..."

I delivered a hard stare to my brother who glanced back at me with concern. "We're here."

I glanced past him to the hotel I was staying in and offered a nod. "Are you coming up?"

"No, dinner with Sasha."

"Interesting," I murmured and he exhaled a sigh, sinking deeper into his

seat.

“I want a divorce, she wants to make it work.”

“You don’t need to explain anything to me.”

His eyes were on me but this time he was seeking something he needed.

“We don’t work. We never will. I care about her but I don’t love her.”

“You don’t even like her. Of course you don’t work. Your marriage was a business deal that filtered over from the office to the bedroom. You married her to appease *him*.”

“And you’ll marry Cress to appease *me*?”

I quickly shook my head. “No, if she agrees, I’m doing this because I understand the position you’re in. You’re asking because you want what’s best for our family. Our father asked, or rather demanded, you married Sasha for purely selfish reasons. It’s not the same. It won’t be the same.”

“Isn’t it though?”

“No, if it happens, it’s my decision. I have a choice, you never did.”

With one last glance I exited my brother’s vehicle, closed the door, and never looked back. He didn’t need my pity or sympathy. Only my understanding. He would always have that and he would never have to ask.

* * *

“You left without telling me.”

“I don’t need to tell you when I leave town.”

“You work for me. You...”

“*With* you, not for you. I have always been clear about what my role would be with your organization. I don’t answer to anyone, least not you.”

Reno was quiet. He wanted to throw his weight around and had anyone else addressed him the way I just had, he would have. He knew better. Reno welcomed me into his organization because he would rather have me as a friend than an enemy.

“When are you coming back? I’m having to move people around to cover what I rely on you for.”

“I don’t know. My brother needs me right now...”

“The same brother that turned his back on you when your parents did?” Reno hissed his frustration.

“Careful. You do not want to travel down that road with me.”

My brother made the decision that was required of him. He always stood

by me but he had a responsibility to our family that I refused to take on. I never blamed him for cutting ties. Or rather, the appearance of cutting ties. He and I were always connected, we simply kept our distance because it was necessary.

“Yeah, no. I don’t. If you decide to come back, the door is open. Always.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I rattled off before ending the call. I respected Reno but I didn’t have friends or ties. Business was business. If and when I walked away I would do so and never give it a second thought. Reno knew that about me. It’s one of the qualities he admired the most because it worked in his favor. A lethal man with no emotional ties was a rare commodity.

Reno wasn’t important to me at the moment. The proposition that was on a timeline had me anxious to the point of needing to expend some additional energy. I refused to go on another run and instead settled for doing a little research on my bride to be.

I settled into the small sitting area of my suite, unlocked my phone, and quickly typed in Cress Devereaux. My feed instantly flooded with articles, several of which had videos attached. I navigated to the most recent which was three months prior where she’d danced the lead to Gisselle.

With greedy impatience, I bypassed the article and moved directly to the video clips. There were three, each a couple minutes long. As soon as the first one began, my focus was trained on the screen.

This woman.

Cress was beyond talented. The way she moved with ease and grace as if it was as natural as breathing impressed me. Her agile body, showing subtle curves that weren’t typical for dancers, moved in ways that made it appear as if she were gliding. Telling a story with her movements, becoming one with that story to the point where it oozed from her soul in heady mesmerizing waves. I didn’t give a damn about classical dance. Never had any interest but Cress had me completely engaged. One video after another, my fingers moved and while she was on the screen, my eyes remained transfixed. Before long, I realized an hour had passed. An entire fucking hour of me watching short clips of Cress Devereaux dancing classically.

I would be the first to admit that seeing her in those clips didn’t remotely compare to the way she’d moved last night on stage adorned in diamonds, but she had my attention all the same. My body was just as engaged as my mind because my dick was still hard as a brick, pressed against my thigh.

I laughed, arrogantly shaking my head as I locked my phone and threw my head back against the seat.

Cress Devereaux is going to be my wife.

The thought had me flicking my wrist to check the time. Eight fifty-two p.m. Eight minutes until the final decision was to be made, only I had a feeling she wouldn't be meeting that deadline.

Only allowing a few hours for her to make the decision had been intentional. There was no point in offering Cress too much time to think she had more than one option. After discovering that my soon to be wife and the mystery woman from Chapter House were one and the same, there was only one acceptable outcome.

I am marrying Cress Devereaux.

I hadn't heard from Christian or his sister. She had no intention of marrying me and I had a feeling Christian wouldn't be able to force her hand. That was okay, I could. However I wouldn't force her hand tonight. I would allow Cress to feel empowered, that she was in charge at least for tonight. I made clear I would be on a flight first thing in the morning if I didn't get a response by nine. At the time I meant exactly that but my little dancer, my stubborn and tempting future wife, had changed my mind. Tomorrow, she would learn that she only had control when I allowed her to.

* * *

The next afternoon, I found myself en route to seek out Cress. When the driver pulled up to the curb in front of Liberté Abstraite (Abstract Freedom). I sat quietly massaging my full beard, staring at the building. The ballet company was owned by Kenneth Shilo and from the additional digging I'd done, I learned that the Devereaux family, mainly Christian Devereaux, was a silent partner. Shilo may have been world renowned when it came to classical dance however, he was horrible with business. Devereaux likely stepped in to ensure that the only thing his sister loved the most remained flourishing and lucrative. Christian was a lot like his father when it came to family. There wasn't much he wouldn't do to ensure they were happy; however, he also understood his responsibility as a significant player in containing control of certain aspects. The same loving brother who ensured his sister would live her dream without worry was also the same brother forcing her into a position that would drastically change her life.

Once she carried my name, Christian would no longer have an authoritative voice in Cress's life. If I decided that dance wasn't what I desired for my wife, I could take that away and there wouldn't be a damn thing he could do. He was playing Russian Roulette with his family's happiness. I would guarantee there would be future negotiations that would rally for Cress to be happy but ultimately the decision was mine. The marriage was necessary and held more importance than her happiness. Christian and I both understood that. He would do what was required of him. She would also, even if by force.

"I'll call when I'm ready."

"Yes sir."

I stepped out of the vehicle, brushing a hand over my waves as I traveled up the concrete steps. The building was old but well maintained. Its antique charm remained intact, giving it a nostalgic feel. There was an article discussing all the recent renovations to the theater. Another gift from Devereaux.

"Welcome to Liberté Abstraite. How can I help you?"

The woman who approached moved with grace. No doubt a dancer but she was older, mid-forties if I had to guess. Her suit was fitted, contouring her tall slim physique. Typical dancer's body, whereas Cress was fit but curvy and not as tall. I loved how she contradicted what was cliché for dancers.

"I'm looking for Cress Devereaux."

The woman glanced past me before schooling her expression. "Cress is in rehearsal for tonight's show. She isn't to be disturbed. Is there anything I can help you with?"

"Yes, you can direct me to where she's rehearsing."

"I'm sorry Mr...."

"Omari."

Not everyone in town was familiar with my family but those that were understood that no wasn't an option. This woman didn't flinch but the security guard behind her did. I noticed the look on his face when he stepped up beside her, hesitant but confident. I assumed he would take charge if I were creating an issue.

"As I was stating, Mr. Omari..."

"Elias Omari," the guard cut in. His eyes were curious as he looked me over.

“Yes, and you are?”

“Stephen Grant. My family owns Grant Security. Your brother uses us for a lot of his functions.”

“You’re on duty here?” I asked, wondering why he was staffed if his family owned the company. Not typical but it happened.

“We had a few guys out so I took up one of the shifts.” He shrugged but seemed proud of his position. I offered a nod while he addressed the woman shooting daggers at the both of us.

“Emily, I’ll handle this.” He glanced over his shoulder and I could see that she wasn’t giving up so easily. Some people took their positions a little too seriously. She was *some people*. Emily still had no clue of who I was or why Stephen was all too willing to assist.

“He’s not allowed back there. No one interrupts rehearsals.”

I could do whatever the fuck I wanted and was seconds away from letting that be known when Grant decided to force his position instead.

“He’s with me.”

“Shilo isn’t going to be happy...”

“And I will deal with whatever issues he has,” Grant said sternly before addressing me. “Follow me. They’re in the main theatre.”

I fell in step with Grant as we traveled through the theater’s open lobby down a short hall until we reached our destination. He remained silent while he guided us to the entrance of what I assumed was the theatre. Two large architectural wooden doors that stood out against the blank pale gray backdrop of the walls they were connected to. One was propped open, allowing the melodic sound of a piano to filter from the theatre.

“I’ve got it from here,” I offered Grant with a nod but he stepped in front of the doors blocking my entrance, lifting his chin slightly while looking me right in the eyes.

“I know who you are, who your family is here in Crescent Falls. Regardless, I have a job to do so before I let you go in there, I need to know that there won’t be any issues.”

Impressive.

If he indeed knew who not just my family was, but who I was, he was taking a huge risk by getting in the way of anything I wanted and right now what I wanted was behind him. I could only respect the guy.

“I assure I intend no harm to my fiancée.”

“Fiancée...you’re marrying *Cress*?” The confusion swept through him

erratically. I could imagine he was just as surprised as everyone else would be. I didn't know much about the woman I was intending to marry but I did know that the only marriage anyone would deem reasonable for Cress would be to her career. There had been no mention of men in her life on or off record. No candid shots of anyone other than family greeting her after shows, joining her for intimate dinners or outings throughout the city which would mean me claiming my future bride-to-be would not be expected.

"I am."

"Oh, shit..." He glanced at the stage. "I didn't know. She hasn't mentioned it."

"Would there be a reason why she would mention to *you* that she was marrying someone?"

"Me, no..." He quickly shook his head. "Absolutely not." He stepped out of the way. "I'm gonna head back up front to let Em know everything's good back here."

He ducked his head and walked away. I stepped inside, quietly traveling down the aisle and stopping midway where I took an aisle seat. No one noticed me so I settled in to watch. The lighting in the theatre was dim making the stage the focal point.

Red and black translucent fabric created a backdrop of simplicity but still felt dramatic in a sense. The bodies on stage moved fluently as they glided across the stage in organized chaos, but none fit the memory of the one I was specially there to see. I waited impatiently. I was eager to see Cress and the minute she emerged on the tips of her black satin pointe shoes, covered in a pale shade of pink from her ankles to her neckline, everything else faded into the background.

My fingers flexed against the fabric of my jeans several times before I caught myself. Watching her move forced my mind into comparison of the first night I'd see her dance, onstage at Chapter House, skin brushed in crystals. That night she had been less guarded, more uninhibited and freer. On stage now, her movements were more structured and controlled. Still breathtaking and sensual the way she became the music. Every note expressed in her movements, subtle and grand. The curve of her leg, the arch of her back, the angle of her lean and slender arms. Being exposed to her in motion gave the impression that each note was ingrained in the fibers of her being. She became the melody.

Gradually the music shifted and it wasn't until her arm extended and her

body bent in a dramatic curve to the side that I realized she was no longer the only person on stage. A male figure approached, with tentative slow movements. The minute her small hand slipped into his, my body tensed to a painful degree. Claws of possessiveness rolled through me at an increasingly alarming rate. When he jerked her into his frame and his hand landed flat against her abdomen, fingers spread so wide the tips rested at the underside of her breast, my fingers ached from the way my fists clenched tightly. The moment was brought to a close by the sharp sound of irritation bellowing over the music. A male voice that had my eyes shifting away from Cress and landing on a pale man with thinning blond hair.

Shilo.

“What the fuck are you doing, Cress? If you cannot deliver, maybe I should consider handing over the lead to your understudy for tonight’s performance.”

Immediately my eyes moved to Cress who flinched and pulled away from her partner. “What was wrong *this* time...”

“You’d do better to ask me what was *right*. How many times do we need to repeat this before you deliver, Ms. Devereaux? Your peers and I would appreciate time to rest and prepare for tonight’s performance. With your efforts we’ll be here until the curtains rise this evening and the seats are full of people who paid good money to see an exquisite performance not mediocrity.”

I was already moving and by the time I was a few feet from the stage I could envision all the very painful ways I would make this man suffer if he put his hands on her. Yelling at my wife—*future* wife—was infraction enough but if he laid a finger on any part of her body...

“She was perfect.” Her partner moved protectively beside Cress and I noticed her relax slightly. I didn’t like the idea of another man bringing her comfort.

I fucking hated that shit.

“She is an embarrassment to this company with how she’s been dancing lately. I’ve been tolerating you, Cress but...” He moved one step closer, placing his face a breath away from hers and I fucking lost it.

“Touch her and I touch you...” I growled, bringing every eye from the stage down toward me. Some gasped and others’ mouths hung open, but I only had one thought in mind. Kill.

cress

THE MINUTE I noticed Elias my first thought should have been what the hell are you doing here but that was side barred by the way his eyes swung left and right.

He was looking for a way up here.

“Excuse you but this is a closed rehearsal.”

The menacing look on Elias’s face had me moving with a newfound determination toward the stairs that were positioned on the left side of the stage. Shilo had no clue of the beast he was potentially poking with his simple words.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

I took the stairs so quickly it was only God’s will that I didn’t go tumbling down them.

“Elias don’t...” I called out just as my hands landed hard against his chest. His very solid chest.

“Devereaux, do you know this man?”

Shilo’s snarky tone had Elias’s eyes moving from where my hands rested without permission on his body back up on stage.

“Move...” he growled and his fingers circled my wrist to assist with the demand he had just made.

“No. Whatever you’re thinking, the answer is *no*.”

This was my job. My life. The people I forged bonds with because we danced together, spent countless hours together. I was not about to allow this man to ruin the one thing in my life that mattered the most.

“Cress, I asked you a question. Who is this man and why is he disrupting our closed rehearsal?” Shilo obviously could not read the room. Or the man currently claiming the room.

“Her fiancée.” The *man* decided to take charge. He just told them I was his fiancée. What in the entire fuck?

“Wonderful. Yet another exhausting detail I have to worry will disrupt an already unfocused dancer.” Shilo released an agitated sigh and moved to the edge of the stage. “I don’t care if you’re God Almighty himself, my rehearsals are still *closed* and my dancers are off limits until I say otherwise. Cress, on stage now. Tell your *fiancé* to leave or I will do so for you. As of now you are *my* dancer and this is my rehearsal so get your ass in gear.”

Elias’s grasp tightened on my wrist and when my eyes shot up to his, all I saw was a man possessed.

“She is my *wife*.” *Not your wife, yet buddy.* “Which means you have no claim to her, *at all*. It would be wise of you to understand how deeply I mean that.”

Fiancée to wife.

We’re skipping right on past the wedding then. Perfect.

Shilo smirked, turning his back. “Cress, on stage, now...”

Before I could prevent the fall out, Elias released me, moved so stealthily and quickly that there wasn’t a chance in hell of me stopping what happened next.

Elias’s large hand wrapped around Shilo’s ankle and with one forceful pull, Shilo landed hard on the wood surface then was dragged off the stage. He crashed awkwardly on the carpeted floor but was only there for a matter of seconds before he was airborne again, lifted by a strong arm crushing long fingers around his neck.

“You need to learn some fucking manners. You want people to move, you ask nicely. You want my *wife* to move, wait to see if she chooses to do so. The decision is hers and only hers.”

Wife.

He’s too damn comfortable with that reference.

“Elias, let him go.”

Shilo’s hands moved to Elias’s wrists but he didn’t say a word. I was more than certain that was only because he couldn’t based on the way the color drained from his face. He was barely five and half feet and if I had to guess, no more than a hundred and fifty pounds. The man’s long slender neck fit very comfortably beneath Elias’s large hand.

But that didn’t make this okay.

“Are you insane? I said let him go.”

Elias glanced at me, a menacing smile on his face when one hand slipped into his pocket and removed his phone, releasing Shilo at the same time. The poor guy buckled to his knees gasping for air.

My eyes shifted to the stage noticing a sea of indifferent emotions. Li was smiling smugly along with several other dancers doing the same. Some seemed confused while others appeared to be concerned. By the time my eyes landed back on the reason for their indifference, he was on speaker calling my brother's name.

"Christian."

"Yeah..."

"Were you aware that Kenneth Shilo believes your sister is his fucking property?"

What in the entire fuck? Was he serious?

"Elias?" I could tell my brother was surprised by the call more than anyone. I hadn't spoken with him since I'd left our family home yesterday. At nine when he dialed me no doubt to demand my cooperation I declined his call and shut off my phone knowing that it wouldn't make the problem go away but it would offer me some time.

"I asked you a question, Christian. Were you aware...?"

"Where the hell are you?"

"At Liberté Abstraite. He just physically assaulted Shilo," I yelled, throwing my hands up.

"I barely touched him, and if you want that to remain the cause, I suggest you instruct him right now that he is to treat Cress with the respect she deserves. If he values his position here, he won't ever in his fucking life talk to her with anything less than respect."

"You can't be serious," I groaned. This was not happening.

But it was...

"Christian..." Elias growled, eyes on me.

There was no way my brother was going to stand for this nonsense or at least I thought he wouldn't but...

"Is Shilo near you?"

"You're on speaker."

"Shilo, whatever the fuck you did, make sure it doesn't happen again and apologize to my sister."

"Fuck you, Devereaux," Shilo choked out, finally managing to stand.

"Fuck me means fuck your position with Liberté Abstraite. You wanna

try that again?”

Shilo’s eyes narrowed, jaw flexed, and he glanced at me, then Elias. “It won’t happen again. I *apologize*, Cress.”

“Good. Elias, is that all?”

The arrogant son of a bitch didn’t answer my brother. He simply ended the call and I was floored. Why the hell was my brother, who bowed to no one, folding on demand for Elias Omari?

Shilo attempted to move away from us but Elias blocked his path.

“You’ve got what you wanted, will you please move?” Shilo’s voice held no confidence.

“Christian and I are two *very* different people. This was your one and only pass. If you don’t remember who the fuck she belongs to, then it won’t be Christian or your position here you need to worry about. It will be *me*.”

He took a step closer to Shilo who flinched and nodded quickly before hurrying around Elias, massaging his neck as he moved up the stairs. “Rehearsal is over. Everyone be here tonight by six,” he yelled before disappearing backstage.

I half-expected everyone to linger but they didn’t, not even Li who lifted a brow at me before he quietly left the stage. The whispers were loud, but my rage drowned out what my peers were saying.

“What the hell was that and why are you here? You were supposed to be on a flight this morning going back to wherever you came from.”

“Is he always that disrespectful?”

Is this man insane?

Stupid question. Definitely insane. He’d just manhandled my director and was now staring at me demanding I answer his question while he skipped right over mine. Two could play that game.

“*Why* are you here?” I yelled, throwing my hands up.

“I asked you a question, Cress. Is he always that disrespectful?”

“Are you serious right now?”

“Very, answer the fucking question.”

I locked my arms over my chest, lifting my chin defiantly. “He’s my director. He’s not supposed to be nice but I can take care of myself. That wasn’t necessary. What you just did is only going to make things worse around here.”

His eyes darkened and I wanted to kick myself for what I’d just said. But then I circled back to the real issue. This man had no business being here. No

claim to me or my life.

Yet...

“You need to leave.” I stepped toward him.

“You need to do what is expected of you. You had a deadline of nine p.m.” He stepped toward me.

“I’m not a *thing* or a *pet*. I’m a person. How can you demand anyone else show me something you refuse to offer yourself?” I took another step toward him, pressing my blunt nail into his chest, the tip of my French manicure a huge contrast against the dark gray shirt that stretched quite nicely over his chest.

“Respect is earned and not given. I’m more than willing to match your energy, Cress.”

Oh god, the temptation of the way his voice wrapped around my name like we were already intimately acquainted was not what I needed at the moment. The sinister look in his eyes and lax easy smile didn’t help either. “Nine p.m. was the deadline for you to discuss your options with Christian...”

“*Options*. Neither of you gave me options. You made demands.”

“There’s always an option as long as you’re prepared to handle the consequences of your actions.”

Consequences...

Dishonoring my family.

Throwing Jona to the wolves. This wolf...

Feeling the overwhelming guilt of leaving my family in the position to fend for themselves in an impossible situation.

I could make this work. This man was everything I would choose for myself. Handsome, established, sexy, and bad news...

The problem being I had not chosen him. Circumstances had. But regardless he wanted me. I could see it. Feel it even if I didn’t understand how that was possible. There was a connection of sorts between us that made absolutely no sense.

“Why me?”

“You were at the same meeting yesterday. Christian explained why you.”

My hungry eyes flitted all over his face, gauging his truth, searching for answers. “He explained why our families needed to reconcile the sins of the past by aligning. I’m asking you why me and don’t give that bullshit about my sister not having anything to offer. Truthfully, neither do I because I don’t

want this or you, so why me?”

Something shifted in his eyes. A flicker of emotion he was guarding ferociously. “You have plenty to offer, little dancer. I’ll be here tonight for your show and we’ll have a late dinner together.”

Another demand. My throat tightened and my stomach flipped with anticipation of him being here later to watch me dance then us sharing a meal together.

“What happened to what I do being my choice...”

“It will be your choice, Cress. I’ll see you this evening.”

I was left with my mouth hanging open, nipples hard, body humming with a new, unfamiliar energy. I watched his back while he walked away so callously arrogant as if he just knew I would comply with any and all of his demands.

I allowed myself another shaky breath as energy buzzed, igniting a hum of promise that lingered even after he was gone.

This was going to destroy the woman I had worked to become. I could already feel my foundation cracking.

Once I was back in my dressing room, Christian was the first call I made. I couldn’t believe he hadn’t thought to defend me and instead took Elias’s side. He knew how important my position and reputation here was. Elias had just shit all over that. Everyone would want to know why Shilo folded so easily to my brother’s demands.

As soon as his voice flitted through the line I was digging in. “What the hell was that, Christian? Since when do you take demands from anyone other than our father?”

The line was quiet for a long moment before my brother exhaled his frustrations. “You brought this on yourself, Cress.”

“You’re blaming me?”

“I’m not blaming anyone. What I’m saying is you had an obligation...”

“*You* have an obligation. Not me, Christian.

“Our family has an obligation. Everyone is playing their role. Yours is currently to marry Elias Omari.”

“Why the hell would I do that especially after his little performance today? Is that what I can expect my life to be? The two of you making demands about how I live.”

“Was Shilo being disrespectful to you...”

I tensed and rolled my shoulders back but didn’t say a word.

“Cress, I asked you a question. Was Shilo out of line?”

Yes.

“Nothing Shilo did justifies the barbaric display that Elias initiated.”

“You didn’t answer my question but I’ll lean on assumptions. I can’t say I would have chosen him for you had the circumstances been different but I’m not upset that he’s already proving that you are a priority, that you will be treated with respect, and that he will stand up for you whenever required.”

I didn’t like that he was pointing out the obvious. I also didn’t like that I too felt the same but how far would Elias go?

“I don’t want to lose who I am to become what he wants me to be, what you’re demanding I be.”

“You won’t,” Christian stated quietly.

“You can’t promise that.

“I’ve already talked to him. I made clear that your career is off limits and that he’s to respect your boundaries.”

“If today is any indication of him respecting my boundaries, then I have very little hope for what my future as his wife will be.”

“You’re overlooking one very important detail...”

I knew exactly what he was going to say.

“Shilo was out of line. Had I been there, I would have done the exact same thing. Elias was not wrong, Cress.”

“He assaulted the man. Dragged him off stage in front of half the company.”

Christian was right but I felt backed into a corner. I felt the control I had over my life and who I was slipping through my fingers.

“We’ll talk soon. Have a good performance this evening.”

“Are you coming?”

“No. You already have plans.”

He knew Elias would be here.

“Right.”

My life was no longer my own.

After I ended the call a soft knock alerted me I had a visitor. I crossed the room and rolled my shoulders back, gently pulling it open to find Li. His bare chest was now covered with a cream sweatshirt with Liberté Abstraite printed down the left sleeve.

His dark eyes flitted past me, circling my dressing room, and mine rolled before I asserted, “He’s not here.”

“Damn it. I was hopeful.” A devilish smile split his face and he forced his way past me and into my space. “But at least that means we can talk about what the hell just happened out there. A fiancé, Cress. When did that happen?”

Li folded his tall lean frame into the small leather sofa that sat in the corner. After I shut us in, I found my way to the makeup chair that sat before the counter lining the wall opposite him.

“It’s not really something I can discuss.”

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

“It’s family stuff and very complicated.” I jerked my hands through my hair.

“What kind of complicated?” He arched a brow.

“The ‘he’s not my fiancé by choice’ kind of complicated,” I huffed.

Li stared at me for a long moment then leaned forward. “That very sexy, fine man should be everyone’s choice. Hell he’d surely be mine. Those are the types of complications I would gladly embrace.”

Li was bisexual so I wasn’t surprised by his enthusiasm about Elias. I wouldn’t dare say the man wasn’t nice to look at but that was the problem. Everything else about him was the issue. “I can’t really go into detail about my family and their primitive ways but my brother wants me to marry Elias because it’s necessary.”

“Devereaux isn’t Italian and this sounds very *gangsterish*.”

“Very much *gangsterish* but it’s also *very* real.”

Li shrugged. “Not all that uncommon. I’m half Asian. My culture practices arranged marriages. It’s typically set up by matchmakers that the families hire but it still exists. It’s also a class thing and rich people do it all the time to keep their old wealth contained.”

“This isn’t about money and are you telling me that you would be okay with your family setting rules about your future, about who you were allowed to love, because I can’t imagine that being the case.”

I delivered a questioning look. Li was not very close to his family. He’d chosen to dance instead of following his family’s plans of him becoming a doctor. He slept with both women and men with no consideration for the so-called embarrassment it brought his parents.

“No, but I might if the person they forced me to love looked like your fiancé.” Her smile only further irked my nerves.

It was deeper than just the marriage. I was expected to forget who he was.

Who his family was?

Elias killed my brother.

But my brother had killed his.

I couldn't truly feel the resentment, which I wanted to embrace about the Omari family, because they suffered a loss just as our family had. This life was what put us at odds and this life was what was forcing an alliance that neither of us wanted.

"You wouldn't understand." I slipped from the chair and walked to the door, pulling it open and staring at Li. "I need to prepare for tonight and so do you."

His frown came as quickly as it went and Li moved to the door but he didn't leave right away. "We're going to kill it out there tonight."

His lean frame bent over me and I was lifted into his embrace. I hugged him back because Li was my friend, a very good friend.

"We are." I smiled as I untangled myself from him and shut the door after he winked over his shoulder and headed across the hall to his dressing room. I slumped into the spot where he had just been but lifted the cable knitted weighted blanket draped over the back and unfolded it to cover my body. Two things were very certain. I had to mentally prepare for my performance that evening and I had to prepare for dinner with my future husband after my performance because both were happening and there wasn't a damn thing I could do to prevent either of them.

SEVEN

elias

I WALKED into my family home and stopped just beyond the door feeling a sense of dread. I suppressed the pulsing urges to embrace the stifling feelings that closed in on me the second I inhaled my first breath once again inside these walls. I hadn't been here in four years but everything felt the same. I was different but this place was exactly as the last time I'd been here.

Every inch of this house was a painful memory that I had never been the son my family wanted me to be.

Directly in front of me was a wood landing that matched the surface of dual staircases that started and ended separately. The wall of the foyers were chapel gray, slates of tile and the wood floors were a few shades lighter and textured.

Our father had always been ahead of his time. He liked nice things and loved being at the forefront of elegance. While his peers had homes that had been passed down within their lineages for centuries, he built a fortress that was fit for a modern day king. Voice-command showers. Temperature-controlled floors and wine cellars throughout the property. Twenty-three million dollars was invested in this home which was now valued at twice as much.

Now it belonged to Ez and I. I was surprised to find that he hadn't cut me out of the will. A copy had been prepared for me, which Ez handed over this morning after he insisted I move into our family home with him and his wife. It was just the two of them. Not that it mattered because there was an East and West wing, separated into three levels. Basement, main level, and upper level.

The main and upper levels on each wing housed an owner's suite on every floor and two other bedrooms for a total of twelve and two additional

rooms on the basement level. It was completely possible for me to live here and never see Ez or his wife if that was my choice. He continually made that point each time I presented the argument of wanting to get a small place in the city.

Regardless of the space, I hadn't settled on the idea of living under the same roof as my mother. She and I hadn't spoken since she'd chosen her side after our brother's funeral. Ez assured me that she spent the majority of the year traveling and when she wasn't, she owned a condo closer to town at Millennium. That was the only reason I agreed to consider living at our family home. However, that didn't prevent the tension that pulsed down my spine with every breath inhaled since being here.

"Sorry I'm late. Got stuck in a meeting about the permits for the community centers we're trying to build for Crescent Manor and Crescent Ridge at the end of the year."

"Isn't that going to be a waste of time and money? It's been done before and each time, they've failed."

"It hasn't been done by us. White people tossing a handout to a less than fortunate community will always fail. Us taking care of our own, investing time and money in things that they ask for allows them to be seen, heard, and appreciated. There's a very big difference between feeling appreciated and feeling like charity case."

My brother was the humanitarian type. A side of him that my father hated but I had always respected.

When I didn't acknowledge my brother his footfalls signaled he was moving toward me. He stepped into my view, eyes cautious as he stared at me. "You okay?"

His definition and mine varied greatly but I wouldn't bring that to his attention. "I'm fine."

The thick cloud of tension and my anxieties about being home slammed together but I didn't feel like I was slipping...

Yet.

He offered a tight nod. "How long have you been here?"

"Not long. Ten, maybe fifteen minutes."

"In the same spot?" He arched a brow in question.

I smirked. "If I say yes, are you going to ask me if I'm okay again?"

"No, according to the call I got from Christian on the way over, I'm convinced you're just fine."

“I’m the one marrying his sister. What’s he calling you to complain about me for? Any issues he has, he and I can discuss, like men. I thought we already had.”

“You did but after the way you handled the situation at her studio, Christian was worried, Lias. Regardless of the agreement, she’s still his sister and he needs to know that she’s in good hands. That you will take what’s best for *her* into consideration.”

“Isn’t that what I did? That muthafucker was talking to her like she was beneath him and worse, like he had the right to address her that way. He doesn’t.”

Ez remained quiet but the smug ass grin on his face was vocal enough.

“Say it?”

He slipped his hands into the pockets of his suit pants. “Are you sure you’re up for this?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“There’s always a choice...”

As long as you’re prepared to handle the consequences.

When we were younger, Ez and I questioned everything. The demands placed on us were more than we wanted at times and the answer was always the same. There’s always a choice if you’re prepared to handle the consequences. Our father repeated that statement so much it was ingrained in both mine and my brother’s head.

“I’m fully prepared to handle the *consequences* of backing out of this deal, but are you?”

His expression shifted. “I’ll do anything for you, Lias. *Anything* and if marrying Cress is not healthy for you, I’ll find another way.”

Anything.

Years ago anything translated to stepping up to fill the void I left behind when our father needed a protégé.

I laughed arrogantly. “There is no other way. Not without there being more blood on your hands and that’s not who you are.” I turned to him. “I’ll be fine. This is a contract. A business deal. That’s all.”

The lie felt bitter on my tongue because she would be more than that. She had something that called to me and I needed to know why.

“Are you sure?”

I stepped closer to my brother, angling my head to the side. He mirrored the motion shifting his slightly in the opposite direction. “What are you really

asking me, Ezekiel?”

“I’m asking if you can marry Cress and keep your head clear.”

Probably not.

She was already crawling beneath my skin, creating triggers that I didn’t know were possible. This was new and I would have to learn how to navigate Cress Devereaux.

“I’ve already told you I’m fine. My head is clear. It will remain clear.”

I turned to walk away and his voice traveled behind me.

“She’ll have to know. You’re going to have to tell her what she’s dealing with.”

“Don’t worry, Ez. I’ll make sure my wife-to-be knows that she’s marrying a fucking lunatic.”

He didn’t bother arguing that he never believed I was a lunatic, insane, crazy. That had always been my father. Unbalanced, yes. Ez would never deny my afflictions but he didn’t see them as weaknesses the way my father always had. My brother saw *me*. We’d been here before. I accepted who I was. No point in engaging in the same argument that would never change.

* * *

Watching Cress on video and in rehearsals was nothing compared to experiencing her on stage. She was a thing of beauty—rare, exquisite, agile and lithe. Watching her now, I experienced so many emotions and although there were sexual thoughts, the most profound had been appreciation. Regardless of who shared the stage with Cress, she completely owned and dominated every inch of it.

Now watching as she moved around graciously speaking with patrons I felt a sense of pride and surge of jealousy from the way they fawned over her, clearly just as affected as I had been from her performance. The erupting commotion moving about allowed me the ability to remain in the shadows, out of sight until I finally slipped away, leaving her to be embraced and gifted praise and flowers. A show of appreciation. She deserved their adoration. I simply didn’t care to hang around and witness it.

I found her dressing room and stepped inside. The flowers I’d delivered prior to the performance sat on a small table next to a tiny black leather sofa. The space was tidy but lived in. Clothes draped across a metal chair. Wardrobe open with dance attire hanging on hooks and satin hangers. Some

shoved to corners at the bottom. This space was the essence of her. Only minutes after I finished my perusal of her space, the door opened and she fluttered in arms full, cradling roses that had been given. She wore a huge smile on her face as she glanced over her shoulder toward whomever had let her in. The way she cradled the flowers there was no way she would have been able to handle the door herself.

“Hurry and change and we can grab dinner to celebrate. I told you we would kill it tonight and we did.” The male voice which spoke from the hallway was laced with excitement. Her partner no doubt.

“You might want to tell your partner that you already have dinner plans.”

Cress almost leapt backward at the sound of my voice. Her gaze darted around until she located me. A soft gasp fluttered from her sweet little mouth before those plush lips pressed firmly into a flat line. Heat jolted over to where I was standing near the corner of her dressing room. Her disdain for my presence was evident in the way her expression blazed with anger but I found myself looking past my bride-to-be when the door opened wider and a male figure stepped forward, moving with the same practiced grace almost as gracefully as my Cress’s.

My...

“Oh, you already have plans...” There was a smugness to his expression as his eyes fully took me in and bounced between Cress and me.

“She does. You’ll have to take a rain check. I’ve made reservations.”

“Hmmm...” he hummed with one final glance between us. “Rain check it is then. Have fun, kiddos. Cress, I’ll see you tomorrow at rehearsal.”

Thankfully he left before she could argue and that left me alone with my fiancée who wasn’t as enthusiastic as her partner had been about my impromptu pop up in her dressing room. I didn’t allow it to fuck up my plans for the evening.

“You were incredible out there tonight.”

“Thank you.” She softened for all of a beat before her posture was ramrod straight again. She turned her back to me and emptied her arms, placing the four bouquets of roses on the slim counter below the mirrored wall allowing me the visual of her reflection as she glared at me.

“What are you doing here?”

“We have dinner plans.”

She turned to face me, locking her arms over her chest. “I’m aware but I meant here in my dressing room. You shouldn’t be back here. I’m not sure

how you even managed this.”

It then occurred to me how easily I’d gained access. If that were the case, anyone else could do the same. I would make sure that was rectified. But for now my attention was better spent on the fiery, unwelcoming woman who was likely plotting my death in the most painful ways.

“Consider me being here my guarantee that we didn’t have a repeat of last night when you completely ignored the deadline I granted.”

Her face hardened more. “I agreed to dinner.”

“You did, but you also haven’t been the most cooperative when it comes to our situation.”

She huffed irritation and marched to the door, slamming it shut before she turned to face me again, hands on her hips eyes blazing with venom. “You mean our forced marriage, not situation. A situation is a state of circumstances that one finds *oneself* in. What a situation is not is me being strongarmed into a marriage I didn’t ask for, nor do I want.” She was still pissed about the idea of marrying me which had her words delivered confidently and strong but the look in her eyes contradicted that confidence. She was unsure about me.

“Technically it is. The situation being the demand of our union. Get dressed. I called ahead to make sure we won’t have to wait in line but I don’t want to disrespect the owners by abusing the privilege.”

“Where are we going?” She eyed me cautiously taking in my jeans and V-neck. “I only have casual clothes.”

“You hadn’t planned on committing to dinner with me?” I arched a brow and she shrugged.

“You weren’t specific about the details. I assumed you’d make it work.”

I chuckled and glanced around, trying to decide how I would spend my time while she got ready for our date, settling on the tiny leather sofa. I sat uncomfortably almost consuming the entire thing and her expression landed hard on me.

“You can’t stay in here while I get dressed. I need to shower and...”

“That’s a bathroom, correct?”

She frowned harder when I motioned toward the door across the small space that was slightly ajar. I hadn’t looked inside but assumed it would offer enough space for privacy.

“Why can’t you just wait outside?”

“Cress, get dressed. We’re already pressed for time.”

Luckily she complied, snatching up the things she needed before closing herself into the tiny bathroom. Twenty minutes later she was invading my senses again. Freshly showered, dressed in jeans and a wine colored top that was slouching up top, fitted across the waist and forearms, hugging her stomach, and giving a full view of her shapely toned physique. The jeans she wore offered a nice visual of her tight ass and lean legs. Seeing Cress your first thought wouldn't be that she was a dancer. Athlete maybe but her curves contradicted what most believed dancers bodies to be. However, when she moved, even a simple act such as crossing a room, you instantly admired her grace. Soft light steps that carried her with gentle touches.

"You look nice." My gaze roved over every inch of her from head to toe before settling on her face. She was void of the makeup she'd worn during the performance. Although it had been light and natural, now I was experiencing Cress's raw beauty and I was not disappointed in the least. The woman was easily stunning.

Her fingers flexed at her sides. My little dancer was nervous. "Thank you." She turned away from me, shoving clothes into a leather duffle which draped over her shoulder. Once she was done, she collected a small purse and allowed her eyes to circle around the room, pausing on the massive display of black and red parrot tulips that sat in the corner. The ones I had gifted her.

"Perfect Pick."

"You know their work?"

She nodded, mindlessly smiling at the arrangement. "They're very expensive and rare but that's their thing." Those expressive eyes ended up on me as if questioning if I had been the one to gift the rare beauties.

"You like them?"

"They're beautiful," she rattled off without thought but her eyes darted my way again, her expression schooled as if in the moment she considered she was enjoying a gift from me.

I chuckled, moving closer. She tensed as I reached for her duffle, sliding it from her arm. "You want to change your mind about how beautiful they are, now that you know they're from me?"

"No." She tripped over the word and I smiled, motioning to the door, placing a hand at the small of her back.

"Let's go."

The drive to our destination was uneventful. Cress spent the time on her phone which I didn't mind so much because I spent most of my time tortured

by every breath I inhaled being a potent mix of her. By the time my driver pulled up to the side of Redmond's I was grateful to step out into the night air to fill my lungs with a cleansing breath that didn't test my restraint.

After retrieving Cress from the rear passenger side, I gave instructions to the driver to remain close and placed a hand at the small of her back, feeling her body stiffen from the contact. We bypassed the line and were greeted with a frown from the way we'd cut off the flow of traffic.

"Line's back there."

"Truce is holding a table. Can you get her for me?"

She smiled but didn't give an inch. "There's a full house tonight and we don't hold tables. It's first come first serve, seat yourself but, the line starts back there."

I felt Cress beside me, beaming. I could only assume my less than warm welcome had her believing this dinner wouldn't happen. Unfortunately she was wrong.

"Elias, hey. Have you ordered yet?" Truce hurried to us, brows pinched but wearing a smile once she reached the register.

"Not yet, just walked in the door."

"Oh okay, perfect timing. Your table's back there. The one in the corner. Sorry, it's the best I can do. We're swamped tonight."

"You're always swamped."

Her smile expanded. "True. Sorry to run, but if you need anything..."

"Handle your business. We're good."

Her eyes darted between me and Cress before she nodded and was on the move again. I turned to the woman at the register who didn't seem pleased but she begrudgingly took our order, handed over a number, and moved on to the next customer.

We made it to our table. Cress sat directly across from me perfectly still, hands folded in her lap, eyes fixated on me but not saying a word. After a long moment she eventually lifted a dark brow while she regarded me under slightly curled lashes.

She wanted to figure me out but she never would. I rarely ever exposed myself to anyone. I wouldn't with Cress.

"Shouldn't we be talking." Her chin tipped in defiance.

"Ladies first."

"Bullshit."

I chuckled, allowing my fingers to flex where they rested on the table.

“You questioning my manners, Cress?”

“I’m questioning you treating me as a lady. So far I’ve been handled like a possession that you and my brother feel you have the right to negotiate with.”

“You’re neither.”

“Then what am I to you, Elias?”

“My future wife.”

“This is an obligation, not a choice.”

“For you maybe. It’s my choice to make you an Omari. No one is forcing my hand. If that were the case, your sister would be sitting here right now. Not you.”

As I expected she didn’t give in to the weight of my confession. Yes, this was an obligation but not one I was conflicted about.

“I need to know what you expect of me. From this...”

“I expect you to be my wife. To find a middle ground so you and I can make this work.”

She shook her head. “That’s not what I mean.”

“Then you’ll have to clarify.”

“What are your expectations for *me* as your *wife*? Do you have any or is this just for show?”

I regarded her closely for a moment. The tension in her shoulder, the slant of her eyes, and the way the corners of her mouth tugged down into a slight frown.

“I never imagined that if I chose to marry it would be like this. I also never imagined falling in love with a woman to the point of feeling as if I couldn’t live without her. No, I don’t have expectations for you as my wife because to be quite honest, there had never been a plan for me to have one but I can adjust.”

“Adjust,” she mumbled.

“Cress, I’m not wrapped up in some fantasy that we’ll live some magical happily ever after. However I am a man who values the importance of trust, loyalty, and respect. As long as you can commit to giving me those three things, then we’ll figure out the rest as we go.”

“That’s too broad and vague.”

“Then tell me your expectations and I’ll let you know if I agree or disagree.”

“My career is important to me.”

“Understood. I have no plans on fucking with your career...” She narrowed her eyes and I smirked. She no doubt was questioning my behavior earlier. I had seen Shilo backstage. His pale skin was already showing purple bruises from landing face first when I’d jerked him from the stage and he wore a mock turtleneck that likely covered the print from my hand.

“I won’t apologize for earlier. He deserved exactly what he got. Consider him lucky to have been there tonight. I could have cracked every bone in his face and not given it a second thought. But I am sorry that it had to happen there in front of everyone. I’m well aware that may complicate your relationship with the other dancers.”

“I don’t want anyone thinking my position is because of who I am.”

“Do you really believe that could ever be the case?”

When she didn’t respond right away, I said with certainty. “You are an amazing talent, Cress. Not one of those dancers who took the stage, with, before, or after you can compare. They know why you are a principal dancer.”

Slowly, ever so fucking slowly, she offered me a smile. “You know what a principal dancer is?”

I chuckled.

She was goading me by demanding that I admit I knew more about her than I should which would mean I had done some digging.

“I was curious. I did some research.”

“Oh...” was all I got.

“What else?”

Her eyes lifted and fastened with mine—a display of questions, so I clarified. “What other expectations do you have...”

Before she could answer, her brown orbs moved past me seconds before our food arrived. A plate was placed between both of us along with a large lemonade. I thanked the server and we said a quick blessing before diving in. Cress moaned through several bites of her croquettes followed by a forkful of grits and sautéed spinach before she shifted her attention back to me.

“I shouldn’t be eating this heavy, but I’m going to thoroughly enjoy every bite.”

“As you should.” I forked a bit of smothered chicken into my mouth and Cress swallowed another mouthful of food, taking down some of her lemonade then she shifted back to our conversation.

“I want trust, loyalty, and respect too.” Her determined eyes leveled with

mine and I nodded.

“You’ll have that.”

“Respect as your *equal*?”

I lifted my napkin and brushed it over my mouth. “If you prove you can handle being my equal, yes.”

She frowned. “And what do you mean by handle?”

“Our worlds are not simple. Family obligations create complications that wouldn’t otherwise exist. I’m also not an easy man. If you’re willing to accept that both may test you then you can handle being my equal.”

There was so much more she would have to understand about me to truly know what that meant but in time I would give her the dark and twisted details.

“I can agree to that.”

“Anything else...”

She hadn’t broached the topic of sex and I could sense from the way her eyes now refused to meet mine that the thought was circling her mind so I coaxed her a little.

“Say it. Whatever’s on your mind is relevant if it concerns us making this marriage work, Cress.”

“The women you sleep with...” She hesitated until her eyes met mine. “They will have to understand discretion. It’s important that our marriage is believable and considering the history...”

I killed your brother and he killed mine...

“We can’t risk any doubt.”

“I agree, but what makes you think I plan on sleeping with other women?” I stared at her, watching as she shifted in her seat with the unease of what lingered behind my question.

“Why wouldn’t you?” She frowned tilting her head to the side.

“You don’t plan on having sex with me?”

She choked on the reality of my words.

“Is that what *you* expect?”

I chuckled. “I have no plans on forcing you into my bed ever but I would expect that at some point, once you truly get to know me, that you will end up there willingly. Had you planned on sleeping with other men?”

Not fucking happening. But I was curious to know her answer.

“I...well...it hadn’t really crossed my mind until now. If I need to, I will.”

“You will never *need* to sleep with anyone outside of our marriage. That’s not the same as you choosing to.”

“And if I did...”

You won’t.

But I wouldn’t tell her that just yet. It would become blatantly clear over time.

“This doesn’t have to be complicated or stressful. You don’t have to hold resentment for me or the arrangement. I want us to find a middle ground so we can both be happy. The only way that happens is if we both agree to be honest about your needs.”

“I’m willing.”

“Good, so am I.”

She smiled and visibly relaxed but only for a second after her brows pinched again. “Oh and I also want to make sure you know I’ll continue living at my apartment in the city.”

“No.”

Definitely not fucking happening.

“What do you mean no?”

“What married couple do you know who live in separate spaces?”

“My place is in the city near the theater. No one will give it much thought. They will naturally assume it’s a matter of convenience.”

“Possibly but my wife will sleep under the same roof as me.”

“And where would that be?” She squared her shoulders.

“My family estate. It’s large enough to accommodate. Ez and his wife live there as well but we will have plenty of privacy. You can have your own suite, separate from mine unless you want to share...”

“And you’re just making that decision? What if I’m not comfortable living in your family’s home?”

“Give me a good reason why you wouldn’t be and we can negotiate.”

“Someone in your family or someone your family hired murdered my brother. That’s good enough reason for me to feel uncomfortable living in your house?” Her eyes accused me. She knew I was the one who’d killed Cole even if she didn’t have the proof but what did it matter. A sin for a sin. He was the one who killed Lucas.

So here we are.

“As my wife, no one and I do mean no one will ever lay a harmful finger on you, Cress. You have nothing to fear from my family. You need to make

peace with that or this marriage will not work.”

“And what about you? You’ll protect me from the world, who will protect me from you?”

And me from you...

“I will never cause you physical harm. You have my word. This is where we have to rely on trust, loyalty, and respect. Trust that you can depend on me to be your protector, loyalty to each other, and respect for the vows we take. Like I said, without those three things we won’t survive.”

My gaze was stern and unwavering. She didn’t have to fear me, ever. But as for her emotional wellbeing, that was a promise I didn’t make. So I wouldn’t.

“Trust, loyalty, and respect,” she said with conviction but her eyes didn’t hold that same confidence. Truthfully, I couldn’t blame her.

EIGHT

eress

“ELIAS OMARI?”

“Yes.”

“*This* Elias Omari?”

She held up her phone and I scooted forward on the sofa to get a better look at her phone. Once verifying the person on her screen was my future husband I nodded and she sat back, swiping her phone.

“Does he still look like this?” She lifted the device into view for me once more and I was blessed with a photo of Elias shirtless on screen sitting next to his brother. Both men had their legs submerged into the pool. Collier Braxton was below Ezekiel inside the aqua blue water with her arms draped over Ezekiel’s thigh. He wasn’t focused on her and was instead looking at Elias. Both men had expansive smiles on their faces, caught in the moment unguarded. I remember that day. We were all in college, home celebrating the 4th of July our senior year. There was a cookout and pool party at Clea Sims’s house. Elias hardly ever spent time with the rest of us but that day he was there.

“Let me see...”

I lifted, careful not to spill my wine while I reached for Trini’s phone. Once I sank back into my spot I placed the device on the arm of the sofa and swiped through the photos which were posted on Clea’s Instagram page. They were from almost ten years ago but Elias still looked the same. He had more weight on his body than he did back then. But the same beard, low cut waves, and insanely beautiful face.

“Well...”

“Yes, the same but different.”

“What does that even mean?” She snatched her phone back, slumping in

the armchair that matched the sofa I was on and tossing her legs over the side so her feet dangled near the arm of the corner I was in.

“He’s older now. His face is more mature and he has more tattoos. They’re everywhere.”

“Everywhere?” She lifted a brow and a smirk curved her lips. “You’ve seen him naked?”

“No, perv. They’re on his arms, hands, and neck. I can only assume they cover all of him.”

“You don’t have to assume shit. If you’re supposed to marry the man, then you have the right to sample the goods before you say I do and clearly you’re not a virgin so you’re not holding out until marriage. The threesome we had senior year confirms you’ve already popped that cherry so what’s the problem.”

“I have no idea why I’m friends with you.”

She laughed, rolling her eyes. “Because no one understands you better than I do. Now answer the question. Why haven’t you fucked yet?”

Because I haven’t seen him in a week.

Wait no.

Because I have no plans on sleeping with him. No matter how fine he is and shit was he fine.

“The marriage is Christian’s thing. It’s not like we met, fell in love, and decided on a happily ever after.”

“So what. Have you seen him? I’d fuck the shit out of this Elias and the new and improved one.” She paused and narrowed her eyes. “Unless you’re lying and he’s no longer fuckable.”

“He’s fuckable.”

“Then make this make sense for me.”

“This is a lot. You of all people should understand why?”

Trini’s expression softened a little. She was about the only person who would understand. Her family wasn’t mine but they were similar when it came to old money and arranged unions. Although the man she married strictly served the purpose of a financial power move between two families with the intent of keeping old money in house, she still was well aware of what it felt like to have your life planned out for you.

“I do but your family is a lot which means in disjointed ways, you have to expect this. Although if I’m being honest, I never thought it would be you. Jona yeah, but not you. You’ve always been absent from stuff like this. She’s

always been right in the middle of it.”

I exhaled a shit. “It was supposed to be her?”

“What do you mean?”

“Christian didn’t ask me. He never would have...”

“I’m lost.”

“He made the deal with Jona, not me.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“Elias is the problem. He said Jona has nothing to offer. That she’s young, barely lived and if anyone was going to take a marriage between our families seriously it had to be me, not her.”

“He’s not wrong.”

I shot her an evil glare and she grinned, shrugging. “I’m a real friend, Cress. Not a yes man. When you’re wrong, I tell you you’re wrong. When you’re out of line, I choke you. When you refuse to accept the truth, I force feed it to you. That’s why we work. And again, he’s not wrong. You’re the better option.”

“Jona lives for this shit, I don’t.”

“Which only further proves the point. You’re the better choice. She’ll do whatever Chris tells her to. You, not so much. If I know that, other people do too.”

She was right.

“Do you feel cheated...”

“Sometimes yes but it’s not all bad. You learn to be happy, to make the best of a complicated situation.”

“Do you love him?”

“It’s been six years so yeah, I do.”

Trini married a year after we graduated college. I had a Bachelor of Fine Arts while she had a degree in business that she would never use. Her husband preferred she not work so she spent her time shopping, traveling, and donating to charities.

“It’s been six years so, yeah I do? That sounds promising,” I questioned and she rolled her eyes again.

“We’re good together. I don’t know if I’m head over heels in love with him, but I do love him and I’m happy. We work. Different people aspire to achieve different things. He’s my consistency and I appreciate that about him.”

He was a good guy and he truly adored Trini.

But I wanted more than that. I hadn't put much thought into falling in love and who I would marry but I did know I wanted it to be something deep, meaningful, and passionate. Something that moved me as much as my love for dance.

"I'm glad you're happy."

Trini threw her head back and laughed. "Bitch I've been married for six years. If you had concerns you were supposed to bring them to the table before I said I do. Not six years later."

I grinned and shot her a bird. She checked the time on her phone and stood, slipping her feet back into her heels.

"You're leaving?"

"Yes, I have plans with my husband and before you ask, no, I don't plan on going home to fuck him."

"Why would I ask if you planned on going home to fuck your husband?"

"You wouldn't but it leaves me open to say that I will if you don't mind me thinking about yours while I do it."

I belted out a laugh and she snatched my wine glass, taking down what was left of the rich blend since hers was already empty.

"Thanks for dinner, love. Spa date soon my treat. I'm glad you're finally in your offseason. I hate your in-season schedule. All you do is...*dance* and train to dance."

I grinned. "Which makes sense considering that is my career of choice."

"Point made." I lifted and followed her to the door, pausing after I opened it.

"And you didn't bother showing up for my final show which I don't appreciate."

"I would have been there if I hadn't been..."

"Fucking your husband?" I smiled smugly and she rolled her eyes.

"No, hosting dinner for his parents. I like them, but I love you so trust me, I was torn." She winked and I hesitated again.

"What page did you say those pictures were on?"

"Clea's. Elias doesn't have a personal one neither does Ez but I'm sure you already know that." She winked at me.

I did. I'd looked and came up empty. Leave it to Trini to do a deep dive and find old photos. Photos I planned on looking at as soon as she was gone.

"Love you, bitch." She blew me a kiss.

I blew her one back. "Love you more."

I locked up after Trini and made my way back to the living room, collecting our empty wine glasses and the bottle we'd shared. I seriously considered opening another but decided against it. Offseason didn't mean going crazy. I could splurge a little more because my schedule wasn't as rigorous, but I did still train several hours a day and worked out to stay in shape which meant limiting certain foods and alcohol.

By the time I had everything put away someone was at my door, knocking like they didn't have any sense. I walked to it and pressed the monitor trying to decide who the hell I was about to curse out when I realized it was Jona. As soon as I had the door open, she bulldozed past me without a greeting or acknowledgment which only further pissed me off.

Shutting the door and keeping my back to her, I closed my eyes and said a silent prayer. I loved my sister but at times she was a handful. Based on her entrance, tonight was going to be one of those times. As soon as I turned to face her. She got started.

“Do you really hate me that much?”

“I don't hate you at all, Jona.”

“Then why are you the one marrying Elias and not me?”

Is she really angry with me?

“That's why you came tearing in here like I'm personally trying to sabotage your life?”

“You are?”

“No, actually I'm not.” I walked past her, heading toward my bedroom. She was on my heels, stopping in the door while I lifted my phone from the charger and flopped on my platform bed. It sat low to the ground, barely a foot off the floor and I loved the cozy, crafty feel that it added to my place. It also helped when I needed to roll in and out of bed after over exerting my body. My mattress was expensive and perfect but I didn't need it sitting four feet off the ground.

“You're marrying him. It was supposed to be me.”

“Not my decision. Talk to Christian.”

“I did.”

“And what did he say?”

She tensed her face but didn't respond which let me know Christian had been honest about the reason I was the one with a future husband and not our baby sister.

“The fact that you're not talking right now lets me know that you're

already aware that this is not what I wanted.”

“But you’re doing it.”

“Do I have a choice, Jona? Because if I do, then please by all means, present the alternative and I’ll gladly step away from this.”

“Fine, give me his number and I’ll talk to him. It won’t take much to convince him I’m the one he needs to marry, not you.”

I rolled my eyes and eased back against the stack of pillows that made up for my lack of headboard. My bed was flush against the exposed brick wall in my bedroom. The set I purchased only came with two low sitting nightstands and no headboard which pretty much offered a minimalist vibe.

“Convince him how, Jona.”

“I have my ways...”

The hint of lust in her voice alluded to one of those ways. “Sleeping with him won’t change his mind about who he wants to marry.”

I didn’t know that for sure, but I was fairly certain.

“That’s not what I meant.” I narrowed my eyes and she shrugged.

“Okay, that wasn’t the *only* negotiation tactic I planned on using. You don’t know anything about the family business. You never wanted anything to do with it. This marriage is all business. I’m the better choice.”

“He didn’t think so. It was his decision. Not mine or Christian’s. *His.*”

She was annoyed. I could see it in her eyes.

“Everything is so easy for you. You get everything you want. Even the things you *don’t* want.”

An arranged marriage. Certainly didn’t want that.

“Why are you upset with me? You shouldn’t want this either. It’s fucking insane, Jona. Why would *anyone* want this life, least of all you. You’re young. You can do what you want. Maybe think about that.”

“This is what I want. This is what I’m good at. You have your career, what else do I have?”

“Anything you want. Why don’t you get that?”

The look on her face expressed exactly why. She didn’t feel like she deserved to be happy. One mistake set her life in motion down a path that wasn’t meant for her. That no one should want.

“Jona, come here.”

She lifted her chin defiantly, but her eyes expressed that she was breaking.

“Jona...” My voice softened and she gave in. She moved away from the

door, kicked off her shoes, and crawled toward me. I opened my arms and she sank into my body, resting her head in my lap after a few minutes. My fingers raked through her hair and we remained silent for what felt like an eternity before I leaned over and kissed her cheek. My sweet baby sister. This was how I remembered her. This was how I wanted our bond to be. Me protecting her from the dirtiness of the world.

“You don’t have anything to prove. Not to Christian or our father. I need you to believe that.”

“I made a mistake and they will never forget.”

Half true. Our father had forgotten because his brain was no longer functioning the way it should. Christian remembered, but didn’t blame Jona. He understood bad choices. He was married to a very bad choice.

“One mistake and nobody’s perfect. We all have flaws.”

“You don’t, at least not to Daddy and Christian. They hate what I did...”

And they hate me...

Those unspoken words hung silently at the end of her sentence but she was wrong. So very wrong.

“Hey, look at me...” She turned so her face was angled up toward me. Mine leveled over hers. “The rules are different for us. They always have been. Our lives are always subject to harsh judgment and speculation. Appearances matter to *them*. We’re not offered the grace that others are allowed so at times what seems like an irreconcilable mistake is nothing more than life lessons and growing pains.”

“But Daddy was so angry. We were never the same after that.”

No, they weren’t.

“Regardless. It doesn’t mean that you have to spend the rest of your life trying to prove that you’re worthy of his love, Jona and I know that’s why you agreed. Why you wanted this.”

She looked away and I exhaled a sigh. “Do you really want to be someone’s wife right now? You have your entire life ahead of you.”

She shrugged. “I don’t know what I want.”

“Which is fine too. You have time to figure it out though. Is that such a terrible thing?”

She huffed and sat up, raking her fingers through her hair which she mindlessly tucked behind her ear.

“No, it’s not.” Her expression leveled. “But what about you? Do you want to be someone’s wife?”

No.

Maybe.

Hell, I don't know.

"What I want doesn't matter. This is happening and I'll do what I have to do."

She grinned and moved to the side of my bed, struggling to stand. "You sound a lot like me when you called trying to talk me out of doing the exact thing you're about to do."

I did. Point made.

"I'm a Devereaux. We do what we must for family."

"Yep. And I think what I'm about to do is spend a few months traveling abroad."

My mouth fell open. "You're leaving."

"Didn't you just tell me to live my life?"

Well shit.

"Yes, I did but I figured you'd live your life here with me. Who's going to help me plan this wedding?"

"We do have a mother, Cress..."

I issued a pointed look that she shrugged off.

Our mother was...

Our mother.

Pretentious, overbearing, kind when it benefited her needs and very much a woman with a selfish agenda.

"Okay fine, maybe not her but you can hire someone. Your fiancé is loaded. And you'll have Trini. She loves shit like this. If you drop this in her lap you will have the social event of the year." I hated the snarky smile that crossed her face. "And you can send me details."

"Do you plan on at least showing up for the wedding?"

"Do you want me to?"

"Yes."

"Fine, I'll make sure I'm here. I'm about to head out. I've got some travel plans to make. Maybe Thailand first. Oh wait, no, I think I want to go to Dubai. There's a really nice hotel and spa Chloe was telling me about."

Maybe this wasn't such a good idea.

"Jona, you probably shouldn't be traveling alone."

She rolled her eyes. "I'll be at six star hotels being pampered and catered to. I'll be fine. Trust me."

“Right but when you tell Christian don’t tell him it was my idea.”

“I’ll think about it.” She grinned as she slipped her feet back into her Hermes sandals before stopping at the door. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Reminding me that I matter.”

A few seconds after she left my room, I called her name. Something occurred to me and she might have the answers.

“Jona...”

“Yeah...” She was back, standing in my doorway.

“You remember when you said I didn’t know who Cole was?”

“Yes.”

“What did you mean?”

She frowned and folded her arms over her body. “I heard Chris and Dad talking that night...”

She was just a kid back then. Well sort of. She was just starting her senior year of high school and about to turn eighteen.

“And...”

“Dad kept saying he knew this was going to happen, that Cole had been begging for it for years.”

“How?”

“Did you know that Cole went to rehab years before the thing with Lucas Omari?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“It was the summer you were on tour with Las Scala.”

Summer before my junior year of college. I was gone the entire summer.

“Oh, I didn’t know. No one told me.”

“You never call much when you’re on tour.”

Ouch.

“No, I don’t.”

She frowned. “They fought a lot. Dad, Christian, and Cole. It got really bad sometimes. They accused Cole of doing a lot of things. Stealing, antagonizing people over business, a bunch of other stuff. I don’t think he ever got better even after he went to rehab. He was high that night. The night Ezekiel and Elias’s brother was killed.”

“How do you know that?”

“I heard them talking about it. You weren’t here....”

I had been in Europe, flew home for the funeral and caught the next flight

out two days later. I asked questions, no one ever answered them. They just changed the subject. And when I returned, the rumors were circulating about Elias being the one that killed my brother. He'd never been questioned by the police but I wasn't surprised. Much like our father, theirs had the ability to pull strings. I was guessing the same reason Elias had never been questioned was the same reason the cops never questioned Cole about what happened that night at the club. He killed Lucas Omari in a crowded club and not once had they looked into him.

"I never knew any of that," I said quietly.

"You never wanted to know."

She was right.

"I guess I didn't."

"I'll call you when I figure out where I'm going."

"Okay. I love you, Jona. I hope you never forget that."

"I won't if you won't."

She smiled then was gone and I was left wondering if I ever truly knew Cole and that had me wondering if me marrying a man just like my father would mean one day history might repeat itself.

NINE

elias

“GOVERNOR JAMES, what a surprise seeing you here.”

And based on the look we were receiving Samson was as surprised as James about seeing us here. Christian grabbed a chair from the nearest table and dragged it between the two massive armchairs where Samson Duke and Governor Holland James were seated facing each other.

“Christian,” James stated firmly with his eyes moving from Christian to me. He squinted slightly as if trying to be sure that it was truly me but the once recognition settled, confusion laced his expression followed by concern. “Elias Omari. Haven’t seen you in years.”

I didn’t bother granting James with a reply and instead listened to Christian’s less than favorable greeting to Samson.

“Duke. It’s been awhile and I have to say I’m a little disappointed that you’re here in Crescent Falls and didn’t reach out. I would have comped a suite at one of my family’s properties.”

Samson coolly leaned back, lifting the lit cigar he had pinched between his fingers, inhaling several long pulls while he offered an easy glance at both me and Christian. I elected to remain standing. Situations like this made me cagey. Me *cagey* didn’t always end well.

“I’m perfectly capable of handling my own accommodations. It wasn’t necessary for me to hit you up.”

I chuckled arrogantly as he glared at Christian, no doubt trying to piece together how we’d ended up here. The world was large, however information was always accessible. Those of us that held weight kept tabs on the other key players. Samson had been labeled as a problem. He was stepping outside of the parameters in which he was allowed to do business. Being here in Crescent Falls was more than enough proof that he had no plans to pull back

after being warned multiple times.

The divide between the Omaris and the Devereauxs had weakened the lines of communication and offered people like Samson who were ruled by greed a way to satisfy his ego and line his pockets. With our families at odds a line of divide had been drawn in the sand years ago and over the years, things had only gotten worse. Opposition that usually leaned in favor of our families unified decisions had begun to choose sides. Business and politics were weakened from the divide. Christian had half the support while Ez encompassed the rest. That wasn't necessarily an issue with most things. Our families could operate independent of one another but men like Samson used the lack of unity to his advantage. Which was why he was here right now. It didn't take long for Ez to bring me up to speed on the most current issue we were faced with. Losing control of the governor. James was entering the last year of his second term. A new elect would have to take his place. One that we could bend and manipulate however required by our pending needs. Samson wanted a governor in his pocket. *Our* governor because that gave him access and partial control over the Southern states.

No limit on the number of drugs and guns he wanted to release into the streets and no prosecution for the women he loved to traffic.

"When you're playing in our backyard it's always necessary to extend the courtesy of announcing your presence. Especially when your plans are to play dirty."

James's eyes darted nervously between the exchange happening with Christian and Samson who spoke with a smug grin in place.

"I have no idea what you're talking about, Christian. I'm simply catching up with an old friend. Isn't that right, James?"

Our very nervous governor flinched. "Look I don't know what's going on here but maybe I should go and let you three work out whatever this is."

It was my turn to speak up.

"How is that going to solve anything when you're the center of what's going on here?" My comment was directed at James whose face easily expressed his guilt but he stuck to the lie.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." His voice remained stern.

I chuckled lightly, lowering my chin when I addressed him this time. "How much is he offering you?"

"Off...offering...me?" James's voice elevated at the end. A sign of guilt.

"A couple million. Ten, maybe fifteen? Am I close?" I continued.

Samson's face went blank. James's expression gave me the answer I was seeking.

"Sounds like a good deal but let me break that shit down for you. The only thing he can guarantee you is some upfront cash and for that money he's promising, Samson is buying his ability to take control of your territories which means flooding the state with his drugs and women. You see, that's all he has to offer and the fact that you're entertaining his *offer* lets me know just how stupid you really are."

Christian chimed in. "What Elias means is that Samson doesn't have the reach that we do. The only business he can bring is of that of less than savory kind. The kind that runs the risk of life sentences and an increase in your murder rates across the state."

James was somewhat a smart man contrary to his stupid decision to be here right now making back door deals so his posture corrected and his eyes moved from Samson to Christian.

"And what can you offer because to my understanding this is the first time in years that two members of your families have been in the same room together without bloodshed. Things aren't what they used to be. I have to look out for myself. My future and the futures of my family have to be a priority."

"By family you mean your son-in-law attorney Walter Fisher who's chasing a senate seat with the hopes of a presidency?" I questioned.

James blanched with recognition.

"What does he have to do with this?"

"Everything apparently. That's what Samson's promising you, right? Not just the money but also backing your son-in-law to take your spot when your final term ends. I'm sure he even tossed in continued support for a senate seat to follow."

Christian smiled arrogantly and cut his eyes at me, no doubt impressed that I knew what I was talking about. I chose not to be connected to the inner workings of my family. Me walking away had nothing to do with me not understanding how things worked. The game never changed, only the players, and James was now playing with the intent of setting up his son-in-law to appease his daughter by helping with Fisher's political aspirations.

I could only respect the dedication but trying to do so with a snake like Samson was a stupid move that would cost him a price he wasn't willing to pay. Not that either Christian or I gave a shit about James or his family's

political ambitions but having the governor in our pocket assisted in keeping control of the power shifts for businesses in the southern states, which we cared immensely about. Both legal and illegal dealings.

Our influence extended far beyond Crescent Falls or even our state. The controlling families made shit happen in politics and business. We were a united network of voices and prestige that was often underestimated and undervalued until we amassed an upset in politics in one direction or the other. Always unexpected but necessary. Samson understood on a small scale how things worked. James did not. He was only offered enough to keep him under control. As of right now, he was allowing greed and selfish ambitions to fuck with the bigger plan. In his defense, he had no clue how important his role as governor truly was in the grand scheme of things. That was by design. The more you know, the more you control.

“He can’t guarantee Fisher wins this next election. Money is only half the battle. The prospect of business and growth is far more important. To get the votes, the people have to believe you have their best interest at heart. We ensure that happens. We keep things balanced. Samson doesn’t have the ability to do what we can do, which means trusting him and his money isn’t a guarantee.”

“Maybe it is, when considering your families are no longer united? Can you make promises about what you used to bring to the table?”

Samson spoke and he had James’s attention because he followed his question of uncertainty about us delivering with his own thoughts.

“He has a point. I’m surprised you’re here today, *together*. Things are no longer like they used to be. Individually you’ve been satisfying your families personal agendas making you no different than anyone else who has a vested interest in the game. Support is torn between the two families which means it could go either way. Has this been up north or out west where there’s still a mutual harmony amongst the key players I might be concerned. With the two of you, I’m not. If I’m going to gamble I might as well place my money on a sure thing,” James stated bluntly.

“And you think it’s this muthafucker?” I drilled out through a cocky laugh tossing my chin to Samson.

James shrugged noncommittally “He’s putting money up. That’s a sure thing.”

“What you can count on is the amount of drugs flooding the streets increasing and the numbers of missing women. You’d be setting Fisher up to

fail and trust me, he will fail. Samson talks a good game. He's quite convincing actually but he doesn't know shit about politics. What he cares about is having you in his pocket so that when he brings his bullshit to our state and traffic on our highways you and Fisher, if he gains the votes, will be forced to turn a blind eye. There's no balance when it comes to greed with no understanding." Christian spoke with an assertive confidence that couldn't be ignored.

"Like you're much different." Samson smirked at Christian. "If I'm not mistaken, you have several businesses that house women who use their bodies to collect a check."

The Devereauxs had high-end escort services that doubled as pussy for sale. Everyone knew. What I didn't know was if Christian felt the same about those businesses as his father once did. Jonathan Devereaux didn't mind crossing boundaries. Our father did and women were a hard pass for him.

Christian's eyes narrowed. "*We* are not the same. The women who we employ are all of age, work with consensually, and are fairly compensated. You kidnap young girls and women and prostitute them out to men who abuse and exploit them mentally and physically. You and I are not in the same class."

Samson smirked arrogantly. "Tomato, *tomato*."

"I don't know anything about that. And I don't *want* to know," James said, dismissing the conversation between Christian and Samson before turning to me. "This is the first time in years that your families have agreed on anything. Am I supposed to trust the two of you won't end up killing each other like your brothers did?"

Rage blazed in my belly but I fought hard to keep it at bay. Christian spoke before I could.

"We've settled our differences. You need not be concerned about the past."

"That's just words and empty promises, James. Words don't mean shit but my money can keep your pockets full." Samson smiled cockily like he had just won the war. Battle maybe but not the war. I was bored with the situation and needed to end this.

"A marriage between our families is proof enough that the past is the past."

"A marriage?" James looked at me then Christian.

"Cress Devereaux and I will be married before the end of the month. If

our past were an issue that wouldn't be happening."

Samson laughed bitterly. "Bullshit. You don't think me and everyone else can see right through that. This is part of the game. You can trust that shit if you want but you'll get fucked in the end. My offer still stands and it would be smart of you to tell both of them to fuck off so that we can close this deal."

James was torn. I could see his mind assessing the odds in his head. "You said that if you're going to gamble might as well put your money on a sure thing, right? That's us. What we can promise you, he cannot," Christian said with an unwavering assuredness.

"Which is?"

"All he can offer is money. That means Fisher still has to go door to door, begging for votes. If we back him, we bring the people and the money to him. Our reach expands beyond the state levels. You should know that considering we guaranteed you two terms and delivered. We land Fisher right where his ambitions are focused—The White House." My eyes remained trained on James until Christian followed me up.

"Look, I wasn't thrilled about any of this but a marriage to Elias is what my sister wants. I love her enough to stay out of the way, but in doing so, my interests are no longer singular. They can't be. Both our families are committed to moving beyond the mistakes made in the past." Christian stood, adjusting his suit jacket. "But the decision is yours to make, James. Whether or not you want to trust what we're telling you or trust the man whose only intention is buying you. Ball's in your court. I suggest you choose wisely who your star players are going to be."

He cut his eyes toward Samson ever so confidently and walked away without another word. I fell in step with him as we left Slow Burn.

Once we reached our vehicles Christian looked my way, carefully assessing me before he murmured, "Never underestimate your opposition."

I chuckled with understanding. He wasn't speaking of Samson or James. I was his opposition. "I know what the fuck I'm doing."

"Looks that way. I hope that's not just with business."

He was questioning how I would handle the marriage to Cress.

"I gave you my word that you didn't have to worry about her. That hasn't changed."

"You did, but I'm still not entirely sure I can trust your word, Elias."

"Feeling's mutual."

Christian's jaw clenched. "My sister is far more important and valuable

than any of this shit. I have more to lose by trusting you than you have by trusting me.”

He had a point.

Ez would always be okay. He was clever, resilient, and a man which meant he had less to be concerned with. My family wasn't necessarily at risk of losing anything but our standings and possibly a little money, but still I played my hand.

“Your brother killed mine because he couldn't choose between shoving coke up his nose and his loyalty to your family. If anyone should be concerned about trust, it's me. History will not repeat itself if I have a say in the matter. As for Cress, she's safe with me but don't think for one minute that I won't destroy you if you cross me or Ez.”

“Even at the risk of her hating you?” he questioned just as I lifted my helmet from my bike.

“If it comes to that her feelings will no longer be relevant.”

“I'm not your enemy, Elias, and I never intend to be.”

“Good because not even God himself could prevent the wrath I'll rain down on you if you do.”

I tossed my leg over my bike, yanked my helmet down on my head, and started the engine. It had been a week since I had last seen or talked to Cress. After checking in with Ez she would be my first stop.

* * *

When I walked into the house, I caught Ez just as his foot met the last step allowing him to enter the foyer. He glanced at me, taking in my black leather jacket and the gloves I yanked from my hands and shoved into my pockets.

“I can't believe you drove that thing nine hours. You could have put your bike on the jet with the rest of your things.”

I shrugged. “Long rides are the best. You should try it.”

“Or not. I'm perfectly fine with my weekend drives up the mountain, in town.” I smirked, bypassing him en route to the living room. Ez poured himself a drink and handed me a bottle of water which I accepted and sank into the sofa facing the fireplace. He settled on the arm at the opposite end from where I was sitting.

“How did it go?”

“Better than to be expected. I’m sure James will be calling to beg for forgiveness and to accept our offer if he hasn’t reached out to Christian already.”

“He hasn’t. I just got off the phone with Christian.” He lifted the glass of cognac and drained a few sips. “I can’t believe James believes Fisher will make it to the White House. Senate maybe, if he proves worthy but no fucking way are we supporting a run for the White House.”

“I don’t think he believes it either.”

“If he does, he’s a goddamn idiot.”

“He’s a fucking idiot for negotiating with Samson.”

Ez slanted a stare in my direction. “How did that go? You being in the middle of things?”

“It was fine but I haven’t changed my mind. The only reason I agreed to stand in for you today is to present the idea of my marriage to Cress. I have no plans on being hands on with the business side of things. I’ve done my part.”

“Not even family business?”

“Our dealing I have no issue with. That’s different.”

My brother’s jaw flexed. He wanted me in all aspects of things. I had no interest in taking on that role.

“Today yes you did your part, but you haven’t stepped into the most important role yet. You have to actually marry her.”

“I will.”

He nodded sharply. “Do you want me to invite *her*?”

Our mother.

His eyes narrowed on me, searching, gauging. I gave the least complicated response. “That’s up to you.”

“It’s your wedding, Lias. The decision is yours.”

“She’s not just my mother, she’s yours too. If I decide I don’t want her here and you agree she’s going to be more pissed with you than me. She has no expectations for me. She doesn’t fucking care about what I do.”

“That’s not true...” I turned my head toward him and added. “Her decision was no different than mine. You didn’t give us much of a choice with keeping you in our lives, Lias.”

“He blamed me for what happened to Lucas.”

“Yes, but she didn’t.”

“Might as well have. She didn’t open her damn mouth in my defense.

You tried to reason with him. You at least made the effort after I left. I haven't spoken to her since that day. She proved what I meant to this family. Not that I fucking care..."

"You care, Lias. If you didn't, we wouldn't be having this talk right now."

I chuckled bitterly. "Yeah well, what difference does it make? I'm not here for her. I'm here for *you* because you asked me to come."

"Are you going to stay?"

I frowned at the question. I hadn't considered the obvious. Being married to Cress didn't mean committing myself to a life here in Crescent Falls. She and I could live anywhere. I could imagine she would want to be close to her family but then again, maybe not. Dance was her life. She would undoubtedly go wherever the opportunities took her. I had enough pull to create opportunities for Cress in other places.

"I hadn't decided yet, but I can promise that I'll at least hang around for a while."

"Always evasive."

"You know me better than anyone. You shouldn't be surprised." I finished my water and stood. "I'm heading out."

"Got plans?"

"Yeah."

A fiancée who I needed to get to know a little better before the end of the month and as of now, I couldn't say I was her favorite person. I would also be falling in the ranks once she realized I had dinner set up with another of least favorite people.

"Tell Cress I said hello," he said after I headed to the entrance to the living room. I chuckled and lifted my hand shooting him a bird. The only thing I missed about being away was the bond that I had with my brother. We'd both lost Lucas but we still had each other.

* * *

When she opened the door, a frown marred her pretty face. I was beginning to believe that was her go to expression when it came to me. Not that I didn't catch the curious stares and intriguing glances that she enlisted her best efforts to suppress but this frown of hers was surely the one expression she settled into with ease every time I was around.

“Can I come in?”

“Why?”

She stood dead center of the doorway blocking my entrance. Very unwelcoming.

“Because I would love to see where my fiancée spends most of her time.”

“Then you might want to head to the theater instead. If you compare hours here to hours there, that would be where I spend most of my time.”

“But this is where you live.”

For now.

“Sleep, shower, and shit is about the sum total of what I do here. Not much to brag about.”

I threw my head back and laughed. She narrowed her eyes, locking her slender arms over her chest.

“Cress, may I please come in? We won’t be here long anyway.”

“I’m not going anywhere so I’m not sure what you mean by that.”

“We have dinner plans.”

“What is with you and these damn dinner plans? I think I need to add a few line items to my list of expectations. It seems you’re under the impression that whatever this thing is with us gives you the right to control my time and my meals.”

I smiled smugly and inched closer to her. The threshold of her door was now the only barrier between us.

“I don’t need control, Cress. I’m more of a cooperative, openly willing type of guy and dinner was not my idea. Now, may I come in?”

She huffed and stepped out of the way and I advanced forward, instantly feeling her presence the minute I was in her space. The delicate tremor of her throat when she swallowed had me pressing forward. Regret rushed through me when the mellow scent of honey settled beneath my skin like a familiar type of comfort. How the hell I could label comfort as a scent was beyond me but that was the first thing that came to mind in her tiny, cozy space.

“Whose idea was it then...?”

“Hmm...” I offered mindlessly as I moved to the antique wood shelf situation in the corner. There were photos of Cress on stage, some in studio, her body bent and posed in ways that had my dick swelling against my thigh. Nothing about her in those photos was meant to be sexual but as a man enjoying the visual of a beautiful and very pliable woman it was impossible not to think about how I could manipulate her body in bed. That created

another sense of anxiety. I didn't fuck women in beds. I didn't allow them to touch me and rarely did I ever touch them beyond what was required to get the job done, but I wanted all of the above with Cress.

"Dinner, whose idea was it if not yours?"

"Your mother."

I glanced over my shoulder to find her expression blanched. She looked physically ill which I could understand considering the conversation I'd had with the woman at seven this morning. She was interesting to say the least. I hadn't quite figured out her intentions but in a general sense she seemed eager to meet me, insisting that Cress and I join her for dinner to discuss our upcoming wedding. I appeased her request, made a reservation, and now all I had to do was convince Cress to join me.

"You...when did you...my mother?"

I wasn't sure how this would end. She looked beyond irritated and at the moment capable of murder. Question was if she was plotting mine or her mother's.

"She reached out this morning and insisted we join her for dinner."

"Why?" It bolted from her mouth so quickly I arched a brow and she added. "This marriage isn't real. There's no reason for her to meet you." She mumbled the last part and I crossed the room, stopping once we were toe to toe. My 1s aligned with her bare feet.

"Our marriage is going to be fucking real, Cress. I plan on committing myself to you as your husband and expect you to do the same as my wife. You need to get past the arrangement part and start processing that you and I are going to be a fucking union, which means your mother will be my mother-in-law."

"And yours mine? So can I expect an introduction to your mother in the near future?" she argued.

I lowered my chin. "She's traveling right now according to Christian but she'll be at the wedding."

Maybe.

"Great." She turned on the balls of her feet with subtle grace and walked away.

"Where are you going?"

"To get dressed. You just said we have plans," she gritted and I chuckled.

TEN

eress

THIS WAS INSANE.

My *mother* was insane.

I half-expected her to ignore all of this type stuff—meeting the family, getting in good with the key players—and show up at the wedding making some type of grand entrance that was over the top and very much *divaish*. Dinner with me and my fiancé hadn't been something I expected. I wasn't sure of her endgame but I knew my mother so there was surely some selfish purpose for this so-called meet and greet dinner.

“I have a private room scheduled under Omari. My fiancée and I are expecting one more guest.”

I discreetly glanced at Elias. He was so confident and at ease with the deliverance of the word *fiancée* in relation to me. I couldn't figure him out. I needed to know what *his* endgame was.

“This way ,Mr. Omari.” The *maître d'* smiled over her shoulder as she walked away. Elias's hand found the small of my back like this was something he and I experienced daily. Another way he was at ease. I decided not to reject his touch. This was my life, might as well get used to it. Once we were seated, the *maître d'* announced that our private server, Carmen, would be in shortly and that she would make sure our third guest was promptly escorted to our dining suite. I supposed it would be counterproductive for me to slip her a few bills to do the opposite and ensure my mother wasn't escorted to our table.

Wishful thinking.

Instead I decided to focus on the current situation.

“You're very comfortable tossing that word around, aren't you?”

Elias's eyes flickered with confusion and I added, “*Fiancée.*”

“Would you prefer I not be comfortable with identifying you as my fiancée?”

“No, I just...” I paused trying to make sense of what I was feeling, how all of this was forcing me to feel. “You act like it’s not a big deal. That you’re happy...”

He laughed lightly and a woman entered carrying a silver pitcher. I had been here several times before with my mother and she always requested Maurly so I wasn’t familiar with this particular server. I smiled politely as she flipped over our crystal glasses and filled them with chilled water. Once she was done, her eyes rotated between the two of us.

“Can I start you with anything else to drink?”

“Wine for me, a sweet red blend— aged—if you have it and you can bring the bottle. I’m sure my mother will have the same.” *And I’m going to need it to survive this evening.* My eyes darted over to Elias.

“Only water for me,” he stated without reservation. She smiled, nodded, and left us alone after announcing that Chef Day would be out shortly.

“Only water?” I questioned with a lifted brow. He nodded, placing one hand on the table, eyes fixated to mine.

“I don’t drink.”

“Ever?”

“No. Is that a problem?” There was lingering thrumming energy that tensed between us while he waited. I shrugged nonchalantly.

“Maybe not for me, but it might be for you. You’ve never experienced my mother. You might want to reconsider the no drinking thing, at least for tonight.”

He chuckled and glanced over my shoulder. “I promise I’ll survive. So I take it you and your mother aren’t close.”

“We’re close.”

She’s a tornado, I’m the city she seeks to destroy.

“But you’re not happy about her being here tonight and you’ve mentioned I should consider alcohol as a vice to survive a dinner with her.”

“I love my mother but she’s a cliché. Rich wife who prides herself on looking and embodying the part. She and I are two very different people.”

“How so?”

I toyed with the silverware placed near my glass. “I bet my mother was very animated about the idea of a marriage between us.”

He grinned salaciously. “She was.”

“That’s because she’s wanted this for me since the day I was born. Both my sister and I.”

“Really?”

I huffed. “Yes. My mother married into money and the very second my father put that ring on her finger, she became the perfect socialite. Every expectation and detail that came along with the lifestyle she gladly embraced with every fiber of her being. When Chris was born, she’d hired a team of people to care for him and the rest of us after she popped us out one after the other. We were groomed to be the perfect family. Etiquette training, social clubs, private schools. If it was considered socially acceptable for the upper echelon then that was what she gave. Naturally my siblings and I were expected to marry, create heirs that would be the perfect clones of us, and follow in her and my father’s footsteps. Christian did everything he was supposed to do. Cole...” I cringed and my eyes shot up to his which darkened a little so I moved on.

“The only reason my mother agreed on allowing me to dance was because it looked good on my social resume. Jona was forced into horseback riding which she hated. She had no interest whatsoever in becoming an equestrian. I loved to dance and my mother loved it too until it got in the way of her perfect family blueprint. After college I was supposed to drop my hobby and marry a respectable young man who was well off and would allow me to be his trophy wife with my only aspirations being planning social events and popping out babies. If I were lucky, my husband would *allow* me to consider a career that didn’t emasculate him or demand too much of my time so that I was readily available to appease his every desire.”

“Hmmm...” Elias’s eyes flickered with amusement.

“That’s all you have to say?”

“That was a lot. I’m just allowing it to digest.”

“If you think it’s a lot for you, imagine living it as your reality. I love my mother and she loves me but I’m not her. That’s where the conflict lies so I’m sure the minute you hit her radar as my potential future husband she was instantaneously overjoyed at finally getting her wish.”

“But she’s not.”

“Not what?”

“Getting her wish.”

“How isn’t she? I’m marrying you.”

“You are but I don’t want a Stepford wife. I damn sure don’t want a

woman whose soul ambition in life is to feed and fuck me and give me children. You're a beautiful woman Cress but who you are is more than what I can see. You're insanely talented and very intelligent. I wouldn't dare take the one thing away from you that makes you who *you* are. So she's getting a marriage but she's damn sure not getting all the other bullshit."

I drummed my fingers on the table, smiling smugly. "A progressive man."

His expression was teasing. "Something like that."

"Darling..." my mother sang.

And here we go.

My eyes shot over to Elias who winked and stood.

"Let me get your chair for you, Mrs. Devereaux."

My mother plastered on a perfect smile as she took a minute to fully engage Elias while he pulled out her chair. My mother was dressed in Chanel from head to toe. White silk because it was a color of purity and new beginnings. She had to make a great impression on my future husband. Me marrying Elias was her new beginning. A way to rectify how I'd let her down in the past. After she was seated and draped the chain of her very expensive bag over the seat of her chair, she leaned toward me and squeezed my hand.

"Cress, sweetheart. It's so good to see you."

"Same."

Carmen entered with a bottle of wine which she placed on the table and opened, pouring a small amount in my glass. "Please let me know if this meets your expectations."

Before I could comment, my mother was out the gate full speed with her polished dramatics. "Who are you, dear? Is Maurly not working this evening?"

"Mom..."

"What?" she offered unapologetically. "We *always* have Maurly."

"Well tonight we have Carmen," I asserted, lifting my eyes to the young woman who looked positively distraught. "This will be fine. You can fill my glass and bring another bottle."

She smiled appreciatively and turned to my mother offering to fill her glass. "And yours, ma'am?"

"Sure," my mother stated with a tight smile that wasn't exactly friendly nor rude.

Damn sure wasn't pleasant.

“I can see if Maurly is available.”

This poor girl.

I wasn't sure if she asked because she was anticipating a long evening serving my mother or because she was truly attempting to be accommodating but I put an end to it.

“No, we're perfectly fine with you, Carmen. Thanks so much for this.” I offered a warm smile and she returned one, nodding as she left the room.

“So...” my mother began and elegantly lifted the glass of wine to her lips. “You're *my* future son-in-law.”

“I am. It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Devereaux.”

“Please, we're practically family. Call me, Trichelle.”

Elias only nodded and my mother continued switching gears. “So, I see there's no ring yet.”

I cringed and my eyes lowered to my bare finger before slowly lifting to meet Elias's intense brown orbs. He spoke to my mother but his heated gaze never left me.

“I have a few in mind but of course I want to be sure what I pick is a perfect fit.”

“A perfect fit is a five carat Tiffany Truly Brilliant in a platinum setting. Not too over the top but enough of a statement piece that others take notice.” She smiled, seemingly feeling accomplished and lifting her left hand which held a Truly Brilliant Tiffany Diamond. Hers I knew for sure was seven carats. She was being modest in requiring that Elias only foot the bill for five with mine. And also making sure my ring didn't outshine hers.

If she knew me at all, she'd know I didn't give a damn about carrying a boulder on my finger.

“I don't think that fits Cress, but if that's what she wants...” His eyes left my mother and drifted to me.

“No, whatever you choose will be fine.”

“Nonsense, sweetheart. You leave it in his hands and there's no telling what you might end up with.” She flashed Elias a smile before adding. “No offense.”

There was definitely offense.

He should be offended.

“None taken.” Elias leaned back in his seat, coolly relaxing as if unfazed. I shifted in mine, unable to hide that I was.

“My marriage, my ring. I will be perfectly fine with whatever he selects.”

Our moment was interrupted when Chef Lemont Day entered. He greeted everyone then delivered the menu for the evening. A four-course taster that Elias had called ahead for. My mother tried to argue switching to a seven-course however, Elias was firm on his selection and insisted that he had a prior obligation later that night. I wanted to inquire but wouldn't dare do so in front of my mother. She was already doing the most with her conversation of choice throughout the evening and by the time we reached our fourth course, I'd had about all I could take from the woman.

"Thank you so much for spending the evening with us. I pray you enjoy our final selection." Chef Day smiled brightly while Carmen placed small, white, shallow-depth bowls in front of each of us. Once they were situated he clasped his hands behind his back and motioned to the table with a jerk of his chin.

"Honey yogurt panna cotta with blood orange sauce." His smile expanded. "It's the perfect complement to satisfy your palate after the white bean purée, balsamic glazed lamb chops, and baby kale, green Asian pear, grapes with candied walnuts and gorgonzola salad."

"Sounds perfect to me," I jeered, having already thoroughly enjoyed our first three courses, I was very much looking forward to this delectable treat.

"Preciate you, Chef," Elias offered and my mother of course only smiled her appreciation. I was sure she had more to say of the less than positive nature but decided to err on the more socially acceptable side of caution this evening.

"Thanks again and enjoy."

After Chef Day was gone, I immediately dipped my spoon into the dish and the minute the flavor exploded on my tongue I was in love.

"This is so perfect."

"Shit, I'm convinced just from your reaction." Elias chuckled and tried his own. He nodded as his brows crowded in. "Yeah, it's on point."

"So..."

There was no way in hell my mother would allow us to have a moment that didn't place her at center stage so she decided to bully her way into the spotlight under the guise of thinking of me.

"There has to be an engagement party. I can already imagine what a nightmare that will be with such short notice, but if I call in a few favors I'm sure I can make it happen. The wedding however, I'm not so sure about. We need to get started right away if there's a chance in hell of securing a venue

that meets expectations.”

My eyes fluttered closed and I inhaled as deeply as the pending frustration would allow but before I could respond to shut my mother down—because in no world would I ever allow her to plan this engagement dinner or wedding for me—Elias’s voice followed.

“We appreciate the offer but we already have a venue...”

“You do...” My mother sounded stunned and a little annoyed. The first blow to her immaculately laid plan to control my wedding.

My eyes peeled open and his were waiting, beseeching. “Yes, considering it’s short notice, I was thinking we could have the wedding on my family’s estate. We have plenty of options to consider as a venue. The rose gardens, the gazebo. The crystal ballroom inside. All of which would work.”

“That most certainly does *not* work. With a guest list the size we’re expecting...”

“I don’t want a large wedding. Something small and intimate.” My tone was clipped when I addressed my mother but softened when I turned to Elias. “Your house will be fine.”

“What about ours?” my mother interjected. She needed a win. Elias wasn’t giving her one.

Okay maybe he wasn’t so bad after all.

“I’m not interested in using your house. Mine will be just fine or Cress can select another venue. I’ll do whatever necessary to make sure she gets what she wants.”

“Well...”

I tore my eyes away from the man across from me. The very sexy man who was full of surprises tonight. “That’s settled.”

“It seems it is. I’ll make a few calls to lock down a wedding planner then. One I can work closely with to make sure—”

“That won’t be necessary either. Cress deserves to have the wedding she wants. No matter the cost. I’m sure she’s more than capable of selecting a planner that meets her approval. One that she can work closely with to make sure the vision is hers and hers alone. If she decides to allow you to be a part of that process it will be a choice, not an *expectation*.”

“That’s likely going to cost. It might work better if I reached out to a few people I know.”

Oh God does this woman ever quit.

Elias’s annoyed expression rounded to my mother. “If I couldn’t afford

the expense, I wouldn't have offered. I assure you, your daughter is marrying a man who can support anything her heart desires.”

My mother sucked in a sharp breath and clutched her imaginary pearls. She would never be caught dead in pearls so around her neck perfectly laid against smooth brown skin that matched mine was a four carat, pear-shaped solitaire diamond which hung on a platinum chain.

My siblings and I gifted it to her one year for Christmas after she selected it and sent us an email with a “just in case we were stumped on what to buy” note.

“Then I suppose the only thing left to discuss is how you plan to ensure my daughter is taken care of after she becomes *your* wife. Have you considered a prenuptial? Clearly you can afford the finer things, so I'm sure it only makes sense that Cress can afford to maintain that type of lifestyle in the event that things don't work between the two of you. One can never be too careful, especially since this is a marriage of *convenience*.”

My mouth dropped open and I was stunned. Was she really trying to push for my financial security on this man's dime knowing that our family was just as established? We weren't hurting for money. *At all*.

“If that's what Cress wants then she and I will sit down and navigate the terms of that agreement. I plan on taking my vows very seriously so she won't have to worry about being careful in our marriage. Either way, that's a private matter between her and I.”

The energy sparking throughout the room was palpable. My mother jolted to her feet, lifting her purse and plastering on a smile.

She had nothing left. Clip was completely empty. All shots fired.

“It was a pleasure meeting you, Elias. I thank you so much for such a wonderful meal.”

Bullshit.

If I could read my mother, and I was very good at doing so, she was waging war in her head against my future husband. When she turned to leave. I mouthed sorry to him and hurried behind her, catching my mother just outside the entrance to our private dining room.

“What the hell was that? A pre-nup?”

She rolled her eyes. “You're naïve if you don't make sure that man doesn't fuck you over when it's all said and done.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means, I committed my life catering to your father. Being what he

needed me to be only to end up with nothing.”

“That’s not true, you have...”

“Nothing, Cress. Christian is executor over the family estate. Your father left everything to the three of you. I have a small trust set up which allows me a monthly allowance which is *laughable*. I was naïve enough to believe that your father truly loved me and valued everything I’ve done for him all these years. I suppose the jokes on me. I was wrong. You would be wise to not make the same mistakes I’ve made. *That man* can make your life a living hell if he chooses to.”

“Is that what you’re saying our father has done?”

“I’m saying, forty-two years and what do I have to show for it? I’m left with a shell of a man who doesn’t even remember my name and not even the empire that *I* helped him earn.”

I cringed, rearing my head back. “You’ve spent your life doing absolutely nothing and *everything* you want. You also have Christian, Jona, and I but I’m sure that means very little in the larger scope of things.”

“Who I’ll be depending on for the rest of my life, thanks to your father’s selfish ways. He left it all to the three of you. Every single penny. I have *nothing*.”

“Wow.” Was she really saying this out loud? I shouldn’t have been surprised but I was.

“If you wanted a guarantee of financial stability then you should’ve worked for your own. You chose the life you have. Daddy never prevented you from working or doing things that mattered. You chose to be a kept woman. That’s on you not him.”

I turned to walk away and she grabbed my arm. “You’re so naïve, Cress. You think you know how things work in this world, but you have no idea. You think you know men like the one you’re about to marry....” She laughed dryly. “You don’t. They take what they want and destroy what they want. It’s not all black and white, sweetheart. There are murky gray areas that you’ll soon learn are where you’ll end up for most of your life. I’m speaking from experience. So when you’re ready to accept the truth, I’ll be here. For now, keep living your fairytale.” She corrected her posture and plastered on a smile. The one she used when she needed to keep up appearances.

“I’d love to be there when you’re selecting a dress. If you feel I deserve an invitation, I’ll gladly accept. If not, just have your *husband’s* people reach out with the day and time and I’ll be there to watch you say I do.” She placed

a hand on my cheek then she was gone.

When I stepped back into the room, Elias was watching. He was always fucking watching and that bothered me because it felt personal like he cared.

About me.

“Everything okay?”

“No, but I’ll be fine. My mother is mentally and physically draining.” I moved to the table and lifted my purse from an empty chair. “We should go.”

“I’m not in a hurry, Cress. Sit down, finish your food.”

I wrinkled my nose. “You said you had a prior obligation. I don’t want to hold you.”

“You’re not. Sit, please.”

“But you said...”

“I said that because I didn’t want this dinner to last any longer than you or I could tolerate. That was also my reason for selecting four courses instead of seven. I’m glad I trusted my instinct. Your mother is a lot.”

“She is what she is. Thank you by the way...”

His brows caved in and I added, “For the wedding thing. She wouldn’t have accepted no from me.”

He smiled. “She barely accepted no from me, but I meant what I said. Whatever your ideas are for the wedding I want you to have what you want.”

“And what about you, what do you want?”

“None of it really matters to me...”

“None of it?”

“You didn’t let me finish.”

“None of it really matters me, other than one very important detail that I won’t bend on...”

“Which is?”

“You.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. The wedding can be as simple or as elaborate as you want. That’s entirely up to you, the only thing I’m demanding is that by the end of this month you walk down that aisle prepared to marry me because it’s what you want, not what your brother is demanding of you. Not because you feel a sense of loyalty to your family and need to do your part. Only because it’s what you want.”

“And if by then that’s not how I feel?”

“Then don’t show up. I’m not going to marry you unless it’s truly what

you want.”

“And what about your brother and mine. Wasn’t this for them? You’d be willing to walk away and not care how it will affect them?”

“Yes.”

“But you agreed.”

“I agreed because my brother asked me to but that doesn’t have a damn thing to do with whether or not I *want* to or will show up on our wedding day.”

The thought of him choosing to walk away suddenly caused my stomach to pinch. Which I didn’t understand because I was so against this and now...

Maybe I’m not.

“So when you picked me over my sister, was that the best of the worst?”

He grinned, in the most insanely charming way, extending to his full height and moving to me ever so fucking slowly. His shoulder was next to mine but while I faced the seat he’d just vacated he faced the exit.

“Both you and your sister are very beautiful women, Cress.”

“But that’s not answering my question. What sane person wants to be forced into a corner when it comes to choosing their own husband or wife? The person they’re expected to spend the rest of their life with?”

With a casual smoothness the warmth of his breath ghosted across the side of my face. “Who’s to say I didn’t choose?”

A whisper of a kiss landed at my temple then he was gone.

My head whipped in his direction to find him waiting by the door, arm extended requesting me. And I gave in, feeling like this was the first of many...

* * *

I was frustrated by how my mother had acted a few nights ago at dinner and my sex drive was on overload after the way Elias had handed her. He’d shielded me from my own mother when he didn’t have to. He could have easily sat there and allowed the Devereaux women to battle it out but no, he shut down every attempt she threw out there to take control of my life and this wedding which was incredibly...

Sexy.

He was sexy.

I wanted to run my tongue from the tattoo that began under his neck

down to the ones I imagined were perfectly placed and peeking from the waistline of his briefs.

Or boxers.

I wasn't sure of his preference.

Wait no briefs. He was definitely a brief type of man.

Oh fuck me.

As I turned up the volume to the Bluetooth speaker I carried with me to the studio, I closed my eyes and allowed the heavy bass to thrum through my body as it vibrated from the sleek wood floors. I had already gone through my warm-ups, stretching, and barre routine. Now it was time to let go. I gave into the rhythm and allowed myself a minute to absorb the music into my core before I began to move. My thoughts weren't on my steps, the position of my arms, or the pacing of my feet gliding across the floor. They were on *him*.

I hadn't yet fully experienced all of Elias but I had a pretty good idea of every dip, contour, and defined muscle that existed beneath the layers of his clothes. That was where my mind had gone.

Elias, naked.

While I worked my body, pushed and pulled until I felt the ache of my muscles, time elapsed. One song bled into the next and my body burned while I imagined the ache was because of him. The length and thickness of him, stretching me wide, pushing my limits, giving me things I hadn't experienced.

My breathing was even, from years of training, but my pulse thundered loudly between my ears. The melody traveled through my veins feeling just as natural as the blood that pumped to my heart. I was alive.

There was freedom to my movements, nothing was choreographed or planned. This was when I was at my best and thoughts of him only made it that much better. A blaze of heat crawled over my skin that I imagined being his fingers. My thighs tensed with the urge to come together but instead I lifted into a pirouette, one, two, three then elevated to my toes, dragging one foot as I leapt with perfect form. I extended both legs until they were slightly angled upward into the perfect split, soaring until I landed with the lightest touch. I lowered until my palms met the floor, my back curved toward the ceiling then I collapsed.

My chest was heaving, my brain felt clouded, then came a slow dramatic clap that had me snapping my gaze toward the door.

“That was, wow...” Trini smiled smugly as she lifted away from the wall moving on her bare feet to bring my metal tin of water.

“Thank you,” I huffed, twisting the lid and taking down several large gulps. After a minute I was examining her toes, white polish that no doubt matched what was on her fingers.

“You went without me.” Her eyes lowered and she wiggled her toes.

“I owe you one. I was so over the French. It was a last minute thing, but I’m always floored when I watch you dance. The things that you do with your body, the way you move, the passion it’s just, wow.”

“You’re supposed to say that. You’re my best friend.”

“Which doesn’t mean a damn thing...”

I narrowed my eyes and she grinned. “Okay so I have been accused of being your most animated and dedicated hype woman but not with this, Cress.” Her expression softened. “You’re really that good. No hype required.”

I’d been dancing since I was six years old and countless people had watched me perform, had told me what an amazing gift I had, but coming from Trini, who I knew had nothing invested in my gift, meant so much more.

“You’re biased.”

“No I’m not but that was not classical dancing. Whatever that was you were doing looked like you needed to be on a pole instead of pointe shoes.”

“Trini...” My cheeks flushed. She was probably right considering where my mind was.

“Is that what you do down at Chapter House?”

“I was just dancing.” I shrugged and she arched a brow.

She knew about my guilty pleasure of dancing at Chapter House. I loved the thrill of being uninhibited with my body. She didn’t understand it nor did she question me. When I tried to explain the freedom I felt being on stage at Chapter House in comparison to dancing with my company, she said it made sense. I could tell she didn’t fully get it. Dancing for those pervs was what she called it. I was exclusive. No one touched me ever and I didn’t do private dances like the other girls there. It was art to me. Freedom. But she didn’t judge. She loved me enough to accept every piece of me. Which had my mind shifting back to thoughts of Elias. Would he?

“Mmmhmm, now go get pretty...” She flicked her wrist in my direction. “We have food to sample and cakes to taste .”

“Ugggggggh,” I groaned, lifting onto my feet and stomping toward the private bathroom. I took a quick shower, moisturized, and yanked on a strapless emerald green maxi dress and gold strappy flat sandals. I accessorized with gold bangles, hoop earrings, and twisted my shoulder length hair at the back of my head and clamped it in place with a bold claw clip. Loose strands and flyaways fell around my temples, framing my face, giving me a naturally mussed hair look. It would have to do.

I shoved my dance clothes into my hobo bag then reentered the main area of my private studio.

“Twenty minutes and you look like that. You’re a superhuman. That look would take me two hours tops.”

I grinned and shrugged as I met her at the door. “Natural beauty is hard to come by. I’m a rare breed, friend.”

“That you are, boo because to be in my top three you have to bring it.”

“Top three?” I narrowed my eyes over my shoulder as we approached the elevator.

“Well yeah. Naturally I’m number one. Then there’s Klay and you. Pending the day you two swap places.”

“And today?”

“He’s two you’re three.”

“Even with me looking like *this*?”

“He woke me up to head, fucked me in the shower, and deposited thirty grand into my account. You can’t compete with that, Cress.”

“I damn sure can’t. Wouldn’t even try.”

“You driving or you want me to?”

“You can. I caught the train.”

She rolled her eyes. “What is with you and that damn public transportation?”

“I like it. Believe it or not it’s relaxing.”

“How is sitting in open space with strangers relaxing? I’d be hella anxious.”

“That’s because you carry ten thousand dollar purses and wear that mountain on your finger.”

“You own most of the same purses I do. Don’t you dare judge my exquisite taste.”

“I’m not. I love nice things, but most of the time when I’m on the bus or train, it’s coming to or from dancing and I don’t look like I’m worth the

effort of robbing.”

“Not true. You still have that look, Cress. It’s not labels or expensive purses. Some people just look like they come from money and you friend, are one of those people.”

I wouldn’t argue that.

“And can we just circle back to my mountain?” She wiggled her fingers. “You’ll be wearing one of these in a few weeks.” We stepped out the building and she hit the locks to her Aston Martin. I slipped into the passenger seat and tossed my bag in the back. After she pulled out of the parking garage and safely navigated us to the main road moving entirely too fast, she turned to me again. “Speaking of, has he given you a ring yet or do you get it at the engagement party?”

“He hasn’t and I’m not sure when I’ll get it. My mother insisted on him purchasing a replica of what she has but *smaller*.”

“Did he agree?”

“No...” I huffed, massaging my ring finger. “He shut her down saying he didn’t think that was my style.”

“Oh...” She jutted her chin forward.

“That’s it? That’s all I get is *oh*?”

“What do you want me to say?”

“Whatever you’re thinking.”

“I think the guy might actually have a thing for his fake fiancée if he cares what kind of ring to buy for you. Most men would have just purchased the biggest, showiest one within their budget and tossed it at you. Seems like he’s putting some thought into this.”

“Yeah.”

“Which means he’s putting some thought into *you*.”

“It’s not a big deal.”

“It’s a very big deal, Cress. It’s a small thing when you look at just that one detail but add in the way he handled dinner with your mom, the ungodly amount he’s paying to make sure you have the wedding of your dreams, and that he chose you over Jona. Aligning all the details to get the full picture and again, it’s a very big deal.”

I didn’t want to overthink it all but I was feeling the same. I was feeling *him* and things that I shouldn’t because this was a fake marriage.

One that he said he intended to take seriously.

“He gave me an ultimatum.” My brows caved in.

“What kind of ultimatum?”

“The kind that ends with me not showing up the day we’re supposed to get married if it’s not what I really want to do.”

“Well shit, when did he say that?”

“After dinner the other night.”

“Why the hell are you just telling me this?”

“Because I knew that you would overanalyze everything and I needed to think about things without outside noise to decide how I felt about that.”

“No, what you wanted was to pretend you hadn’t already made up your mind and you knew I would call *bullshit* when you threw that *bullshit* at me that you just spewed.”

I grinned and rolled my eyes. “So what.”

“You want this, don’t you?”

“Is that crazy? I don’t know him and our past...”

“Don’t do that. It’s not *your* past. It’s your *family’s* very complicated and barbaric man versus man bullshit that has nothing to do with you.”

“Be that as it may, he is one of those barbaric men.”

“Do you think he’s a bad person?”

“Yeah.” I laughed, shaking my head. “The worst.”

“Then don’t marry him.”

“It’s not that simple. Christian needs this.”

And I want this.

“Fuck Christian with his fine ass.”

“Trini...”

“Well he is fine and I have fucked him so I can say both.”

“Oh god, please don’t bring that up again.”

“It was good. Your brother can fuck and I thoroughly enjoyed him fucking me. If he hadn’t married his wife and I hadn’t married my husband. I’d do it again. I’d fuck him a lot actually because, well, he’s good at it.”

“Trini,” I warned, so over this and the word fuck.

Because it made me think of Elias in ways I shouldn’t be right now.

“Okay sorry but my point is, this is not about Chris. This is about you and obviously that man wants you to want this which means he wants this or he wouldn’t care about you wanting this.”

“Yeah,” I huffed.

“And it’s okay to want this. I barely knew Klay when we got married. We dated for three months which was a blessing considering our parents were

making us get married.”

“Three months is a lot better than three *weeks*.”

“Maybe but I also knew the day I met him that I wanted to be his wife. The first time he kissed me I knew that I could love him. Even if it took time, I had that feeling about him.”

“So you don’t think it’s crazy?”

“Fuck yeah I think it’s crazy but I also know it’s possible to be happy. And word on the street is that your fiancé fucks really good too.”

My eyes snapped to hers. “How do you know that?”

“Not from experience, relax. I’ve heard things.”

“Things like what?”

Why was I jealous and why did I care? Why did I want to torture myself with knowing about who he’d been with?

“He’s never really had a girlfriend. Not that anyone can identify but there have been rumors about him.”

“He’s never had a girlfriend?”

That was odd.

“No and that’s not anything to be concerned with. The guy is insanely rich and his family is very prestigious. That’s pretty much a green light to be more of the fuck and go and not the commitment type.”

She had a point. Christian never really dated anyone for long periods of time. He had flings, a lot of them, one with my best friend, but no committed relationships.

A fling that she loved to bring up, knowing I had no interest in hearing about it.

“Well he’s been gone for four years. There’s no telling what he’s been doing and with whom.”

We both need to be tested.

“And you’ve been casually sleeping with Allen, speaking of, does he know?”

Shit.

“No, but it doesn’t matter. We’re not dating.”

“Not dating but he has been making you come on the regular for the past year.”

I cringed at the thought. I hadn’t given him a second thought since all of this happened but he and I also had an understanding. We didn’t do the daily chit chat. We didn’t go out on dates or do cutesy things. We spent time at my

house or his that ended in mind-blowing sex then went our separate ways. It worked with both my career and his. We could go weeks at a time and not communicate. Like now, he was currently in Japan on business and we hadn't spoken in a few weeks.

"I should probably let him know."

"Ya' think."

"He's not my boyfriend."

"Nope just your fuck buddy but he deserves the courtesy of knowing things are coming to an end..." She paused as she pulled up at TasTey's where we had an appointment with Teyon Miller who agreed to cater my engagement dinner and the food for the wedding. She was adding me to an already full list which I appreciated and also made sure she was appropriately compensated for the added inconvenience.

My hubby-to-be said spare no expense. Not only was this last minute, but it also had to be top tier. Well, the engagement party did. Christian was inviting certain *people* to send a message. Devereauxs and Omaris were once again united. He agreed that I didn't have to invite those *people* to the wedding. I was grateful. I didn't want my wedding to be a spectacle.

Simple and meaningful.

Ha. While I married a man I barely knew and didn't love.

After Trini shut off her engine, she turned to me with a serious look on her face. "Is it coming to an end? The arrangement you have with Allen? Because if it's not then that means you'll have to accept Elias having a fuck buddy too. Have you considered that?"

"We discussed it."

"And..."

"And I don't want a marriage where my husband is sleeping with anyone besides me."

She smiled smugly. "You do realize that means *you* have to have sex with him."

"I'm well aware," I huffed, getting out of the car and slamming the door once I was on my feet.

Trini got out and joined me. "Based on that little tantrum you just had, I'd say you fully plan on sleeping with your husband. Good for you."

"*If* I show up and go through with it." I stuck my tongue out and she laughed.

"You will. I'm not the least bit worried about you showing up."

She looped her arm through mine. “Now let’s go fuck this food up. I’m starving.”

“This is a tasting. Not a meal.”

“And it’s Teyon Miller. I can taste enough to make it a meal. Her food is so damn good I have to seize the moment. Plus the hubby said spare no expense, right? I intend to fully embrace the experience to know that the menu will be the very best for my bestie.”

She had a valid point.

A very selfishly motivated point, but still valid.

ELEVEN

elias

THE WOMAN I was sitting with today, Dr. Olivia Temple, greeted me with a warm smile. Surely she had read my file. I'd already signed off for her to request it from the most recent therapist I had been seeing.

Dr. Candice Harrington.

Consistently, once every three months, I sat in her office and allowed her to question me. I gave clinical responses to all of her questions because I'd been doing this long enough to know exactly what to say not to pique any concerns. She robotically moved through her praise and concerns and wrote the prescription for my medication. Lithium extended release, six hundred milligrams, twice a day. Always a three-month supply and requested a check-in a week prior to the prescription expiring. That had been my life for the past three years.

The first year after we lost Lucas, I spiraled. I stopped taking my meds, my cycles came every couple weeks, and a lot of people got hurt. Physically and emotionally. I was out of control and driven by not only my emotions but my disorder. I drank too much which I cocktailed with any drugs I could get my hands on and eventually I crashed.

I wasn't sure how it happened because the memory of the night I ended up in the hospital psychiatric ward was a bit of a blur. The recovery period that followed was still very visual in my head. They kept me for thirty days. Ez had been notified and he made the arrangements that placed me in a discreet private facility.

A few days before I was discharged someone on staff notified my brother who paid a lot of money to erase any evidence that I had been there. He begged me to come home. I refused. A few weeks later I stumbled upon an underground fight club. Stabilized and no longer having alcohol or drugs to

get lost in, I began fighting.

Every night, I beat the crap out of anyone who stepped in the ring with me but not until I allowed them to inflict as much pain as I could bear. That was how I'd met Reno and why he offered me a job. He later found out who my family was and thought keeping me around would be some sort of privilege. One that would offer him an advantage. I didn't give a damn about Reno beyond appreciating that he offered me a distraction from the very thing I had been running from.

My family.

For three years I had been stable. My cycles happened but they were manageable. I could feel and acknowledge the shifts. I knew when my moods would change and was able to keep the highs and lows contained to short periods when they happened and the spans between them stretched for months at a time. Until now. I wasn't so sure I could continue to remain as level as I had in the past. Which was why I was here.

"Mr. Omari..."

"Yes."

Her smile expanded and she extended a hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Same."

It wasn't a fucking pleasure but I wouldn't mess up her day. This was my issue not hers. Hopefully she could help. In a few weeks I would be married to a woman I was trying to protect from my darkness. She would be living in my home, hopefully sleeping in my bed, and that meant she would be exposed to all of me.

"Please, come in, have a seat." She motioned to the office behind her and I did as instructed. Walked in, bypassed the sofa, and elected to sit in the armchair across from the one she settled into.

"So, I read your file. Thank you for that."

I lifted my chin in acknowledgment and she continued. "I didn't see anything out of the ordinary or alarming and you have another month and a half left with your current prescription so would you like to tell me why you're here today?"

No.

Not particularly.

But it's unavoidable.

"I'm considering a different combination of my meds. "

I stared at her, searching for any signs of emotion but she schooled them all. Nothing. She gave me absolutely nothing.

She was good at this too.

“From what I can tell, you’ve only made a few changes within the past three years and that was within the first years. That’s common when you’re trying to find the right combination. You’ve been on the same meds for a while now. Is there a new concern?”

A very new concern.

My future wife.

“I’ve recently come home, which you know. New environment, old stressors. I just need to make a few adjustments. I’m not sleeping much and I feel more agitated than usual.”

“I see.” She smiled softly. “It might be helpful to discuss the recent changes. Have you experienced any sporadic cycling?”

“No, but I can feel them pushing to the surface.”

“Depression or mania?”

“Both at different times but back-to-back.”

“You mentioned old stressors. Like I said, I read your file in its entirety. You were diagnosed at age thirteen. The first few years were a little rough with finding the right balance but you settled into things by late teens early twenties. You managed to live a pretty consistent and normal life...”

“There isn’t a damn thing normal about my life. How my brain works, how I handle things, is not fucking normal.”

“The definition of normal translates to everyone differently. My definition of normal is the ability to move about and function in society without cause for concern. Normal is not meeting a predetermined standard of expectation that society deems acceptable to maintaining their comfort levels. You’ve been doing that, Elias. Or rather did until just before your brother died, Lucas, right?”

This wasn’t why I was here. I didn’t need this type of therapy. I was well aware of my issues. My feelings about my life, my family, and how I was forced to deal with losing someone important to me. I was here to get her to change my meds to hopefully settle the unease that was growing beneath the surface.

“Lucas is not relevant to why I’m here today.” My tone was even but not welcoming. I’d managed to somewhat mask my emotions over the years. She was doing her job, I wouldn’t penalize her for doing so but I wasn’t going to

entertain subjects that weren't relevant.

"Possibly not, my only reason for bringing it up is that Lucas was murdered here. You have just recently returned home. You left a few weeks after his death and to my understanding haven't been back since. Losing your brother, Elias, was the first time you allowed the disorder to consume you. You spent thirty days under psychiatric hospitalization..."

My eyes snapped up to hers. Ez had pretty much erased that history or so I thought. She arched a brow before saying. "I only take patents that are fully open with me. When you signed over your files you allowed me access to all of your medical records. Even the ones that your family managed to make magically disappear."

"I'm not here because of Lucas," I gritted.

"Then tell me why you are here."

I don't want to destroy my wife with my inability to maintain mental balance.

"I'm getting married in a few weeks." My fingers flexed several times, opening and closing into a fist.

"Weddings can be stressful."

Epecially when they're dropped in your lap with no warning.

"Yeah."

"Is it just the wedding that's causing your unease?"

A rough laugh dragged from my throat. "Fuck no. It's not even the wedding. It's the woman I'm marrying."

"I see. And what about her, specifically."

"She's not like me. She'll expect things that I'm not sure I can give because we're different. Balance, a family, normal shit that most people don't have to question whether or not they're capable of."

"Have you discussed this with her?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"She doesn't know anything about any of this."

And there it was. She finally allowed the mask to slip just for a second to express her disapproval of me keeping my disorder from my future wife, but then it was back in place.

"Why haven't you told her?"

Because I don't like feeling like a fucking charity case. A crazy person. Weak.

“I will.”

“That’s not what I asked you, Elias. My question was why haven’t you told her.”

I just stared blankly at her and she did the same for a long moment. “If you’re marrying someone that means you trust them wholly and fully with your life and who you are. If you cannot be open enough to discuss a part of yourself that somewhat defines who you are and will play a major role in the success or possible failure of your union then I have to question whether or not marriage is the right choice to make right now.”

“Marriage isn’t always about love. Sometimes it’s as simple as a business deal where two people come together with a singular goal to accomplish.”

“Is that what your marriage will be? A business deal.”

“More or less.”

She eyed me for a minute before her expression softened. “Do you mind if I give you my personal opinion right now, not a clinical one?”

“No.”

“Your marriage might be a business deal but, I feel that you want more from this deal than just a mutual benefit. You’re very good at controlling your reactions, hiding behind the mask you wear on a daily basis, but I’m also very good at reading people. You have given me everything I need to gauge what the true issue is.”

“Which is?”

“You care about this woman. Your feelings are rooted in something more than just a mutually agreed upon singular goal. You’re afraid of what that means to your expectations about this marriage. You’re concerned about whether or not she will accept this part of you. There may be other stressors that are testing your control but she is the most relevant. Would you be willing to agree that I’m right about that?”

I chuckled lightly, shaking my head. She was indeed good. “Yeah, you’re right.”

“Thank you for being honest.”

“Not like you gave me a choice.”

She smiled. “I’m not Dr. Harrington. She was a great resource. And is very accomplished but based on the notes from your sessions, you did the bare minimum. She allowed you to. If that’s your expectation for me, I suggest you find another therapist. I can provide some recommendations.”

Isn’t this some shit.

“You’ll work...”

For now...

“Good to know. Now let’s discuss adjusting your meds.”

I looked her in the eyes. “You’re going to agree...”

“If you trust me to do my part, I’ll trust you to do yours. No one knows you better than you. There are things that I can take into account to make decisions about how to treat you, Elias, but the most relevant is your honesty about what’s going on internally. Prior to losing your brother, you did well managing your disorder. After your slip, you’ve managed to remain on track for the past couple years. That tells me you’re responsible with your treatment and fully committed to the process. If you feel you need an adjustment, I’m more than willing to work with you. If I find that it’s not working well one way or the other, I’ll step in. For now, I trust that you can be an active voice that navigates how we deal with your treatment. I like to consider us partners. We’ll work together to find a combination that best suits where you are in your life with the understanding that things often shift and change. Agreed?”

“Yeah, I can fuck with that.”

“Good but I need you to make me a promise.”

Tell Cress about my diagnosis.

She didn’t have to say it. I knew. “I’m going to tell her.”

When the time is right.

“Thank you. If you would like to discuss it here, where she can be armed with the proper knowledge, then I’m open to the three of us sitting down together.”

“She can google that shit.”

Like everyone else had.

“She could but you know just as well as I do. The information out there can be misleading as well as very generic. Each person dealing with bipolar is different. Triggers are different. Even something as simple as your rapid cycling can be misunderstood without the proper knowledge that relates directly to you and how you manage your symptoms, Elias. If she’s going to be your wife, she will be a large factor in how you manage moving forward.”

She was right. My parents and Ez had always been a voice in my treatment. They watched me, picking up on signs. Shifts in my moods and behaviors. They could often see the depression or mania coming before I settled into it. In the beginning our mother was more hands on, more caring,

but that was when she felt she could sit me in front of the right doctor who could fix me. There was no fix for bipolar, only managing the behavior. Her feelings about it aligned more with my father's after a while. I was damaged goods. The crazy son. The family secret.

Ez was very different with me. He did what they never could and that mattered more than anything. He treated me normally which made it easier to be and feel normal.

I knew that Cress's reaction would set the precedent for how we worked in a relationship, which was another reason I wasn't in a hurry to tell her. For now, I simply wanted to get to know her, allow her to get to know me. The me that I was holding onto daily but eventually I would slip and be forced to expose her to the other side of who I was.

"That won't be necessary. I can tell her what she needs to know."

She nodded but I sensed that she was only agreeing for the moment.

"I'm not going to adjust your lithium. We'll just add some anti-anxiety and a low dosage of antipsychotic the same for now. Give it a couple weeks to see how you're adjusting. You should be able to see the changes in a few days. If things don't feel right, you can schedule an appointment. You know what changes to look for?"

"Yeah. Is that all?"

"Unless you have something else you'd like to discuss then yes, that will be all for today."

"No, I'm good."

"Then this was a great start. I'm going to ask that you come see me in two weeks..."

I didn't hide my irritation and she smiled smugly. "I've already told you, I'm not Dr. Harrington. For now, I'd like to check in on a regular basis. We'll get to a point where we can spread those visits out over longer periods of time but for now, every two weeks. Can you commit to that?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"No, actually you don't. Not unless you'd like for me to recommend you to someone else who is willing to do half the work."

"Two weeks, I can do that."

"Good."

I stood and she did as well but she added, "I need you to consider something."

I gave her my full attention. "Bipolar can be as present or indeterminate

as you allow it to be. People deal with all types of disruptions to their lives. Some greater than others. Phobias and other disorders. The key is understanding and proper management. You can exist without allowing this to consume you. You've done so for years. Half the battle is how you manage the disorder."

I scowled. "Panicking because you see a spider doesn't present a need to push your limits in destructive ways or force you to feel like some days you need to crawl in a corner and slit your fucking wrist and others be so hyped up on adrenaline that you go for hours at a time doing whatever feels good just to fuel the need pulsing beneath your skin. Not the same."

"No, it's not the same. It's very much different but that's my point. You have unique attributes because of how your mind works that complicates your life, as do they. Is any one of us truly a depiction of what is classified as normal? The mind is delicate. Some are obsessed with their looks or their bodies. Some simply fear the proximity to insects but regardless it comes down to how the world views us and if we're accepting of those views. Do those opinions really matter or is it our own that guide who and what we are?"

* * *

Today was our engagement party. Cress and I arrived together. Our clothes matched considering I was in a pale gray suit and she wore a silver cocktail dress that had me watching every male in attendance that wasn't family to see if they appreciated the way it hugged her body just as much as I did. Cress had loose curls in her hair which brushed her bare shoulder while she mindlessly tucked pieces behind her ear. It was a nervous habit. One that wasn't meant to be but presented as sexy. Every detail about her had been ingrained into my memory. For the past couple hours, I had been watching as she moved around the room, from guest to guest. Smiling cordially, talking socially, and being polite to people she didn't know.

The men and women in attendance were connected to our families in one way or another. Politicians, law enforcement, CEOs, all of which had a vested interest in our marriage being successful. They had whispered those things to me throughout the evening while shaking my hand and showing appreciation. I was taking on such a huge commitment that reassured them that their lives could settle back into routines that lifted worry and concern

for the future of their billion dollar companies. A few also had the balls to point out that I was a lucky man for being *gifted* a woman like Cress. They didn't say why but I knew.

She was a fucking rare gem.

Smart, talented, and more importantly, beautiful.

But none of those attributes made it okay for them to label her as a prize. I made sure they understood how little I appreciated their assessment of my future wife.

Mayor Calhoun had even gone as far as to express how he'd watched her growing up and wondered who would be the lucky man to secure her.

No fucking class.

I not so kindly told him that if I so much as caught him looking at or near Cress anytime this evening or in the future I would break his fucking jaw, then release to the city proof that he was spending the city's money to keep his mistress living just as cushy a life as his wife.

He walked away and had been at the bar with his face buried in a glass since our little chat. He smiled and talked when anyone approached but he was very careful to stay out of Cress's path. *Smart man.* The rest of his night was spent making lazy conversation with people he was obligated to acknowledge based on the sizable donations they'd contributed to his campaign.

I stayed out of the way most of the night, allowing Christian and Ez to work the room. They lived for shit like this. I didn't like interacting with people and had never been the type to be friendly. Being here tonight was exhausting. Some I wasn't able to avoid so I struggled through forced conversations with so-called important people. Those who wanted to gauge me to see just how interested I was in stepping up to work alongside my brother. I didn't commit to anything but they didn't care. They had already made decisions about my new role. It was going to be vastly disappointing when they realized their decisions didn't mean shit to me. I was not my brother or my father.

No one invested a lot of time engaging me which meant I was left alone for most of the evening. Out of sight. Watching people.

People mostly meant Cress. She was good at this and not because she had been raised in a family that groomed her to shine in this type of environment. I attributed most of it to being thrust into a world where she was constantly in the spotlight. Being a Devereaux and accomplished dancer presented more

pressure than being in a room full of ego driven men who thrived off control and viewed women as accessories.

I was amused by the thought. Cress would never in her life agree to be anyone's accessory. At least not mine. I also wouldn't expect her to be.

"She's lovely." I tensed at the sound of a voice I hadn't heard in years. I kept my eyes on Cress not yet acknowledging my mother. At that very moment, my fiancée leaned into her best friend Trini and turned her face to the side like she was attempting to hide her expression while she toyed with the ring I'd put on her finger a few hours ago. It was a three point eight carat solitaire with sweeping ivy made of smaller stones which presented as leaves. I'd paid handsomely to have it custom made the night after dinner with her mother. She seemed pleased with the choice, thanking me with an expression of how lovely the piece was. But she didn't go overboard, however I'd noticed throughout the evening she toyed with it, always having a smile on her face.

"I didn't know you were coming."

"Did you not want me here, Elias?"

I pulled my eyes away from Cress and acknowledged my mother who continued. "You didn't reach out, Ez did. Still, I showed, choosing not to read too deeply into your lack of consideration."

I cut her an unforgiving glare. "Are you here to support me or because Ez asked you to come?"

Her eyes narrowed on me. "You're my son, Elias. I will always support you. When you allow me to."

"I've never *not* allowed you to."

"That's not exactly the truth now is it?" Her brown eyes held firmly to her truth daring me to deny it.

"It's true, Mother. It has been true my entire life."

When I was level she doted over me, when I wasn't she focused on Lucas and Ez. When they accepted their roles working alongside our father, she completely disconnected from anything concerning her first born. The family disgrace.

"You're penalizing me for things I can't control."

I laughed bitterly. "Are you saying you couldn't control accepting your less than perfect son for who and what he is?"

"I've always accepted you, Elias." She rushed that lie from her mouth and moved on. "Your father would be so proud to see you today. To know that

you're embracing the destiny that was always meant to be yours."

My mother was the queen of eluding accountability. That was what we did as a family. Focused on the things that made us feel good. Allowed us to shine.

"I'm sure he would. If you'll excuse me..." I stepped away and she crossed in front of me, cutting off my path. Her eyes roamed my face for a long moment, searching for any sign of the flaws that gave her an excuse to toss me aside.

"You let him down, you know?"

How the fuck could I forget?

"And you don't think he let *me* down? That *you* let me down."

She frowned. "You didn't bother coming to his funeral. That was the least you could have done."

Accountability avoidance, again.

"I didn't know and if you wanted me there, the least *you* could have done was reached out..."

Her eyes narrowed and I added, "But that's not your style, is it Mother? Had you done so, that would have taken away one more thing you could look down on me about. There wouldn't be another black mark against me, adding to just how much I disappointed you and him. It was better that I wasn't there."

I walked away and she spoke to my back. "You haven't changed, Elias. You're still the selfish person you've always been. I assumed you being here meant you finally understood what it means to stand for your family. I guess I was wrong."

"I guess you were." I spoke over my shoulder and walked away, regretting that I agreed to any of this. She could accuse me of not changing but she hadn't changed either.

Before I could make my escape I was ambushed by a Devereaux, but not the one I had grown fond of lately. The much younger version.

"You're marrying my sister?" Her expression was unreadable so I kept mine blank.

"I am."

"You picked her over me, why?"

I lowered my eyes and she didn't budge. "You're young. Cress was the better option."

No point in protecting her feelings.

“So *you* chose my sister. Does that mean you actually like her enough to want to marry her for the right reasons and not just for this showy, political bullshit?” She glanced around the room before her eyes landed on me again.

I wasn't sure how I needed to answer the question or what answer she was actually looking for so again I kept my response short but honest.

“I'm marrying your sister because I want to. Enjoy your evening, Jona.” I attempted to walk off but she cut in front of me just like my mother had done. My frustration was spiking but mostly because I hadn't released the irritation that was still lingering from my mother. I didn't want Jona to be caught in the crossfire so I swallowed down my annoyance and let her have the moment.

“My sister deserves to be happy. All my life I looked at her as the lucky one. She got to do whatever she wanted. Traveling the world, dancing center stage, being adored by the world. My parents and my brothers never placed demands on Cress. For me things were different. Or at least I thought they were but I'm now starting to understand. I was the one who made things *different*. I could have done anything I wanted, just like my sister. You choosing Cress was kind of a slap in the face.” She grinned. “But it was also a reality check. I don't want to be your wife but I would have done it because Christian asked me to.”

“I'm not sure what you're expecting me to say.”

“I'm thanking you for not choosing me. Say you're welcome.”

I smirked with understanding. The kid was a handful. “You're welcome, Jona.”

“And one more thing...” She stepped closer.

“What's that?”

“She's my sister and I love her. You hurt her and...”

“I'm not going to hurt your sister.”

“No, you won't because if you do, you'll regret it.” She narrowed her eyes, laced with tainted innocence, then walked away. I turned in the opposite direction and left the ballroom, navigating to the rear of the house where I stepped outside into the gardens. I inhaled a deep breath needing a minute to ground myself. I had picked up the prescription from Dr. Temple but wouldn't start the new regime until the morning so my mood was slipping.

“You don't think I know that? Because I do. I love you and I want this to work but it's complicated.”

I heard a familiar female voice. One that shouldn't be professing their love on a call because the man she took vows with was inside working the

room.

I moved quietly, gaining on her, but she was so caught up in the call that she hadn't noticed she was no longer alone.

"I can't just walk away. There are things binding us that I have to work out..."

"Sasha..." I called her name and she startled, turning to face me, eyes wide and fearful.

She clutched the phone to her face and whispered to the caller, "I have to go."

She didn't bother worrying about whatever they might have said. She simply ended the call and looked at me with nervous eyes, forcing a smile.

"I'm gonna go back inside."

I walked closer. "Ez, isn't happy. You aren't either. He wants a divorce. Said that you want to make things work. That's not what it looks like."

"Don't judge what you don't understand, Elias. You've been gone for years. You have no clue what's between your brother and I."

"You telling another man that you love him gives me a pretty good idea of what's between you and my brother."

"He's not perfect."

"Never said he was. What I am saying is that you don't want to be married to him and he doesn't want to be married to you. There's a simple fix, Sasha. Get a divorce."

"Divorcing your brother isn't a simple solution. Our marriage isn't about us. It never has been. Again, don't judge what you don't understand and stay out of my business. Your father is the reason why I'm so miserable."

She walked off and I moved further into the garden, taking a seat on one of the concrete benches. A few minutes later I had company.

"If you get to hide, so do I?"

I smiled at Cress who settled next to me. The bench was long enough to fit at least four people but she took the spot directly next to me so that our shoulders and thighs were touching.

"I'm not hiding."

She turned her face to meet mine and arched a brow. I chuckled, lowering my eyes to her finger where she was toying with her ring.

"You've been fidgeting with that all night," I murmured. Her eyes shot up to mine.

"How would you know that unless you've been watching me?" Her voice

was teasing.

“I have. Is that a problem?”

“No, I don’t know. *Maybe.*”

I chuckled at her uncertainty. “I like watching you and considering the alternative...” *Engaging in small talk with people I have no desire to converse with.* “Watching you has been the highlight of my evening.”

“I guess I can’t argue with that.” Her eyes lowered to her hand and she wiggled her fingers. “I love the ring. It’s nothing like I expected.”

“What didn’t you expect?”

She smiled wide. “I don’t know really but I figured something more uniform.”

“Is that what you would have preferred?”

“No...” She frowned. “I love this and I’m not fidgeting with it because it’s not absolutely stunning. It’s just a reminder that this is happening. Tonight makes things more real. That we’re really getting married.”

I could agree. Tonight shifted things a little. A houseful of people congratulating us would do that.

“I met your mother.”

“Then I apologize for whatever experience she left you with.”

“She was nice.”

“I’m sure she was, to *you.*”

“Hmm, should I invite her to dinner to get the full experience?”

I laughed, shaking my head. “You can but you’re on your own. I wouldn’t dare willingly expose myself to the full experience of my mother.”

“How is that fair? I had to suffer through dinner with my mother.”

“As much as you think your mother and mine are similar, they’re two very different people.”

“Care to explain?”

“Story for another day.”

We stared at each other awhile, not saying anything. She wanted more, I couldn’t give her that right now because doing so would lead to the reasoning behind why my mother and I were on opposing sides. I wasn’t prepared to offer insight on how my mother viewed me as her biggest disappointment. I know I had to. But tonight wouldn’t be that night.

“Story for another day then,” she offered softly and my gut clenched from denying Cress. Even something so simple as insight on my family. I was already fucked when it came to the power this woman was capable of having

over me.

“Cress...”

“Hmmm...”

“I want to kiss you right now.”

Her smile spread like wildfire before she offered, “I want to let you.”

I chuckled, gripped her chin, and pressed my lips to hers. Soft gentle touches at first to get a feel for her but then my hand met her jaw, squeezing roughly while my tongue took over. I explored all the corners of her mouth, pulling back enough to bite and suck her bottom lip until she was leaning into me with a hand on my thigh. Fingers digging in at first then climbing higher, closer until she made contact. She tried to pull away but I kissed her harder because I was sold on the idea of wanting her to touch me. However, the moment was interrupted by someone I thought for sure I could fucking strangle.

“Cress...”

She froze and pulled away from me, wiping her mouth as she corrected her posture.

“Allen. What are you doing here?”

Yeah, now I was for sure going to strangle this muthafucker. She knew him and based on the look currently displayed on the guy’s face it was more than just a mutual acquaintance.

“I flew in this morning. Imagine my surprise when the first thing I saw in the paper was a wedding announcement...” He stepped closer. “With your name in it...”

The guy’s eyes lowered briefly to me before lifting again. The first thought I had was my property was gated, he shouldn’t have been allowed to make it to my house. As soon as I found out how he did, I was issuing consequences.

“You want to introduce me to your *friend*?”

She was not his friend. She was not his anything after tonight if I had a say in it and I had a goddamn say. I stood and Cress did too, stepping slightly in front of me.

Protecting him.

I yanked her to my side, planting my hand at her hip, holding firmly to make sure she didn’t move.

“Allen, this is Elias Omari...”

“Her fiancé,” I added, purposely glaring at him.

He ignored me and focused on Cress. First fucking mistake, dismissing me. “I know who he is, what I don’t know is how I’ve been gone for a little over a month and you’re engaged to him.” His eyes remained on her as he lifted a hand aiming a finger at me.

“You don’t think I deserve the courtesy of a heads up?”

“I guess you weren’t worth the effort of extending a courtesy.” I kept calm, trying really hard not to allow the anger building to push through.

“I’m good enough for her to fuck then I’m good enough to be extended the courtesy of knowing that she’s marrying you.”

From the corner of my eye I noticed the look of surprise and hurt actively moving through Cress’s expression.

I was moving at the same time she was. Her petite frame blocked mine and the only way to get to him was by knocking Cress over, moving her out the way. She must have sensed that would be my intended move.

“Elias, don’t. Not here, not tonight.” She pushed back against me with her body and her hand fisted the material of my pants.

“We’re not dating. I don’t owe you anything. Sex is just sex, Allen. I’m sorry if you assumed it meant more.”

“I don’t know why I care. You’re not worth the time spent if you agreed to marry him...”

He tossed his head toward me. I took a minute to fully take the guy in. Slacks. Cashmere sweater. Loafers. Boring as fuck but clearly well off. I didn’t know him. Even after she’d given his name nothing about the guy registered to me. He likely came from money but that didn’t mean shit to me.

“Lias...”

I heard my brother approaching but didn’t acknowledge him. My body was already humming with the need to deal with this son of a bitch. That was the problem with my disorder. There were times I could control the outcome and others when I couldn’t. Tonight just happened to be one of the latter.

I was moving again this time not caring about what was happening around me. I did feel Cress’s hands press into my chest then move down to my stomach. My logic had been overshadowed by the blazing hue of red that clouded my gaze. My fist crashed into the guy’s face. One calculated punch with years of skill, strength, and rage driving the motion. I dropped him. His knees hit the ground below and the rest of him followed. It felt like everything was moving in slow motion but small vibrating hands pressed into my abs again, grounding me.

“You didn’t have to do that.” Cress’s voice brought my surroundings back into clear view. Elias was yelling for everyone to go back inside. Christian was at his side doing the same.

My gaze dropped and fastened with hers but the one thing I expected wasn’t there. No fear or anger. Just confusion.

“Fuck.” I yanked a hand down my face and turned to walk off. She was behind me, fisted the back of my jacket and my muscles locked beneath my clothes. I turned back in her direction and her eyes went wide, not expecting the abrupt movement.

“Where are you going?”

I have no fucking idea.

“I need a minute.” I struggled to collect every bit of restraint I had which at the moment was very little...

“You need a minute?” She jerked her chin lifting her eyes to me. “Well I need an explanation. What the hell just happened?”

“You know exactly what happened. I told you that no one will ever treat you with anything less than respect.”

“I get that but you can’t just go around assaulting people and truthfully I can’t say *you*. Whoever that man was, the one that hit Allen wasn’t you Elias.” Her tone was tentative.

I laughed lightly. “I’ll take that into consideration.”

I wouldn’t mostly because I wasn’t always able to.

Instead of explaining, I turned to leave again. “Where are you going? We’re not done talking...”

“Maybe you’re not, but I am. I told you I need a fucking minute.” I didn’t stop moving nor did I consider what she was saying. As much as I hated the reality of things. I really needed a fucking minute more.

TWELVE

Cress

“IS HE OKAY?” I asked as soon as Christian walked up to me. It took a little over an hour to clear the house. Everyone was gone, aside from Ezekiel and his wife who lived here, the staff assigned to clean up after that party, my brother, and of course Allen who was being seen by a doctor that appeared out of nowhere. He was with them and a man I just learned was the Omari family attorney.

They worked fast protecting the interest of their family members. I was used to the process because it was no different from how my father handed things in the past and now Christian.

“He has a fractured jaw but he’ll survive. Are you dating Allen Warren? Please tell me you know better than to get tied up with that man.”

“I’m not dating him.”

Christian placed his tightly clenched fist on his hips lowering his chin so that his blazing eyes met mine. “Let me rephrase the question. Are you fucking him?”

“Yes. Are you happy?” I threw my hands up.

“Why the hell would I be happy about you screwing Allen Warren when I’m right in the middle of a very important business deal with his ex-father-in-law. That should go over extremely well, considering they already hate that fucker since he cheated on his daughter. People choose sides in business, Cress. I need him to choose mine.”

“He’s divorced.”

“It doesn’t fucking matter. He cheated on the guy’s daughter. It was messy and not a good look for you or this family.”

“You’re not sleeping with him. *I* was and casually. What does it matter?”

“I’m not doing this with you.”

“Why are you angry? I didn’t know you were in the middle of a business deal with him.”

He cut his eyes my way and shook his head. “You could do better, Cress. Why do you always sell yourself short?”

“*Better* like the man I’m currently engaged to?” I was wrong. Wasn’t sure why but I had no idea what the hell had just happened with Elias. It was as if the man I knew was somehow transformed into one I couldn’t recognize. This wasn’t like the altercation with Shilo. Even then, it was more about Elias defending me but tonight, things felt off. Like he wasn’t himself.

“Yeah well. I’m beginning to wonder if I made the wrong call with this,” he muttered and I glanced at my phone just in time to catch a text from Jona.

She left not long before things got crazy, hurrying to the airport with a flight to catch from plans she made before the engagement party. One week in Maldives. She was flying home for the wedding and leaving the day after on her way to Bali.

“Jona is on the plane. She said she’ll let me know when she gets there.”

“One problem at a time, please.”

Christian wasn’t onboard with Jona’s new found desire to travel the world alone but there wasn’t much he could do to stop our baby sister that wouldn’t end in her shutting him out. He controlled most of the family’s portfolio, but not her trust which held enough for Jona to live a luxurious life for a very long time.

“Why is a lawyer with Allen? Is he already preparing to sue?”

“I’m sure he considered it but by the time Ez’s lawyers are done detailing how fiscally stupid that will be, he’ll cut his losses, accept whatever is offered, and if he’s smart stay the fuck away from *you*.”

Christian glared at me like this was somehow my fault.

“I didn’t ask him to come.”

“Did you bother telling him you were marrying another man?”

“No. I was going to but he was in Japan. I haven’t talked to him in weeks. That’s not how we work. It was just sex. Mutually consensual sex with no strings attached or promises of commitment.”

“Spare me please.”

“God, Chris. You’ve slept with half the female population in the city. Are you really judging me?”

“I’m not judging you, Cress. I don’t give a damn who you sleep with but I do care about being handed the intimate details of how you handle things.”

“Fine.”

I walked over to the bar and wrapped my hand around a bottle of bourbon not caring that they were working efficiently to pack everything away.

“Can I have a glass please?”

The guy stacking bottles of champagne in crates nodded, kneeling lower. When he was at his full height, he handed over a glass. I filled the bottom, tossed it back, and repeated the act.

“May I?” Ez motioned to the bottle and I extended it to him. He turned it up, not bothering to request a glass like I had.

“How did it go in there?”

He laughed arrogantly. “They’re stitching him up.”

“I was thinking more along the lines of whether or not I had to worry about my wedding being delayed because my future husband is about to be tied up in a lawsuit.”

Ezekiel eyed me in silent contemplation for a long moment. I couldn’t read him but when he opened his mouth I pieced together part of what the skeptical look was about. “You still plan on marrying my brother?”

I arched a brow. “Are you saying something’s changed and you no longer need me to?”

He exhaled a slow breath. “No, nothing has changed on my end. Wasn’t sure if it had on yours.” He placed the bottle on the bar and turned to me again. “What happened out there?”

“I really don’t know. Allen was disrespectful. He got exactly what he deserved but I really don’t think it was just that. Something happened to your brother. He was different.”

“Different how?”

“I don’t know. Just different. There was this wild look in his eyes but they were almost vacant. And he was physically there. But in a way he wasn’t. Is that normal behavior? Have you seen him get that angry before? Is his temper something I should be concerned about? What happened tonight can’t happen again.”

“Come with me.”

“Why?”

“Cress, just come with me, please. You need to talk to him. *He* needs to explain this.”

Something felt off and had my pulse thumping like I should be worried even though Ez’s eyes were soft and pleading. I toyed with my ring, worrying

my lip with my teeth, and my eyes drifted to Christian who had his back to us and a phone to his ear. His stance was wide and I could tell from the stretch of his suit jacket that one arm was pressed across his chest while the other was bent up cradling the phone to his face. The conversation didn't appear to be friendly, but Ez's voice brought my gaze back to him.

"Don't worry about Christian. I'll let him know where you are."

"Okay."

I followed Ezekiel out of the ballroom, through the house, up the left side of the stairs. When we reached the landing, he turned left, entering a long hallway. Halfway down there was another staircase that matched the ones in the foyer but only about half its capacity. We talked up those and made another left to the end of another hallway until we reached two large black doors that started near the ceiling extending to the floor.

"Give me a minute."

I nodded and he pulled down the handle to open one of the massive doors and disappeared inside. I heard his footfalls move away from where I was standing then murmured voices. I couldn't decipher what they were saying but it was definitely Elias and his brother. A few minutes later, Ez appeared again and pointed to the room behind him.

"You can go in. He's on the balcony."

He said he needed a minute. Did I really want to go in there?

"Maybe I shouldn't..."

"Cress, you want answers, he's the one who has to give them to you. He knows you're out here."

"Does he know I'm coming in *there*?" I arched a brow and Ez smiled, nodding. "He does."

"Okay then does he know I'm coming in expecting answers?"

His smile expanded. "Yes, he knows why you're up here." His hand squeezed mine gently almost like a sign of comfort then he was gone. I peeked into the room trying to decide if I really wanted to be on the other side. My need to understand the man I was supposed to marry took over and I walked inside.

The room was classic and contemporary with a range of grays and charcoal hues. The floors were paneled wood a few shades darker than the modern sleek gray furniture and the wall behind the bed was textured with a simple pattern that mimicked the strokes of a paint brush, while the others were alternating grays.

There was an illuminating chandelier above the king sized bed and sitting area but the ceilings were so tall you'd barely notice they were there. The space was simple, yet cozy and very clean and neat. That was what stood out the most. Everything was organized and tidy.

I stepped onto the balcony where I found Elias sitting in a chair, body extended, head back, and angled to the ceiling with his eyes closed.

"Hey..."

He didn't respond so I moved closer, electing not to touch him. I simply stared at his profile which was shaded by his arms being folded in front of him, hands linked over his head.

"We should probably talk."

"About your surprise guest. Yeah, that might be a good idea to discuss your boyfriend with your fiancé."

"He's not my boyfriend..."

Elias lifted his head. His body was tense. After a long pause, he laughed darkly and jerked to his feet, pushing past me. I followed, not caring that he didn't want to have this conversation. We were having it.

"Stop ignoring me. Tell me what happened out there."

He paused his movements, his back was to me, muscle straining against the fabric of his shirt since he was no longer in a suit jacket.

"Explosive rage. A very common symptom with bipolar disorder."

Explosive rage.

Bipolar.

Everything around me closed to the point where I had to focus hard to make sense of what he was telling me. My stomach knotted with unease.

"You're bipolar?"

He just stared at me but the confirmation was sharply present in his eyes.

"Were you going to tell me?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"I don't know."

"Before we said our vows?"

"I said I don't fucking know." His voice elevated and I could almost feel the irritation radiating from him in strong waves, but I shouldn't have been the focus of his unease. I hadn't done anything wrong.

"You don't get to be angry with me. I'm not the one at fault here. You punched a guy because you couldn't stop yourself. And more importantly

you kept a very important detail about you from me. Something that I need to consider before agreeing to all of this.”

He laughed darkly then proceeded to escape again.

“Elias...”

“What?” He spun so quickly that I almost stumbled backward.

“Are you going to tell me what is going on? What happened tonight? Do you know Allen?” His eyes darkened.

“I don’t fucking know him. What I know is he said some foul shit to and about you.”

“I agree, but your reaction. Was it because of him or...”

Because of the disorder.

“Cress, leave it alone,” he warned harshly.

“Leave it alone? I can’t. I’m confused and need to know what the hell happened. I need to know if it will happen again. I’m going to be your wife, Elias.”

“Not anymore. This isn’t a good idea.”

I felt as if someone had just slapped me in the face. “What do you mean not anymore? You’ve changed your mind?”

Why did I care? After tonight, I should be grateful. This man was a vast contradiction. One minute he was sweet and flirty and the next he was flying off the rails in full attack mode.

“You should be the one who changed their mind. What happened tonight is a part of who I am and I can’t guarantee that it won’t happen again. If anything I can guarantee that it will. Do you really want a husband that’s unpredictable?”

“I really don’t understand what’s happening and I’m trying to. *I want to.*”

“You’ll never fully understand. It fucked with my head. It will always be a part of who I am. It will always be my struggle. I’m not changing my mind about this marriage but you need to change *yours.*”

“Well I’m not.” I folded my arms across my chest and lifted my chin defiantly. I watched him, he watched me, his face traveling through a cocktail of emotions.

“Cress...”

“Don’t waste your time trying to warn me that this is a bad idea and stop trying to make it sound dark and scary because you want to scare me into changing my mind. If you want to be a pussy and take the easy route by forcing me to be the one to end this then you can stop now. I won’t let you. If

you want out, then it's going to have to be your decision. Not mine. So what's it going to be? Pussy or a man, Elias."

I could see him warring and eventually he dropped his eyes and leveled his face with the floor to hide the smile that surfaced.

"You really gonna call me a pussy?"

"Are you really going to act like one?" I arched a brow and he chuckled lightly but he was still on edge, uneasy about what I now knew.

"This is something I don't share with people."

"I can respect that but I'm not *people*. I'm going to be your wife."

We remained in a standoff. He wanted me to bail. To make this easy, but I wouldn't.

"What do you want to know?"

"Whatever I need to know."

He cleared his throat and his fingers flexed and closed into fists at his sides. His body looked like it was pulsing the way his muscles tensed and relaxed consistently.

"I was diagnosed when I was thirteen."

Feeling that I needed to make this as easy as possible for him, I walked over to the sitting area and sank onto the leather sofa, posture relaxed, hands clasped together in front of me.

He joined me in the space, leaning against the wall opposite where I was seated. His jaw tightened several times before he continued.

"I got into a fight with Ez. I don't remember what it was about but I know it wasn't anything that should have warranted the reaction I had. I blacked out. Completely lost control. When my father pulled me off him and threw me across the room and I snapped out of it, I was so fucking lost. My head was in a fog but I could still feel the anger pulsing through me. I was looking at my brother's face, busted lip, bruises swelling and the worst part, the fear in his eyes but I still felt enraged. The anger was pushing so hard in me that I didn't know what to do."

"Then what?"

His fingers were in motion again. When he noticed my attention drawn to them, he shoved both hands in his pockets.

"Ez and Lucas both were afraid of me. They wouldn't come near me for days. My parents spent a lot of time whispering about me and a week later, I was sitting in a doctor's office listening to him explain to my parents that I had bipolar disorder.

He prescribed meditations but specified that he needed to watch me to determine what worked best. Bipolar is different for everyone. There's no one size fits all. After a while they realized what I have is rapid cycling..."

"What does that mean?" I kept my voice as level as possible. Didn't want him to shut down on me. This was a conversation we needed to have but I also didn't want him feeling like whatever he shared would make me run. I wouldn't run. I had already chosen him whether he believed that or not and this wouldn't change my mind. I just needed to understand him a little better.

"Cycles of highs and lows. Most of the time it's weeks even months where I suffer from periods of mania but mostly depression. With me, my cycles are shorter and less frequent. Hours but I can go from one end of the emotional spectrum to the other back to back. I'm also fortunate enough that the periods between my cycles are less frequent. Months at a time."

"Is that what happened tonight? A cycle?"

He quickly shook his head. "Things trigger me. Most of the time I can feel when it's happening. My chest gets tight, my pulse gets erratic, mind starts racing. If I'm triggered I usually just walk away. Sometimes I can't. Tonight I couldn't."

"Your brother knows."

"Yeah."

"Does mine?"

"Maybe, but not likely unless Ez told him. He probably wouldn't though. It's not exactly something you bring up in conversation."

"Is that why you didn't tell me?"

"Partly." His brows pinched like he was deep in thought. "For the first year after I was diagnosed, my mother kept dragging me to different doctors. Here in the city then different states where there were *experts*. Nothing changed. They all said the same thing. There was no cure, no fix, but with proper management and medication I could live a normal life."

"Which is good, right?"

"Not with a family like mine. My father wrote me off after the first diagnosis. He didn't bother being hopeful the way my mother was. All of his attention moved from me to Ez and Lucas. My mother kept trying. She never got the answers she was looking for so after a while she was done with it too but neither of them discussed it outside of our home. My disorder was a weakness, a blemish on our family's pristine reputation, and they couldn't have that."

That made my heart ache for him because parents were supposed to be the only ones we could count on for unconditional love. I knew that wasn't the case because my mother always had conditions. But this was different.

"But you and Ez are close."

"We are. He forgave me once he understood what was happening, who I was. He never blamed me for things I couldn't control."

"And you thought that I would..." I said quietly.

"I didn't *think* anything..."

"But you didn't tell me."

"Because I wanted you to get to know *me* first. It's a part of who I am but it's not me."

My heart cracked again. This man was strong and fierce and so full of strength but talking about this made him vulnerable exposing pain.

Fear.

Fear of possibly not being seen or accepted by me.

"Do you still want me to walk away? To change my mind?"

No. It was there, so loud and bold. He'd lost enough people because of this but that didn't stop his honesty.

"I don't want a wife who tiptoes around me, who treats me like I'm broken or like someone she can't trust or respect. If knowing this makes you feel any of those things then yes, I want you to say you can't do this."

Trust.

Loyalty.

Respect.

I now understood why those things were so important to him. I stood and moved closer until I was inches from where he leaned against the wall. I gently placed my hand on his chest. The muscles tensed and flexed beneath my fingers. His eyes lowered to the connection watching as my hand moved higher until my fingers met his cheek which I cradled in my palm, allowing the pads of my finger to press into his skin.

"I can't change my mind."

"Why?" He struggled to get the words out, swallowing hard.

"Because I don't want to." His gaze drifted over my face.

"But what if I want you to?"

I smiled, inching closer and sliding my arm around his neck, allowing my chest to press into his.

"Women like me don't take orders very well. We sort of do whatever the

hell we want.”

He chuckled, lowering his eyes to my lips.

“But I need to add one more thing to our list of expectations.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Communication.”

His brows tensed and I explained. “This is new for me. I’m familiar with bipolar but very surface information. I do know enough to understand there’s no one size fits all. Like the rapid cycling thing. I’ve never heard that before. I won’t always know what you need but I’m willing to learn. While I’m learning I need you to be open and communicate with me. You have to talk to me, Elias. You have to trust me enough to tell me what’s going on with you and respect my role in your life enough to know that I’m going to do whatever I can to make sure you’re good, that *we’re* good but I can’t do that if you hide. You have to let me see you. *All of you*. I will be loyal to you as my husband.”

“Is that it?”

“Well yeah...”

My words were cut off by his mouth crashing against mine. Then his forehead against mine.

“I’m sorry I fucked up our engagement party.”

“I’m not.”

He smirked. “I’ll pay for another one if you want me to.”

I gently shook my head. “No, one was enough to provide a lifetime of memories that I’ll spend years trying to forget.” He laughed lightly. “And that would mean delaying the wedding. I don’t want that.”

“No?”

“No. I’m kinda looking forward to moving in here. This house is fucking amazing.”

He grinned down at me. “If you’d rather stay at your place...” I opened my mouth to argue but he lifted a hand and brushed his thumb over my lips to silence me. “Hear me out, baby. What you know now changes things. I don’t want you to be uncomfortable with me so if you want to stay at your place you can. I won’t like it but I’ll understand.”

“I want to be here, with you.”

“You sure?”

“You made me a promise. That I was safe with you. I trust you to keep it.”

“I will.”

“I guess that means I need to figure out this dress thing.”

“You haven’t found one?”

“Not yet. I’ve been looking but nothing feels right.”

“Do you want me to help?”

“Help me find a wedding dress?” I stared at him confused.

“Yeah, is that so strange?”

“Doesn’t that break tradition or something? Like you’re not supposed to see me in it?”

He lifted my chin and kissed me again, which wasn’t good with my hormones currently going haywire knowing we were in his room, a few feet from his bed.

“Nothing about what we’re doing is traditional, Cress. I think we have a little leeway to make exceptions, but I don’t have to see you in it if that’s what you prefer. I can make a few calls to get some options sent to you.”

“Calls to who? Isn’t this your first wedding?”

He smiled charmingly. “It is but I still know people who know people. You want my help or not?”

Why would I refuse when I wasn’t having much luck on my own.

“Sure, why not.”

Elias pressed a kiss to my forehead. “Okay, I’ll take care of it.” He pushed away from the wall, forcing me to move with him. “Come on, I’ll take you home.”

“You want me to leave?”

“I don’t want you to leave but it’s for the best if we intend on keeping some things about this wedding traditional.”

“I’m not a virgin and I assume you aren’t either.”

He paused his steps, lowering a hard gaze to me. “You with other men is a trigger, baby. A very explosive one.”

Noted.

“But, my point is, my first experience with you will be as my wife.”

“Oh…”

Once we reached the landing outside of his room, he slipped his hand in mine, bringing my fingers to his mouth where he kissed my ring.

“It’s important to me.”

“Then it’s important to me too.”

But damn if my body wasn’t screaming at me to say fuck tradition. Let’s

do this now, over and over and over again. But that wasn't happening.
At least not tonight.

THIRTEEN

elias

THE MORNING after the engagement party I was up early staring at the newly prescribed meds I was to take. A combination I requested because of a certain woman who was now embedding herself into my soul.

So many thoughts crashed in my mind one after another. What if this doesn't work? What if I fuck this up? What if I hurt her? What if I hurt her so severely that she walks away, unable to forgive me?

The easiest way not to feel or suffer from disappointment or abandonment was to never get attached. To never let people in. Not to trust because trust led to expectations and expectations led to relying on people to uphold them.

Shortly after I discovered who I truly was, when those doctors labeled me as damaged goods, I learned that love without conditions didn't exist. For most anyway. There were a few exceptions. Ezekiel and Lucas were exceptions. My brothers loved me. They didn't care that I had this thing that lived in me that made it damn near impossible for them to love me at times. But they did, no matter the consequence, no matter how difficult.

That was why I was here, doing this for Ez. I owed him in a sense. My inability to live up to our father's standards placed demands on his life that were more than they should have been. Lucas dying that night only made things worse. There was no one else for our father to rely on. Only Ez. And the night Lucas was killed, he had been with me, settling the weight of his absence right on my shoulders. I should have been able to prevent what happened. No matter that Cole was amped up on coke to the point where he was out of his logical mind. A simple argument that should've ended with only bruised egos and at worst, a few bruises and broken bones, had ended with the loss of a life. Lucas's.

"It should have been you, not him. *You*. Elias." Those were my father's

only words to me that night.

A few hours later Ez found me in the basement with a loaded gun in my hands. When he approached me, I lifted it to my forehead and told him not to take another step or I'd pull the trigger.

He did but not before telling me, "If you die, I die, Lias. It's just us. We're the beginning and the end. We already lost Lucas and I'm barely hanging on. If I lose you too, I won't make it. If you die I die."

I put the gun down, he took it from my hands and walked away. A few hours later, I hunted Cole Devereaux down, forced him into the trunk of my car, drove out a few miles from his family home, and I beat him until he was no longer breathing. Then I dumped him back into my trunk, drove him to his family's property, and left his body just outside the gates with a note telling them that we would never be even but killing Cole was a good start.

A few days later we buried my brother and I left. Ez tried to get me to stay. Begged me to stay but when he realized there was no changing my mind he accepted that I needed this. He let me go and for one year I tortured myself. Drinking, drugs, fighting, excessive amounts of women. Anything I could do to feed that emptiness I felt because my brother died.

Ez stepped in and saved me again. I owed him this. It was my turn to save him. He needed me here. He needed to make peace between my family and hers and now...

I needed Cress...

I fucking needed her and that scared the shit out of me.

There wasn't much I was scared of other than losing Ez but Cress had changed things. I was fucking terrified of not only losing her but the possibility of breaking her. Destroying her because I lost control. I knew that I would never lay a finger on Cress but I could surely disrupt her life in ways that would make her hate me.

My eyes lowered to the pills once more and I slipped them from the nightstand, tossed them in my mouth, and chased them with water. I closed my eyes as they went down, opening them again when I heard someone enter my room.

"How long have you been up?" Ez frowned at me, lowering his eyes to my bed then back to my face trying to gauge if I'd slept at all.

I had, barely.

"A while. What's up?"

I lifted from the bed, walked to my dresser, and removed a black V-neck

from the drawer which I pulled on.

“You heading out?”

“Yeah, I have a few things I need to take care of. You need me for something?” I cut my eyes his way and he was watching me.

“Are you going to ask about what happened after you stormed off last night?”

“Do you want me to?”

Ez’s expression remained flat. “I guess not.”

“Then I won’t.”

I lifted my phone which I shoved in my front pocket and the key to my bike and wallet which I placed in my back pocket. I didn’t look at my brother but he was still watching me.

“Did you tell her?”

Cress...

“Yes.”

“And?”

“I told her everything, tried to get her to bail. She refused.”

“And you don’t feel like you should be the one to walk away if she refuses to?”

I crossed the room to leave, stopping right in front of my brother. “You wanted this, I’m giving it to you. Now you want me to fall back? You can’t have both, which is it, Ez?”

“I want you to be okay. Last night you were not okay. You told me you were good. If you’re not...”

“I am.”

“Then what the fuck happened...”

She happened.

“How many times have you known me to care about a woman?”

“Never.”

“How many times have you ever known me to be emotionally invested in anyone or anything other than you?”

“Never.”

“That’s what the fuck happened.”

I care about her.

I’m emotionally invested in her.

“If that’s truly the case then I have to ask you again, do you think this is a good idea?”

“No, but it's what she wants.” *What I want good, bad, or indifferent.* “So, I’m giving it to her.”

He exhaled, relaxing his stance. “I’m worried.”

I smirked. “You should be.”

“This isn’t a fucking joke. I’m seriously worried.”

“Good because so am I.”

I stepped away and something occurred to me so I stopped. “Your wife is cheating on you.”

“I know she is, but how do you know?”

“I heard her on the phone in the garden last night.”

Ez mumbled his annoyance, brushing a hand over his head. “She’s getting sloppy.”

“She wasn’t expecting me to be out there,” I added. “But I thought you said she wanted things to work and you didn’t. Openly cheating doesn’t feel like wanting to fix your marriage.”

“Because it’s not. She doesn’t give a damn about wanting to fix our marriage. Nor does she give a damn about me. The terms of our contract are very specific. Our father was very good at manipulation and negotiation when it came to things he wanted. Her father wanted his daughter married to a man who would honor and respect her. Our father wanted controlling interest of her father’s business...”

“Which he had and *you* now have. Our money fixed their financial issues. Win-win on both sides.”

“Not exactly.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that he knew she and I wouldn’t work. I told him from the very beginning there was nothing between us. That wouldn’t change. He didn’t care. There was always a plan behind the plan with him. She’s cheating with the man she was hoping to marry before her father sold her to ours. The man she’s been in love with since she was a kid. I didn’t know...”

“But he did.”

“A plan behind the plan.”

“He knew the marriage wouldn’t last. In the event we separate or divorce, if there are any indiscretions on her side then it’s no longer controlling interest. Our family completely owns everything. Her family is left with nothing. A thirty-million dollar empire, *gone.*”

“They didn’t know?”

“Too fucking greedy and eager to sign over everything. They didn’t care about the terms as long as I married their daughter and we wrote the check. I told her I wanted a divorce. Drew up the papers which enforced the terms of the original agreement but I’m not our father. I’m not fucking heartless but business is business. I can’t completely let things go. There’s too much invested and a lot of money and opportunity on the table. I was going to still have majority shares and a seat on the board. Her family now understands what they have to lose if I walk away from them. They’ll be comfortable, but everything they’ve worked for will belong to our family. They demanded she work things out.”

“But that’s not what you want.”

“No, I’m fucking miserable. I take my vows seriously. I refuse to cheat.”

“You’re a better man than me.”

“You’re right, I am.” He shrugged then smiled.

“How long you gonna let her drag this out?”

“Not much longer. My patience is running very thin.”

“And while you’re waiting, you don’t think they’re making plans?”

“Oh I’m sure they are but executing any of those plans is impossible without my say so. I have controlling interest in everything they own. They can’t make a move without me.”

“Wouldn’t want to be you.”

“I don’t want to be me,” he scoffed. “So, the wedding’s still happening?”

“Yeah, it is. I’ll get with you later though. I have some things that need to get done.”

* * *

I parked my bike right outside of Perfect Pick and pushed through the doors. Flowers wouldn’t fix my fuck up last night but it was a start.

“Back so soon?”

“Yeah, I guess I am.”

I frowned at the woman accepting a card from the guy facing her at the counter. There was a bouquet of some type of orange flowers wrapped in black tissue and bound with gold cording. It was protected by cellophane. I checked them out but decided that orange wasn’t what I was looking for. They didn’t fit Cress. The woman finished with him, handed over his flowers, and he tossed a chin to me on his way out. She sidled up beside me once he

was gone.

“You remember me?”

“Dark red and black parrot tulips. Two dozen of each. The arrangement was breathtaking.”

I glanced at her and she smiled. “I remember the flowers more than the people who purchase them.”

“Makes sense.”

“Did she like them?”

“She did.”

“So are you back because she loved them or because you messed up again?”

I chuckled and she moved past me back to the counter.

“Both but more the latter.”

“You should make better choices then. I’m going to run out of arrangements that will dig you out of a hole.”

“The first one was a congratulations for her performance. She’s a classical dancer. This time it’s because I messed up.”

“We’ll then, let’s see if I can help you out of whatever mess you’ve gotten yourself in. Do you have any idea what you’re looking for?”

“No, you did a really great job last time so I’ll leave that up to you.”

“Are you truly trying to say that you’re sorry or is there something else?”

“I want her to know that I appreciate her trusting me and that I see her strengths, but also I want them to express how beautiful and rare she is.”

She smiled slowly. “Oh, you’ve got it bad, buddy.”

I chuckled with no intention of denying the truth. “Yeah I do.”

“I’ve got just the thing.”

* * *

My next stop was the private studio that was purchased for Cress. The owner was listed as Liberté Abstraite but Cress Devereaux was attached to the paperwork. I would assume the space was gifted by her brother considering he owned the building with the exception of that one space.

After meeting Cress, with a greedy intent, I collected every detail I could about my future wife. At the time it was simply to learn more about her. In the future it would be to ensure I had the ability to guarantee she was untouchable. As of now the information was simply an asset that made

moments like the present possible.

Once I reached her space, I stood outside the glass-paneled wall watching her. I'd experienced Cress in motion a few times and as amazing as she was on stage, this was easily my favorite. Watching her now felt more intimate, like she was dancing for only me. Her feet appeared to barely touch the floor, giving the illusion that she was dancing on air. A contrast of strength and delicacy.

When the song ended, I knocked on the glass and her eyes jolted to mine. First with confusion but then a smile eased on her face. She sank to the floor but pointed to the door. I stepped inside the studio and she threw her hand up.

"Shoes off."

"I'm not taking my damn shoes off."

She frowned at my feet then angled her face upward to look at me. "You'll ruin my floors if you don't."

"Then I suggest you come to me. I'm not taking my shoes off, Cress."

She rolled her eyes and lifted so gracefully and effortlessly it looked as if there could be strings attached to her body and limbs that were tugged over her head. When she was close enough I wrapped an arm around her slim waist pulling her to me like I'd done it a million times before. "Hey."

"Hey..." she returned in a breathy tone. "Are these for me?"

"No, for my next stop. She likes flowers. Figured I'd kill two birds with one stone."

"That would be a dangerous game to play."

I chuckled and kissed her temple, allowing her to pull away from me when she tried. "They're for you."

"They better be." She lifted them from my arms, lowering her face toward the blooms.

"They're beautiful. What are they?"

"Gladiolus Espresso."

"I've never seen them before. The color is so deep and rich. Is this going to be one of your things?" She peeked up at me.

"Maybe, is that a problem?"

"No, I love flowers, but I'm also attempting to learn my future husband. Did they tell you the meaning?"

"They did. Strength of character, integrity, faithfulness, and remembrance."

"Interesting combination."

“That fully represents who I believe you to be, and...” I gently wrapped my arm around her waist, gently bringing her into me. “Because they’re shaped like a sword they’re known as the sword-lily and the giver is sending a message to the receiver that they are deeply infatuated. The flowers symbolize how you’ve pierced my heart.”

Her smile blossomed so regardless of the cost, it was well worth the purchase. “Do you have plans tonight?”

“No, why?”

“You do now.”

She grinned, cradling the bouquet in both arms. “Dinner plans with you?”

I chuckled. “Dinner plans yes, but not with me. Do you think you can get Trini to meet you around six?”

“Maybe, why?” She gave me a curious look, pulling her lip between her teeth.

“It’s a surprise. Just call her and see if she can meet you. Make sure she knows it’s important.”

“Important.” She lifted a brow

“Yes, *important*. I have to go. If she can’t be there, let me know and I’ll figure out how to make it work without her.”

“I don’t like this.” She pouted and I pressed a kiss to her forehead.

“You don’t have to like it. Just show up at the address I’m sending you, at six, with your girl.”

“Fine but if I don’t like whatever this surprise is...”

“Then name your price and I’ll make it up to you. For now, just trust me.”

Trust.

It was so easy to request but not easily given. But she gave it without question.

“I trust you. Now go, please. I need to finish my conditioning.”

I walked away knowing that there had been plenty of times when my life had been shattered and destroyed, leaving sharp edges and broken pieces but it had always been self-inflicted. Never had anyone held the power to destroy me until now. She could and I felt at some point she would but I’d let her if it meant she stayed around long enough to do the damage. And I knew that was a minefield but I didn’t care nor did the reality stop me from wanting every bit of the pain I knew she would cause.

FOURTEEN

eress

I HAD my arm looped through Trini's as we stepped onto the private elevator that led us into the Grand Amin Suite at the Metropolitan. I was a little anxious, not sure why Elias had rented a suite.

"It's crazy that I've never been here before."

"Not all that crazy. You travel a lot but places other than here."

"Yeah I do, but I've had a few staycations. Just never here."

"Well we'll both be surprised because neither have I."

She grinned at me. "Speaking of surprises, we shouldn't expect any from the future hubby should we?" She gave me a curious grin and I frowned.

"The whole thing is a surprise. He wouldn't tell me anything."

"That's not what I mean. I'm speaking specifically about the type of surprise. He's not into any kinky shit is he?"

"He better not be," I shot back.

"What he told you was pretty vague and cryptic, bitch. Down to the make sure you bring your best friend and if she can't make it, I'll figure something else out. What if we walk in there and he's butt ass naked, dick swinging, expecting a threesome or something."

I threw my free hand over my mouth and choked on a laugh. "What the fuck, Trini? Why the hell would your mind automatically go there?"

"The better question is why *wouldn't* yours?"

"Because I'm a normal person whose mind isn't corrupted with kinky shit."

"Not true. Don't forget we've had a threesome before."

"That was college when we were both young and dumb and exploring our sexuality like every other normal twentysomething. It was totally acceptable then."

“And not now?” She raised a brow and I shook my head.

“Absolutely not. The only woman sharing my husband’s dick or his bed will carry his last name and since polygamy isn’t legal here then that woman will only ever be me.”

“Well shit, I guess you’ve settled into the idea of not just marrying the guy but fucking him too.”

I had.

“It’s kind of a package deal, Trini.”

“Technically yes, but there are always ways around technicalities but I guess you won’t need that.”

“Nope.”

We stepped off the elevator still arm and arm to be greeted by a woman dressed in a chef’s jacket and black pants. She exposed a warm smile as she greeted us.

“Ms. Devereaux and Mrs. Landry.”

“That’s us,” I offered.

“Follow me. We have you set up in the living room.”

She turned to lead the way and Trini leaned into me. “Oh, he’s fancy.”

“I guess so.”

We entered the main living room to find a buffet set up with black linen tablecloth and stainless chargers sitting on them. Ten in total. Before I could ask what was going on, my phone was ringing.

Elias.

“This is nice.”

“Glad you like it. You have dinner waiting. I had Chef Lemont hook up a heavy hors d’oeuvres and dessert sampler for you.”

“Not that I’m complaining, but care to explain why?”

“I fucked up our dinner the other night by forcing you to sit through a meal with your mother. Figured since I was trying hard to get back in your favor, might as well add that to the list.”

“You never lost my favor, Elias.”

“You sure about that?”

“Maybe a little but this will more than make up for it.”

“Good, I hope you enjoy both.”

“Both?”

“Yeah, the meal and the other surprises.” I glanced around.

“Which is?”

“You’ll see soon enough. Enjoy your evening, baby.”

Baby? I’d been getting a lot of those lately.

He ended the call and Trini was at my side holding a plate full of stuffed lobster tails, tempura asparagus, and rosemary and butter diced potatoes in one hand and a glass of wine in the other.

“Yeah, you’ll definitely be fucking him. If he’s doing shit like this, he deserves it. Oh my gawd, these scallops are so buttery smooth they just melt in my mouth.”

“Glad to know how easily you’re won over. Some sea urchins and smashed grapes and you’re all in love.”

“Scallops are Bivalvia not urchins, but yep much in love with him at this point.” She settled on the sofa. I filled my plate and was handed a glass of wine by our server for the evening before I settled into the spot next to Trini.

After a few mouthfuls of cilantro lime shrimp I had to agree. He was more than winning me over.

“Cress...” A woman stepped out of the main suite and approached us wearing the most boss ass mauve pants suit I had ever seen in my life. It was high-waisted pants with six brass buttons lined in stacks of three at the waist, slim cut and accented with a corset style blazer which she was bare beneath based on the way her breasts sat perfectly exposed in the center of the low cut V of the blazer.

“Yes...”

“I’m Addison Bradley. All things to Kameron Tyler.”

“Kameron Tyler,” Trini whisper-yelled from beside me before I got a chance to.

“You work for her.”

“With her and yes. Apparently, whoever set this up for you, is someone important or knows someone important. Kam would have been here herself but she wouldn’t have made it in time, so you get me and not her, but you do get six of her custom pieces to choose from.”

“Custom pieces.”

“Yes, dresses. *Wedding* dresses. You’re getting married in a week, correct?”

Well shit.

“How the fuck did he pull this off?” Trini glanced at me then Addison.

“I don’t know.”

“Neither do I. All I know is that I got a call to have my ass on Kam’s

private jet and in Crescent Falls by six tonight. So I'm here and so are the dresses. Shall we get started?"

"Now?" fumbled out of my mouth. I was still a little confused.

"Unless you have something else more important you'd rather be doing?" She placed both hands on her hips, smiling smugly at me. Kind but matter of factly. Trini snatched my plate and my wine glass.

"Nope, now is good."

I glared at her and she flicked her wrist. "Bitch go."

I followed Addison into the main suite where there were two metal racks. Each with three Kameron Tyler labeled garment bags. My eyes bounced between the racks then landed on her.

"Where should I start?"

"That's up to you. I'm just here to assist."

That's not exactly assisting now is it?

But then I thought of something. "Has he seen the dresses?"

"Yes, that was one of his demands. He wanted to hand pick each one. We started with twenty and got the number down to six. His top six."

"Which one was his favorite?"

"That one?" She pointed to the last garment bag on the second rack.

"Are you sure?"

"Very."

"Then that's the one I want."

"You haven't seen it." She arched a brow with that smug look again.

"If it's his favorite. Then that's the one I want."

"Okay then. But I think you should at least try it on."

I wanted to try it on, so I had no complaints there. "What about size?"

"You're a dancer. Your measurements weren't hard to find. A few phone calls got me what I needed. I picked samples that would work best for your build and here we are. Now undress and I'll get the dress ready and help you into it."

By the time I had it on and stood in the full length mirror admiring myself I was instantly in love and I think I fell a little harder for Elias. He'd picked this for me and it was exquisite and rare.

Heat crawled up my neck reminding me of how he said those words to me.

Addison began talking and I stared at my reflection while she fussed over different details of the dress, delicately brushing her fingers over it.

“Handblown crystal beads and pearls. The choker is made from pearls and white beads sitting high for dramatic effect. You’re a dancer so I’m sure you appreciate that.” She winked at me through the mirror and kept going. “The choker finishes off with elegant off-shoulder pearl sleeves. The base fabric is imported white silk, lined with more crystal beads, pearls. *Hand-beaded*. The pearls on the shoulders are delicate and can break easily so be careful. It’s probably best if you skip wearing anything under it. The garment is see-through but there’s nude underlining so no one gets any sneak peeks.”

She paused and placed her hands on my arms from behind me. “You look amazing. I was torn between this one and another but seeing you in it....” Her smile expanded. “This is it. This is the one.”

“It is,” I said quietly.

“Now go. As much as I’m sure you appreciate my opinion, I’m sure hers will matter so much more.”

She pointed to the living room and I rolled my shoulders back and carefully lifted the dress so I didn’t snag or trip on it. There wasn’t exactly a train but it pooled at my feet a little wider than the formfitting body.

When I made it back to the living room, Trini’s back was to me while she refilled her plate. I remained quiet and still but the minute she turned to me, her eyes went wide.

“Bitch you better wear that dress,” she yelled very animatedly to the point where all I could do was throw my head back and laugh. I extended my arms out beside me and turned slowly.

When my eyes met hers again I asked. “You like it?”

“Fuck no. I don’t like it, I *love* it. Cress, it’s so perfect. So damn perfect. There are no words for how perfect that dress is.”

“He picked it,” I said softly.

Her smile went big. “Of course he did.” She narrowed her eyes, walking deeper into the living room where she lowered her plate to the glass table separating the sofas, lifting her wine glass. “Are you sure I can’t think about him while I’m fucking my husband?”

“Trini, I love you but I will fight you.”

She rolled her eyes. “Fine. I was kidding. *Kind of.*”

“If you’re sure about this one, I’ll help you out of it and have the original packaged and delivered to the address he gave me.”

“What address did he give you?”

“A condo in Millennium.”

My address.

“Perfect, thank you. But wait, what do you mean the original? This isn’t the original?”

“Original prototype, yes, the one she intended to present to a very high profile celebrity who I cannot name or I’ll lose my job so...”

“Oh shit. You’re a dress thief.”

“In a general sense she is but Kameron hand selected the dresses to present to the client in question. This was one of them. She’s never seen it so she won’t know you stole it from her.”

“See, I’m not a dress stealer.”

“You are by default,” Trini chided before settling on the sofa and digging into her plate. I followed Addison back into the room, she helped me out of the dress, and I slipped back into my own clothes before joining Trini again. While Addison packed up the dresses I finished my first plate and was working on another.

“It was a pleasure fitting you. The dress will arrive by ten a.m. tomorrow. If you have any questions my contact information will be inside the packaging.”

“Packaging?” Trini shook her head smiling. “I can’t believe you’re getting married in an original Kameron Tyler.”

Me either.

“Oh, wait. He won’t know which one I picked, will he?”

“No, not unless you want him to. He left a card on file and never asked about pricing.”

“Would you mind not telling him? I know he picked them but of the six, I want the one I chose to be a surprise.”

“You’re the bride-to-be and she always gets what she wants. Your secret is safe with me.”

Not long after Addison was gone, I received a second call.

“So I hear you officially have a wedding dress.”

“I do, thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Which one did you pick?”

“I’m not telling you. It’s going to be a surprise.”

“I’ve seen them all.”

“You have but you haven’t seen me in them.”

“I’m not asking to see you in it. Just want to know which one you chose.”

“Sorry, you’ll have to wait.”

“Damn, it’s like that.”

“Unfortunately, yes and for the record, you’re really setting the bar pretty high and I haven’t said I do yet. What you do to get me you have to do to keep me.”

He laughed lightly and it was like a promise of good things.

“I’m not worried. You can definitely get that and more.”

“We’ll see.”

“Indeed we will. Let me know when you get home. You’re welcome to stay the night if you want but either way, make sure you let me know you’re good.”

I was dancing tonight. I needed to release some energy, but I wouldn’t dare tell Elias. Maybe I would never tell him. I hadn’t decided as of yet. I wasn’t ashamed but I was still in that space where I wasn’t sure everyone would be openminded about my need to be on stage at Chapter House. So, for now, I chose to keep that small detail to myself.

“I will.”

“Night, beautiful.”

“Good night, Elias.”

After I ended the call, I felt Trini burning a hole in the side of my face. I dropped my phone on the sofa next to me and lifted my plate, pulling my legs up and crossing them at the ankles. “What?”

“If I didn’t know for sure that this marriage was a business deal, I would swear on my life that you two met, fell in love, and decided to spend the rest of your lives together.”

“Well, we didn’t but is it so terrible that we like each other?”

“No, it’s not. It makes me feel better. I was worried about you.”

“Why?”

“Because you were stressed the fuck out and not happy about any of this. Now you seem...” She shrugged. “*Agreeable.*”

“I am.”

“Good because I think I like him.”

“Because of all this.”

“No, because of that.” She tipped her glass in my direction.

“What?”

“That goofy ass I’m falling in love smile that he seems to keep in rotation on your face.”

I laughed, shoving a tempura asparagus in my mouth.

She wasn't lying. I didn't have to see my face to know that goofy ass I'm falling smile she was referencing was there. I felt it.

"You're so extra."

"And you're in denial but adorably so. Are we going to talk about what happened out in the gardens? Elias's hand and Allen's face."

"He had no business being there and he got exactly what he deserved."

"I agree but what happened? I saw Elias when he stormed inside. He was more than just angry. Did Allen like kiss you or something?"

"No, but he was very graphic about our situation. It pissed Elias off..." I shrugged. "Like I said, he got what he deserved."

I wouldn't give her anymore. At least not now. He'd shared something intimate with me and sharing it with anyone else felt like betraying his trust. He didn't offer that part of himself to people. He trusted me enough to share it with me. I wouldn't make him regret the decision.

"When your parents told you about Klay, was there anything about him that you would have considered a deal breaker?"

"A deal breaker that would stop me from marrying him?"

"Yeah."

"He was rich. Very sweet and I knew he wouldn't cheat. Sexy in a nerdy kind of way and he didn't disappoint with the necessary tools I needed to make a happily ever after, so no, not really. What about you?"

"What about me?"

"Come on, Cress. You're asking for a reason. Is there something about him that feels like a deal breaker?"

"No."

"Then why ask."

"Because bitch, I wanted to know," I argued and she stared at me like she didn't believe a word I was saying, so I pushed off the sofa to go get more wine. I brought the bottle with me, refilled her glass with what was left and curled my legs up under me again but this time I pressed my back to the arm of the sofa and faced her.

"I hope you don't think giving me more wine is going to make me drop this."

Her eyes narrowed my way.

"There are no deal breakers. Okay, relax. He's not perfect but there's also nothing you need to worry about."

That was more or less true. She didn't have to worry about him. I chose to trust Elias until he proved to me that he couldn't be. Regardless, I didn't feel like he would ever hurt me. Intentionally or not. If it came down to it I truly believed he'd harm himself before he ever hurt me.

FIFTEEN

elias

“Is this the only place in the city where you can have a business meeting?” Ez glanced at me over his shoulder as we navigated through the main area to get to the private room that had been reserved for the evening.

“There are plenty of places but here we get overlooked because the majority of the crowd is occupied by their own personal agendas.”

“Too busy fucking to recall a face.”

“Exactly.”

As soon as we entered the private room, we were greeted by Chief Commissioner Reid and Governor James who brought his son-in-law Fisher. Might as well get him acclimated. Didn’t take much for James to make his decision about where his loyalty needed to be rooted.

“Evening, gentlemen. Glad you could join us. I also appreciate you coming out this late so I won’t waste your time. We’ll get down to business as soon as Christian gets here,” Ez spoke, lifting his chin in acknowledgment to the three men.

There were two large sofas facing each other and two matching armchairs. One on each side. I sat in one, Ez the other while James and Fisher filled one sofa facing Reid who sat alone on the other.

“Sorry I’m late. Accident on the highway,” Christian muttered after he walked in closing the door behind him. He took the seat next to Reid.

“Now that we’re all here. Let’s get started.” Ez lifted one leg placing his ankle on the opposite thigh. I sat arms resting on the outline of my chair, legs spread wide, an alternate position of power to the one Ez displayed. Christian chuckled, peeping the display of dominance. He always chose the more laid-back approach. Just as dangerous because you didn’t see it coming.

“Commissioner.” Christian motioned to him to begin.

“I’m sure you know things have been a little disrupted over the past couple years. Your two families have been on opposing sides which made the demands of our job more complicated.”

“What you mean is you’ve had to get off your ass and do the job the good citizens of Crescent Falls pay you to do.” Reid shot me a nasty look but knew better than to follow it up with the disrespectful thoughts I would no doubt believe were sitting on the tip of his tongue.

“There’s only so much we can do when our hands are bound by obligations you put in place. Those obligations, however, have been self-serving over the past few years.”

“Understood but we’re here now to make sure we get a handle on things. It serves no purpose for us to argue over the past. We can neither change that or justify the consequences. Let’s focus on what needs to happen moving forward.”

“It’s bigger than just Crescent Falls,” James cut in. “If you don’t guarantee majority constituents then he doesn’t win the election. With the discourse of your families the votes all over the state will be split down the middle. Preston County has flipped because the corners are overflowed with dealers. Fryer County will only vote for a candidate that supports a governor who will ensure they get the factory that’s been promised. That means cleaning up the areas around the land promised to the companies, financially backing the construction.”

“So you’re flooding the smaller counties now?” Ez glared at Christian who shrugged. “It’s been packaged there for distribution. Not put out on the streets. The labor required also creates jobs. They can either work at my warehouses or kick in doors, robbing and stealing. It’s not a perfect solution but it’s a viable one.”

“So is training and providing legal jobs,” Ez murmured.

“Are we really going to waste our time on that argument? You know as well as I do that opportunity doesn’t guarantee commitment from the communities it’s meant to serve. Some people choose their paths regardless of what’s available to them. They don’t want to join a blue collar workforce. I allow a controlled environment for those that choose the streets over traveling a path of the straight and narrow. Let’s not forget it’s about balance. I could easily place a gun in their hands and tell them to go wild. I keep their pockets full and keep them out of our already overcrowded jails.”

He had a point but that was Ez’s soft spot. He understood when there was

need, there would always be demand. That wasn't our call to make. Our role was to ensure balance. "You do business the way you see fit as do we. We're getting off track. We're here to ensure that there is now an understanding about what needs to happen in order to get *him* elected." I pointed to Fisher who nodded his approval. I could read him well. He was the perfect candidate for governor. He had that clean cut image with street knowledge and edge. Fisher would be embraced in both worlds. Flexibility and understanding was what got votes. Appealing to the masses not one group or another was how to get support.

"Agreed." Ez shot me a look paired with that smug ass grin. Already knew what he was thinking. This was where I needed to be, in the middle of things. Hands on. I didn't want this shit. "Moving forward, no more private meetings. When decisions are made, they're made by both families." Ez narrowed his stare allowing his eyes to pass between Reid and James.

"I have no issue with that." Reid shrugged

"Neither do I as long as we have an understanding about the promises made," James added.

"I'm a man of my word as are the Omaris. You do your part, and we'll do ours." Christian's cocky demeanor surfaced a little.

"So where do we start? We need to get our people in place to ensure we get the votes required for Fisher to step up when James's term expires."

"You and I need to agree on what concessions will be made. We're both going to have to settle on our priorities for certain areas to make sure we both get what we need." Reid, Fisher, and James all nodded at Ez. "Once Christian and I settle on our priorities for each of the prospective zones, we'll pass that down so the rest of you can do what's necessary."

"Yeah because I need your officers to stop fucking with my people." Christian glared at Reid.

"And I need your dealers to understand their zones so that my sponsors for the community centers feel comfortable writing checks."

"You do realize that my dealers are the ones who keep order in these communities. It's a balance of power, Omari. You think those families who live in those less fortunate areas give a damn about his officers telling them to stay in line? They don't. Those dealers are their leaders, their hero. Without them there is no order."

"I agree but your dealers when given too much power overstep and things get chaotic. We all want the mutual investment. Now that we're back on the

same page, let's make sure we're doing the work, *together*." Ez stood and so did Christian.

"We'll if we're done here, I'm going to head out," Reid stated, sending acknowledgement to all of us.

"Yeah, we're gonna head out too." James and Fisher were on their feet. They all shook hands with Ez and Christian, tentatively glancing at me. Nobody really fucked with me but that was understandable. I had a reputation. They didn't know how to gauge me and decided it was best not to engage me at all when they didn't have to. That worked best for me as well.

Once it was down to just me, Ez, and Christian I stood, ready to head out. I had no idea if they were staying, but I hadn't planned it.

"Feels good to be back where we should be," Christian stated with a cocky grin aimed at Ez.

"I won't deny that. Shit flows better when we work together."

"It does. It had to happen eventually. I just hope it continues to work the way it should." Christian had eyes on me and I chuckled.

"Is that arrogance disguised as concern?"

"That's me reminding you yet again that as much as I appreciate our families finding a common ground, my sister is still the priority. None of this shit matters if it means she gets hurt."

I walked up on Christian, looking him right in the eyes. "I've given you my word. You either accept that or you don't but regardless, what's been me and your sister is our business. You need to understand that you and no one else will tell me how to handle my wife or anything concerning her."

"Elias..." Ez warned but not because he was concerned about me. He knew that pushing too hard wouldn't be beneficial to Christian. Christian simply smiled in confirmation.

"You gave me your word. I trust you to do what's best for my sister but please understand. If I didn't, there wouldn't be a damn thing you could do to get in the way of me doing what was best for her."

He extended a hand. I glanced down, smirked, and accepted it. We shook. I respected Christian and he respected me. That was enough.

"I'll send over my zone priorities tomorrow."

"You'll have mine too."

Christian was gone, leaving me and Ez. "You sure about this?"

"I am. He has just as much to lose as we do. If we can't pull our shit together both our families are out and they'll find someone to take our places.

That's a loss I don't want to deal with. Neither does Christian."

If he was sure, I would support whatever decisions he made.

"I'm going to hang around for a while."

I stared at my brother, seeing things in a new light when it came to his marriage. "Is being here how you handle your wife fucking someone else?" His face tensed with anger.

"Although I'm well within my rights, I have never cheated on my Sasha."

"You do realize putting your dick in another woman is cheating, right?"

"I do, which is why I haven't done that," he shot back.

"Then what's the point of being here?" These private rooms were used for discretion.

"I enjoy the show, but I keep my body parts and hands to myself."

I smirked, highly amused. "So you're in here jacking your shit while she's playing in her own pussy?"

"Pretty much. It's a compromise I can accept without betraying my vows." He shrugged.

"Vows you made to a woman who didn't give a fuck about you or the promises she made."

"I'm not her. Our marriage is basically over but I'm still her husband. I take that seriously even if she doesn't."

"I respect you. Wouldn't be you, but I respect your commitment to your vows even if the end result is you buying out every lotion within city limits."

He shook his head, smiling. "I'm glad you're home."

"Me too." I tossed my chin and left him to his shit. I wasn't big on emotional displays of affection, not even when it came to my family—or at least hadn't been in the past—but a little dancer was slowly pushing me to be more open to the idea. The worst part was that I didn't seem to care, at least not when it came to her.

Speaking of...

The minute I stepped into the main area, the stage where I first saw the woman in question dancing illuminated but this time with a deep emerald green. Her body was posed with her back arched so dramatically it looked unnatural but also had my dick thickening in my briefs.

She wore what looked like green body paint but it was actually a thin, sheer ensemble similar to the first one I'd seen her in. This time, there were only several strips of green that circled her left arm and right leg. The strip that covered her right leg extended to her left hip so her pussy wasn't visible

but everything else was.

I kept my eyes on her because if I chanced a look at anyone else watching, enjoying her, I was going to lose my shit. She was fully exposed, her nipples, the curve and flex of her ass, every goddamn inch of her.

There was a pulsing, animalistic attraction that I couldn't do a damn thing about. It pissed me off, caught me off guard, and had me leaving the building the minute her dance ended.

As soon as I was sure she was no longer on stage, I was on my way to the parking lot hopeful that she would leave immediately after her performance. I stalked out of the building searching for her vehicle. It was in the same spot as before but this time I wouldn't be watching from the curb.

A few minutes later, Cress was crossing the parking lot. She'd covered herself with a tee shirt and loose sweats, moving carelessly through a dimly lit parking lot, face angled to the ground while she dug in her purse. Likely looking for keys.

Too trusting.

When she was a few feet away, I spoke. "You're not making it too easy for me to keep my promise."

She froze, her steps halted, and a hand flew up to her chest. It only took a minute for recognition to settle into her expression and her body to relax.

"What are you doing here?" She came closer, brows dipping.

"Business meeting with Christian and Ez..."

"Here..." She gasped as if realizing her cover might have been blown. Tonight, like the first night, her face had been disguised by a mask. This one was green to match the body suit she danced in.

"You look worried?" I pushed away from her truck and grabbed her around the waist until her back landed where mine had been. Her eyes darkened as she adjusted her body beneath the weight of mine.

"Why would I be worried? I'm grown. What I choose to do with my personal time is my business."

"Normally I would agree but..." I paused, allowing the anticipation to hang heavy between us. "In less than a week you are going to be my wife. Dancing in there, wearing little to nothing, isn't something I can agree to."

"It's no different from me dancing at the theatre."

I forced a cool smile. "Don't insult my intelligence, Cress. It's very different. Which I believe is your reason for doing so but we can negotiate..."

“Negotiate what?” She lifted her chin in challenge.

“You having the ability to experience whatever freedom dancing here gives you in a way that doesn’t put so many people’s lives at risk.”

Because them watching you is a fast track to the top of my hit list.

“I might be open to negotiations but the final decision is mine. I’m your equal, remember? That means you don’t get to control what I do.” Her eyes narrowed on me.

“Instead of dancing here at Chapter House, you can dance for me...” She laughed, rolling those pretty brown eyes.

“Your counteroffer doesn’t benefit me. Only *you*. That’s not how negotiations work.”

“Why do you dance here?”

The vein in her neck pulsed while she considered whether or not she wanted to tell me.

“You know my biggest secret, Cress. Do you really think I have room to judge anything you tell me.”

“No...”

“Then, why?”

She swallowed hard. “I’ve danced all my life. Trained under some of the most influential people. On stage when I perform, I feel robotic. It’s all muscle memory of the years of talent and skill.”

“You feel controlled.”

“Yes.”

“But not in there.”

She quickly shook her head. “No. It’s different. In there, I’m not a name, a talent, or even a person for that matter. I’m an illusion. I’m...” Her eyelids fluttered as she held the last word but I gave it to her.

“Free.”

“Yeah. In there I’m free. There are no expectations and if there are, those expectations and fantasies live in their heads. They don’t touch me. I would never allow them to. But dancing here is my drug. I get a rush that I can’t get anywhere else but here.”

Her heartbeat skyrocketed and her nipples hardened against my chest. I pushed my body further into hers. “I can’t allow any man to have fantasies in their heads about my wife so my compromise is you can dance for me. You get to be as free as you want. I’ll build you a fucking stage that matches the one in there if optics are a dealbreaker. There will only be one chair in the

room and it's mine. Since it's part of the mystique, I won't touch you, unless you give me permission. That's what I'm offering."

She's considering it.

Her breathing accelerated and lashes fluttered as she stared at me beneath them. My dick strained against my zipper, desperate to do what I just promised I wouldn't without permission...

Touch her.

"This offer still feels like it's benefiting you more than me."

I smirked, pushing my hips forward. "Then you might want to reconsider the no touching without permission clause. If we can negotiate that, I promise you'll be the one who benefits the most."

That was a fucking lie.

We'd both be very satisfied with the outcome.

Her mouth dropped open with a gasp of disbelief just before I kissed her hard then I stepped away, adjusting myself. She was at risk of being publicly exposed if I let this play out any longer. Cress's eyes lowered then lifted to meet mine again which let me know she wouldn't necessarily be opposed.

"I'm going to follow you home to make sure you get there safely."

"Are you coming in with me?" she asked with lust still clouding her eyes.

"No."

I slipped my fingers across her palm, removing a key fob and pressing firmly to unlock her doors. I maneuvered around her to open the door and once she was seated inside, I handed off the key.

"Goodnight, Cress."

She yanked the door closed and I chuckled, knowing she was just as sexually frustrated as I was, but I also knew the countdown was on and we would soon be at the finish line.

* * *

I followed Cress home. Walked her to the door, left her with her lips bruised and swollen, my dick incredibly hard, then I drove my bike home. A bike and a hard dick were a terrible combination.

Painful and uncomfortable.

As soon as I walked through the doors of my bedroom, my dick was heavy in my hand while I fucked my fist with images of Cress dancing behind my eyelids. I lost myself in the moment—breathing accelerated, body

tense and pulsing while thinking about fucking *her* instead of my hand until ribbons of cum escaped, bringing relief that didn't nearly compare to what I needed.

That led me to the basement where I entered our home gym and hit the treadmill for a run, pushing my body like a mad man.

“Why the fuck are you in here at three in the morning?”

“Why the fuck are you in here at three in the morning?” I rushed out trying to keep my pace steady. Ez walked up beside me, glancing at the monitor.

“You've been on this thing for two hours.”

I felt the smugness in his voice so I didn't bother looking at him.

“Are you just getting home?”

If he were, that meant while I was handling my business here, he was doing the same at Chapter House. Neither of us were in the position to judge.

“You deal with your shit in your way and I'll deal with mine,” he mumbled, walking away.

Ez had interrupted my zone and my body was now feeling the past two hours so I slowed my pace and eventually stopped, stepping down from the treadmill. He sat on the weight bench near me, still dressed in his suit from earlier. Cautiously he watched me and mentally asked the question he was holding back.

“You good, you need to talk about anything?”

I smirked, downing a full bottle of water. “You my therapist now?”

“I have been at times, but no, just your brother.”

He had a point.

“I'm good.”

“You sure?”

“I'm not running because I'm manic. I'm running because I want to fuck my fiancée and can't. This is the alternative.”

He chuckled. “Why can't you? She holding out until she says I do?”

“My decision, not hers.”

“Then your problem is self-imposed. Why do you want to wait?”

Did I really want to have this conversation with him? I stared at my brother who stared back and eventually brushed a hand over his head, lowering his eyes to the floor before they met mine again.

“Tonight I admitted to servicing myself while paying a woman to do the same so that I could get my shit off. You really think I can say anything about

what you have going on?”

I chuckled, shrugging. “There’s nothing wrong with what you’re doing. You take your vows seriously. I told you I respect your commitment.”

“Yeah well, give me a fucking humanitarian award and a goddamn divorce.”

“It’s coming, the divorce that is.”

“Not soon enough,” he muttered.

I leaned against the wall, spreading my feet to hold my weight and locked my arms over my chest. “I haven’t had sex with a woman who I allowed to participate in a few years.”

“Sounds like your struggle isn’t all that different from mine.” He grinned arrogantly and I shook my head laughing.

“Nah, we aren’t the same, Ez. My dick and her pussy were involved, but I don’t let them touch me. It’s strictly me fucking them. Usually, hands bound or placed on something to make sure I’m in complete control and never in my bed or theirs. Shit, I can’t remember the last time I actually fucked in a bed.”

“Why?”

“Sex for me was just like the drugs and alcohol. Just as dangerous and just as addicting. The only way to keep myself from slipping back into the space was to keep my interactions controlled. Once I got my head clear...”

My gaze met his, communicating the rest. After he forced me into the psych ward.

“It was easy to let go of the drugs and alcohol. The urges were different with both of those but with sex...” I shrugged, smiling arrogantly. “I needed it. I wasn’t trying to be a monk or no shit like that but I had to be mindful about the hold it could possibly still have on me.”

“You worried about how that’s going to translate with Cress?”

“Hard not to be. I already crave her. Seeds don’t grow unless you water and nurture them. I don’t want to fuck this up. I don’t want to disappoint her, you, or hell, me. But I feel it, pulsing beneath my skin. I feel the addiction growing. This time it feels different.”

I looked away. “Sometimes with the shit that goes on up here...” I tapped my temple. “It’s hard to know what’s real. The lines get blurred with what I really feel versus what my mind tricks me to believe I feel. I don’t want to fuck this up,” I said again.

“Then don’t,” he said matter of factly, drawing my eyes back to him. “I know it’s not all black and white with you. I’ll never pretend to understand

how your brain works but what I do know is when you truly feel something you do whatever it takes so that you protect it at all costs. That filters over to the people you care about. You're not damaged or crazy or a monster. All those things were his labels. That's not who you are and you have never disappointed me. *Ever.*"

When my eyes questioned his truth, he shook his head.

"What happened to Lucas was not your fault. Neither was it mine or Christian's, Cress's, or any other person's in that family. The fault lies completely on Cole Devereaux. He made the decision to take a life. He was responsible. I have never blamed *you* and I never will. You need to stop blaming *yourself.*"

He stood and walked over to me. "If you really want this with Cress and you don't want to fuck it up, then don't." He shrugged. "You might not trust what you feel because of the shit in your head. Maybe it's that you don't know her the way you believe you should in order to truly *feel* something for her but what I know for a fact is you don't have to know someone to love them. You just have to know their heart. After last night when you handed her your trust, she showed you her heart, Lias. She didn't run. She didn't condemn you or place any of those labels on you that others so easily have. People who were supposed to love you and protect you. She's still in this. With *you.*"

He left and I released the weight of my worries. They weren't entirely gone but they were a little less prevalent.

SIXTEEN

eress

“YOU’RE GETTING MARRIED TOMORROW.”

I grinned with my eyes closed, enjoying the calm before the chaos.

“I’m aware.”

Trini and I had just spent the last four hours being pampered at Rejuvenate. It was my go-to when I needed to relax and unwind but today was on an entirely different level. I wasn’t sure if the services received always existed or if this was yet another one of Elias’s perks but either way, our experience today had been top tier.

Ginger sea salt scrub with lemony aromas, jasmine rose clay wrap with orange blossom mist which was finished off with a tangerine body butter. Chef’s kiss!

Afterwards we experienced a herbal hand and foot massage with rose quartz, foot steam, and hot towel hydration. I was in heaven. To end with a cold-pressed plant extract facial massage that hydrated and calmed leaving my skin glowing and blemish free was top notch. All the other little perks throughout the day such as an individual menu of tasty treats and wine had me floating and completely in love with this place. I would definitely be upgrading my monthly routine here from now on. Once you crossed that line, you could *not* go back.

“Are you nervous?”

“I probably should be, but I’m not.”

When I felt Trini moving beside me, I turned my head in her direction just in time to catch her shifting to her side, tucking an arm under her head. I did the same, mirroring her movement so that she and I were face to face. The incredibly soft and cozy leather chaises we were in seemed to embrace the adjustment and after a few moments, I sank into the cushion while it

cradled every inch of my well pampered body.

“You’re not even the least bit anxious about who you’re marrying?”

I considered the question before saying with confidence, “I’m not nervous about any of it. Getting married, who I’m marrying. I really feel at peace.”

“That’s surprising. You were ready to promise up your firstborn if that would guarantee an out of marrying him.”

I grinned wide. “True but right now, I’m looking forward to tomorrow and what follows. That very well might be because of the magic air I’ve been breathing in here all day. I’m convinced they’ve laced their air filters with some sort of magic powder but either way, I’m happy.”

“And you feel good about him?”

I nodded confidently. “He’s so different from anyone I’ve dealt with before.”

“Different isn’t always good though. Sometimes it’s simply a contrast of what you’ve experienced before which tricks you into believing different is better.”

“I know but that’s not what it is with Elias. He’s intelligent, thinks before he speaks, and he has this weird blend of clam and chaos that makes me feel safe with him.”

What I knew of him didn’t change that. I still felt like I could completely give myself over to Elias and he would handle me with care. The thought had me frowning to myself.

“Is that weird? That I feel that way about him and we barely know each other?”

Trini smiled smugly. “No, it’s not weird at all. I think it’s nice. One thing I’ve learned is that people are who they are. Generally if you remove all the layers and view them without preconceived notions you see the *true* essence of people. You feel them. That’s how it was when I met you.”

“Aww, Trini, you love me don’t you.”

“Yes bitch, I do.” She rolled her eyes and sat up. “But real shit, the first time I ever met you I knew you were solid. People talked shit about you. Said you were stuck up and selfish...”

My mouth dropped open and she shrugged it off but kept going. “It would be easy to think those things about you because most people only knew you on a surface level. Your family was a lot like mine. Image was important so we had to move differently than everyone else. You were careful about who you let get close. You spent all of your time dancing which meant you

weren't in the so-called social circles. People had their own opinions about who you were instead of truly getting to know you. On the outside looking in, you were the spoiled, weird, rich kid who was too good to be a part of their world."

"Well damn."

Trini laughed. "I mean it is what it is but I guess that's kind of why we clicked. You and I were kindred souls."

"No, we were not. Everyone loved you."

"Because I did whatever I needed to so they would. That's what I mean. You didn't give a damn about being a part of their cliques. I did. I tried so hard to fit in that a lot of times I lost myself to who they wanted me to be. *But*, then you almost plowed me over in the senior parking lot and I met my sister from another mister."

"I only almost hit you because you thought I wouldn't. You looked right at me through the windshield and stepped in front of my car while it was moving like I wish a bitch would, so I did."

We both looked at each other and fell out laughing. "Yeah a bitch did." Trini rolled her eyes, grinning. "But it was cool because the very first connection I had with you that day was the realest I ever had with anyone else. No preconceived notions, just us, chilling and it felt right. I knew you would be my person and you are. Shit, we've been rocking forever and are gonna be rockin' for life."

"Are you trying to make me cry?"

"Not at all but I do want you to not forget who your person is. I get that you're marrying him and everything but I'm your one, Cress. And I also said all that to prove that sometimes you just know. So what you feel for him isn't weird, misguided, or unrealistic."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." She blew me an air kiss.

"And for the record. You'll always be my person, no matter who I'm married to."

"Mhm, you just remember that in the near future when he's trying to convince you to cancel a girls' trip because he's going to miss you too much and is doing so while licking on that yoni. Make sure you put some respect on my name no matter how many times he makes you cum."

I threw my head back and laughed. "Don't you ever again in your life call me extra because you are the true definition of it. Not me." But then a

thought occurred. “Wait, is that what Klay does?” My eyes narrowed. “Is that why we had to reschedule our trip to Brazil?”

She lifted her hand and examined her freshly manicured nails. “I don’t kiss and tell, boo. You should already know that.”

I grabbed the satin pillow from behind me and hurled it at her head. She dodged it with expertise. “I can’t believe we had to reschedule our trip because he gave you a few orgasms.”

She smiled wide. “In my defense, they were really amazing orgasms.”

“You ain’t shit.”

“Maybe not but you still love me.”

And I did.

* * *

I lay snuggled in my bed, cradling my phone as I frowned at my sister’s image from the video call we were on. Her backdrop was the private jet which belonged to our family instead of the bedroom of her apartment in the city.

“You missed today.” I pouted and she offered a similar expression.

“I know, I’m sorry but I’ll be there before you wake in the morning.”

“You should’ve been here now. Tomorrow will last for five minutes then I’ll be on a plane to a surprise location.”

“It’s your fault that your wedding will only last five minutes. You wanted to keep it simple.”

“You were at my engagement party. Can you blame me?”

“No, I can’t. I’m kinda glad that you’re keeping it simple.”

“Only because you’re trying to get in and out as fast as humanly possible. I wished I had never suggested that you travel. I feel like a second class citizen in your life now.”

She laughed, rolling her eyes. “You could never be second class in my life. You’re one half of my heart. You and Christian make me whole, Cress.”

I swallowed thickly knowing that she purposely excluded Cole because it was easier to exclude him than it was to remember that we lost him. He wasn’t perfect but he was still our brother.

“I know,” I said softly and she shifted a little. Something moved in her expression but she suppressed it. I decided not to let things get dark and neither did she because she quickly moved on. “So what’s the deal with your

surprise location?”

“Honeymoon,” I mumbled.

She raised a brow. “So you’re doing that?”

“I guess. He planned it. Hence the *surprise*.”

“That’s good. It means he’s taking this marriage seriously.”

“It means he wants to keep up appearances.” My stomach flipped at the lie. I knew better. Elias didn’t give a damn about what anyone thought. He was no longer marrying me as a favor to his brother. He was marrying me because he wanted to. The thought allowed my body to loosen into a relaxed state. “*But*, that doesn’t mean I’m not still disappointed that you missed today. I wanted you there.”

“You had Trini.”

I heard the jealousy in her voice. She had always felt slighted by my relationship with Trini but she didn’t have to. No one would ever replace what Jona was to me.

My sister.

My blood.

“You’re not in competition with Trini.”

“I know.”

“Do you?” I challenged.

Her smile was genuine. “I do and I’m sorry I missed today. I’ll make it up to you. I promise.” Her nude painted lips puffed slightly and I shook my head.

“How, Jona? Your flight out leaves right after I say my vows and you’ll be gone for months according to the last update you gave me.”

“You just said you leave right after you say I do, so don’t try to make me feel bad. I’ll be there for your wedding as promised but I have to leave right after to meet a friend or we won’t make it to Bali in time.”

Friend.

“I’m your family. It’s my wedding day and who is this friend? I know all of your friends.”

She had been so secretive. Secretive about why she delayed her flight home for my pre-wedding plans. Secretive about why she was flying out immediately after and secretive about the blush in her cheeks now because I was questioning her about this so-called friend.

“They’re new.”

“They or *he*. If it’s a guy you can tell me. I won’t judge.”

She arched a brow, her cheeks flushing more. “Won’t you though?”

“No, I won’t. I want you to be happy but more than anything I want you to be careful. Why didn’t you bring him?”

“Because I’m not ready for you to meet him yet. Maybe I never will be. Right now, we’re just having fun, you know, me living my life.”

I wouldn’t condemn her for an idea that I had put into her head.

“So you’re admitting it’s a guy?”

“Yes, but that’s all you get.”

“Promise me you’ll be safe.”

“I will.”

“Then that’s all that matters. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“In the morning,” she repeated with a soft smile before ending the call.

I locked my phone and shifted deeper into the warmth of my bedding. My sister was happy. I would accept that as a win. Peace settled over me but the moment was disturbed by the soft rap of someone knocking at my door. I lifted my phone, checking the time and frowned already knowing it was late. I lay still hopeful that it was a mistake.

No one should have been here this late but when the knocking sounded once more, I tossed my comforter back and lifted from my bed, padding lightly to the door. I pressed the button on my monitor and when the screen illuminated showing who my visitor was, my teeth sank into my lip and my eyes closed briefly before I turned the lock and pulled the door into my chest peeking my head out from behind it.

“We’re getting married tomorrow. You shouldn’t be here.”

His eyes moved from my face, down the thick oak door like he could see through it. “Today,” he said quietly when his eyes found mine again. I squinted a little and he added. “It’s after midnight. We get married *today*.”

I smirked at his handsome face. “You still shouldn’t be here.”

“I thought we agreed to skip tradition.”

“With some things, yes.” We settled into a heated exchange when my eyes moved down his chest then returned to his face.

He chuckled lightly. “I’m not moving on that, but I’ll offer a compromise.”

“So that’s your thing, negotiating terms?”

“With you, yes. I don’t allow that option for others. I stand by whatever I say.”

“Why do I get special consideration?”

“You’ll be my wife. Cress. You get what others never will.” He lowered his chin. “The privilege of my submission.”

“You’ll submit to me?”

“As my wife, yes.”

“Interesting.”

“Why is that interesting?”

“Men in our world don’t submit. It’s not in their nature.”

“You asked to be my equal, right?”

I nodded.

“I can’t expect your submission if I don’t offer mine but you will be the only person who will ever bring me to my fucking knees.”

The intensity in his eyes and tone solidified that promise.

“Can I come in?”

I arched a brow. “Should you?”

He smiled charmingly and shook his head. “Probably not but if you let me, I’m going to.”

I stepped out the way, widening the door. He stepped inside and closed it behind him, keeping his eyes heavy on me as he scanned my body. I was only in a sheer nightgown which clung to my body. Even with it and the matching thong beneath it, I felt naked. Might as well have been because my breasts were fully visible, nipples puckered from the coolness of my apartment and the heat of gaze I’d swear to physically warming my skin.

“Is there a reason for this visit?”

“Of course.” He regarded me for a moment and moved closer.

“Are you going to share?” He smiled darkly.

“I couldn’t sleep.”

“Cold feet?”

Do I want to know the answer to that question?

He moved closer and shook his head.

“Then what?” I asked, lifting my chin because his tall frame now hovered over me.

“I messed up?”

Okay this doesn’t sound promising.

“How?”

“I made a demand that I’m not sure I should have. It’s kinda got me fucked because I can’t necessarily take it back.”

I frowned up at him. “A demand of who?”

“You.”

“Me?”

He nodded.

“What was it?”

“That in a few hours, you only show up if it’s what you want and not because your brother is asking you to.”

“You worried I might not show?”

“Maybe.” His brown eyes were measured as they slowly traced the length of me. Immediately following he cupped the back of my head and brought his face close to mine. His thumb stroked the side of my throat. “I’m not a betting man. I like to deal in guarantees.” Something in his dark eyes shifted from amusement to hunger just before his lips met mine. The first touch was soft but then his mouth conquered mine and his hand was at my back, bringing me to him.

My body blazed against the firmness of his while my tongue surrendered. His taste was intoxicating and my head was already swimming with need.

Heat flooded my body and I opened more at the feel of his palm blazing a trail over my skin from my lower back to my hip. He pulled back some, barely, a little. Just enough to suck my lower lip then pierce it with his teeth before his mouth consumed mine again.

Sparks of electricity settled against my skin when his fingers pressed harder into my hip, moving me closer, allowing me to feel him hard and long digging into my stomach.

Then it was over. He stepped back, taking the warmth of his body with him and I almost stumbled forward. I sucked in a sharp, desperate breath feeling lightheaded. I pressed my fingers to my lips. The contact made my entire body tingle from my core, spreading like wildfire through every inch of me.

His brown eyes held mine with an intense determination and the smugness of his smile had me slightly annoyed. The kiss was intentional and so was his next move. His scent wrapped around me when I felt his warmth shift close again, this time not touching but lingering teasingly close.

“I’ll see you in a few hours.”

I frowned after a featherlight kiss brushed my temple. “You came here to kiss me?”

He smiled confidently, the arrogance of his gaze burned into me. “I told you, I like to deal in guarantees.”

I was granted one last kiss. This one landed at the side of my neck, the sensitive spot between my shoulder and my throat. “Get some rest. We have a big day tomorrow.”

He gave me one last look then turned to leave. My stomach clenched, my pulse was still racing, and my heart thundered in my chest. The minute my door closed the air left my lungs on a soft exhale. A smile crept onto my face. This would be my last few hours as a single woman and Elias left here knowing the same.

And I both loved and despised his arrogance.

SEVENTEEN

elias

I SWALLOWED my meds and sat for a minute trying to clear the anxious feeling in the pit of my stomach. The changes from the new combination were subtle but I felt them. I'd have to talk to Dr. Temple when I got back because I wasn't sure the changes she made were beneficial. Right now, my mind was on one thing.

Marrying Cress.

When I showed up at her apartment, I told her it was because I only dealt in guarantees. That had been the truth but I wasn't concerned that she wouldn't walk down the aisle with Christian at her side, prepared to hand her over to me. I had my guarantees about Cress long before today. I simply wanted another reminder of what would soon be mine.

Body and soul.

The minute I entered her, both would be mine and I couldn't fucking wait.

“Who the fuck gets married at ten in the morning?”

A man obsessed with his future wife.

I glanced over my shoulder at my brother, then turned to face him, leaning against the dresser. My hands gripped the edge on each side of me while I took in his agitated state. I could see the tension in his shoulders, the muscles locked tight around his mouth and eyes as he approached me but the minute he came to a stop, his features relaxed.

“Never thought I'd see this day. You look good.”

“I better. Damn suit cost me ten grand.”

A Kameron Tyler original, cut to pair perfectly with one of six dresses I'd hand selected for Cress. I was anxious to know which one she'd chosen.

“You paid ten grand for a suit that you'll be in for a few hours.” His

posture completely relaxed and a smile spread across his face.

“Isn’t it necessary to look the part?”

He chuckled, slipping his hands into the pockets of his tux pants. “It’s your day. You can have whatever you want.” He looked me over once more and gave me a small smile. “You ready for this?”

So fucking ready!

For Cress to have my last name.

For me to have her fully and completely.

“This is what you needed.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“I’m ready for Cress to be mine in the most permanent way possible. Yes, I’m ready for this.”

He stared at me for a long moment before nodding. “I’ll see you downstairs.”

Once he was gone, I crossed my room and stepped in front of the full length mirror, barely recognizing the man staring back at me. In one month, so much had changed. So much more was going to change in the next few hours and days that followed.

“You look *respectable*.”

The sound of my mother’s voice grated my nerves. “Why are you here?”

“My son is getting married. Why wouldn’t I be?”

I laughed bitterly. “Because you don’t give a shit about me.”

“As much as you like to pretend you know how I feel, you don’t. You’re my son. I love you and I want what’s best for you.” She paused, clasping her hands in front of her. I finally turned to regard her. Josiah Omari. My father’s wife. She had stopped being considered my mother years ago. Yet, here she stood before me dressed in white. A slim-fitting dress that hugged her body and swept the floor. It was covered in crystal beading with short lace sleeves that stopped just below her elbow.

How fucking quaint.

No doubt selected to upstage my future wife.

“You don’t think that’s too damn much for the mother of the groom.”

Her glossed pink lips curled at the corners. “You don’t like my dress?”

“If you’re trying to overshadow my wife, then you wasted your time.”

“*Future* wife. She hasn’t said I do just yet and why would I want to overshadow Cress? She’s a lovely young lady.”

“Because that’s who you are.”

“You really think that little of me?”

“I *know* you don’t give a shit about me or Cress. You’re here to fulfill some twisted obligation you have to me, maybe even my father. Who the fuck knows? I don’t care what your reasons are...” I paused and crossed the room, stopping where she stood at the entrance of my room. “If you fuck with Cress or try to ruin this day for her, you will regret it.”

Her eyes flared with amusement. “You care about her? I thought this was something forged between you and Elias to fix what her family ruined for ours.”

I chuckled, shaking my head. “You’re unbelievable. Do us both a favor and leave now.”

I pushed past her and when my back was completely to my mother she spoke again. “Does she know who you really are? If not, maybe I should have a word with my future daughter-in-law to make sure there are no surprises after she vows her unyielding commitment to her family by marrying you. I’d hate for there to be disappointment from the poor girl expecting a happily ever after versus the nightmare she’s going to receive being tied to you. That’s all you can offer her, Elias. Does she know bearing your children means chancing that they’ll end up just like *you*?”

My fist clenched at my sides. I felt a flux of irritation spiking through my veins but I managed to keep myself restrained when I turned to face my mother.

“Do you really hate me that much? Because if you do, I’m not sure why. I am what *you* made me. Your lineage, *mother*.”

Your grandfather passed this down to me.

Her eyes searched my face and for the briefest moment I half-expected this woman to show some compassion but that was short lived.

“I don’t hate you. I hate the disappointment you caused our family. I hate that your brother will never get to have this moment. He will never watch the woman he loves walk down the aisle toward him and pledge her love. *You* stole that from him, from us. I don’t hate you. I hate what will never be *because* of you.”

And with that, she smiled, rolled her shoulders back, and walked past me like she hadn’t just spewed venom that no mother who loved her child should ever be capable of. But for her, the words flowed with ease because she didn’t love me and she never would.

* * *

The garden was decorated for the occasion. Exotic flowers were in short, round crystal vases that lined a makeshift walkway that separated the area into a small section. All the original decorations were still executed even though we elected to keep the ceremony to only being our immediate family. Cress stood at one end of a clear acrylic that held pearl colored beads beneath it which would give the appearance that she was walking on clouds down the aisle toward me.

My angel

Her dark knight.

That was how I currently felt. My mood had shifted and I couldn't shake the layer of vexation that my mother had left me with. At least she'd done me the courtesy of leaving. I couldn't say I was surprised. That had likely been her plan the entire time. Get dressed up just to come shit on my day. That was who she was.

"You good?" Ez moved beside me. The priest was standing off to the side mumbling to himself. Likely going over his speech to deliver our nuptials so I relaxed and addressed my brother, feeling our conversation would remain private.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"Our mother was here. What did she say?"

"Does it matter?" I growled, cutting my eyes his way.

"She wasn't supposed to show." Ez stepped in front of me so that he was blocking my view of the handful of people that were here. Sasha, Christian and his wife, Jona, their mother, Trini and her husband.

I was grateful that Cress wanted this to be simple and private. We'd done the performance at our engagement party. Today was for us.

"You invited her, Ez."

"And after the interaction the two of you had at the engagement party, I told her it was best that she not show."

"Yet, she was here."

"This is still her home. Not much I could do to stop her from showing but she wasn't supposed to be here. Knowing that she left leads me to believe she only showed to prove a point."

"She wanted to remind me that I'm not worth her time or her love."

"Lias..."

“I’m fine, Ez. Nothing I haven’t heard before.”

He frowned, searching my face again. I could see the concern but I brushed it off. No matter how much the poison she always seemed to spread hummed in the back of my mind. I was grateful when the soft chords of a cello began to play, intervening. I wasn’t in the mood for a pity party on my behalf.

Fuck my mother.

“Last chance to bail.” He smiled smugly and I lifted my eyes looking past him. I saw her and nothing else mattered. “With the way you’re looking at her, I guess I don’t need to hand over the escape route.”

My eyes shifted back to my brother as he stepped out of the way. Cress was looking down. One of her arms hung loosely through her brother’s, the other clutched an arrangement of calla lilies just below her chest. Her expression was tense as Christian leaned in close. My stomach clenched at what he was possibly saying, maybe offering an out as Ez had just done but eventually she lifted her head and those pretty brown eyes connected with mine. Her smile was soft at first but it grew slowly. Incredibly fucking slow until it showed in her eyes.

I winked and she dropped her gaze but only for a brief moment then they were moving. I was appreciative of their slow pace because it gave me time to fully take her in. The dress she had chosen was the one I wanted to see her in. Sheer, covered in beads. It hugged her body gently and pooled at her feet, keeping her steps measured and even.

Cress was all I could focus on. Her hair was pinned back off her face, in loose waves that brushed her bare shoulders, held by a tiara that sat at the crown of her head. The beading matched her dress, complementing it and her gorgeous brown face.

She was beautiful.

She was mine.

And when she stepped beside me, allowing Christian to kiss her cheek, she gently removed her arm from his and she extended a hand to me, palm up. All the dark whispers that had flooded my head up until now fell silent. Her hand slid into mine without hesitation and I lifted them both and kissed her knuckles.

“Why this one?” I asked, allowing my eyes to do a slow crawl from her neck down the length of her body.

“I wanted to know which one was your favorite. She said this one.”

“It was.”

“Why?”

“Because the first night I saw you on the stage at Chapter House, you were brushed in diamonds.”

Awareness settled in her eyes. “You were there?”

“I was and I wanted to murder everybody in the building because of the way they were watching you.”

Lusting over you.

Imagining what it would be like to have you.

“You were watching me,” she smiled smugly.

“I was but I had already claimed you so I had the right, they didn’t.”

Another reality settled into those pretty brown eyes.

“That’s why you chose me over Jona. You saw me dance that night.”

“It’s not as simple as watching you dance, but yes, that’s part of it and today, I get to marry the angel who stole my heart while she’s wearing a reminder of the night she did it.”

Her smile spread again. “I’m not sure if I should be impressed or disappointed.”

“Why would you be disappointed?”

“Because your first impression of me was physical and that’s why you chose me instead of my sister.”

You’re so damn wrong.

“I chose you because that night I felt you before I ever laid eyes on you. I chose you because you were already mine before I ever knew who you were. I simply didn’t know it.”

Her cheeks flushed and Ez cleared his throat but my eyes never left her face when he spoke. “As much as I appreciate you two having this very private moment, maybe we should get these vows out the way then you can get rid of us and do this without all these extra eyes on you.”

“Yeah, I think I like the sound of that.”

I winked at Cress who rolled her eyes but smiled as she handed her bouquet to Jona. The priest waited patiently until we turned to face him then each other. This part was pointless to me. Cress was mine and I was hers.

This was just a formality.

* * *

I leaned against the open frame of our bungalow with my back to the ocean while Cress moved around on bare feet, exploring our home away from home for the next five days. The open floor plan allowed me a visual of her as she moved from room to room. Pending where she stopped, I could only see the white silk of her dress but I was able to completely track her movements.

When she finished exploring, and stepped in front of me with a blush in her cheeks and arms locked behind her back smiling nervously, I reached out and gripped her hip, pulling her to me.

“You should be tired.”

She was correct. I should have been but wasn't. A nineteen hour flight and forty minute ride on a private yacht to get to the island. Most of which I spent awake, unable to rest.

“So should you?” I feathered kisses over her cheek, down her jaw.

“I slept on the plane, you didn't.” Her chin lifted so her eyes met mine.

“How would you know whether or not I slept if you were asleep.”

Her smile expanded. “I wasn't asleep the entire time.”

“Most of it.” I pinched her chin and landed a kiss and her smile expanded beneath my lips. “Do you like it?”

My eyes left hers and roamed around the space we were in. She turned in my hold so her back was against my chest. My hand moved to her stomach as she settled against me.

“I do. It's perfect.”

“You're perfect.” I kissed her neck.

“Give it a few days. You might change your mind about that.” I chuckled and she pushed away from me but I caught her hand, kissing the inside of her wrist before I let her go. “I'm going to take a shower then we can decide what to do next.”

I gave her a head start but my mind was already set on what was next.

Her.

By the time I made it to the bedroom, she was undressed, standing beneath the spray of the rainfall shower. The silhouette of her body held my attention long enough for me to enjoy the view while she stood with her head back, eyes closed beneath the steamy downpour.

I tugged my shirt over my head and tossed it aside. The rest of my clothes followed. Cress tensed briefly when I walked up behind her and pressed a kiss to her shoulder but she instantly relaxed into me after a few seconds.

“I guess I should get used to this. We’re married.” The lightness of her tone had me smiling against her skin.

“We are,” I murmured against her neck, sliding my palm against hers then lifting her hand so that I could plant a kiss on her ring finger.

She turned, facing me with a cautious smile on her face. “So does that mean we get to do what married people do?”

“Such as?”

Her fingers pressed into my stomach and moved lower. She lifted onto her toes, moving one hand to the base of my neck, kissing me at the same time her other wrapped around the base of me, applying light pressure as she stroked me slowly.

“I was thinking I could help you wash away the flight and you could help me get acquainted with my new husband.”

“You can have whatever you want.”

“That might be a dangerous promise for you to make, Elias.” Her eyes flashed with mischief and I chuckled, kissing her deeply. I washed her body and she washed mine. By the time we made it back to the bedroom, I was barely holding onto what little restraint I had left but I knew it would be worth it.

She would be worth it.

Cress stood at the foot of our bed facing me and with one tug, her towel was pooled at her feet. My fingers brushed her hips before I guided her lower until she settled at the foot of the bed and I was lowered between her thighs. Being eye level with her pussy, breathing in her heady scent, enjoying the sight of her lips swollen with arousal had my dick throbbing again.

I pushed her thighs wider and ran my palms over her smooth skin. She shuddered, exhaling a slow breath, sucking in a sharp inhale when my thumbs stroked her slick folds.

“Dance, I have to...”

Keep it bare.

“I’m not complaining.”

My thumbs glided over her slick skin once more, parting her folds, revealing how aroused she truly was. I leaned in and licked her clit. Just barely making contact and she released another shaky breath. When I lifted my eyes, hers were closed and her body was angled back, resting on her elbows.

“You don’t want to watch me claim you, Cress?”

Her eyes flew open, lips parted as they narrowed, watching the first of many gentle licks. Her muscles clenched and my dick throbbed each time my tongue slipped between her lips, gliding from her opening to her clit. My tongue traced the smooth slick skin, tasting her sweet pussy, opening her wide, imagining how my dick would feel once it found its way there.

Each time I lifted my eyes, hers were there, drunk with pleasure, watching as I enjoyed the feel of her on my tongue. My teeth grazed her clit and my lips followed, soothing the pinch while she jerked and tensed, parting her legs wider for me.

By the time I was fully invested, she pushed forward, rocking against my mouth while I sucked each fold, swiping my tongue flat across them, teasing her clit. Tremors rolled through her body with a desperation that had her rocking against my face, begging for more.

I complied, forcing two fingers in deep, diving into her tightness with sharp, hard thrusts. I watched her with astonishment for how free she was in that moment. Cress craved freedom and I would offer it willingly.

An unfamiliar feeling settled into my chest while I enjoyed the recognition of pleasure that settled into her expression. I was fucking overwhelmed with a primal possessiveness knowing she was mine. Every inch of this woman now belonged to me. Her protection and her pleasure, all *mine*. A cocky smile settled against her throbbing pussy followed by a few more gentle strokes of my tongue to ease her through the last of her descent.

I extended to my full height, towering over her quivering body, knowing that she would be my undoing, the same as I had just been hers.

EIGHTEEN

eress

WITH ELIAS STANDING OVER ME, brutally attractive eyes roaming over my nakedness, my body thrummed with the remnants of pleasure. I was almost afraid to move because I didn't think I'd survive what came next.

My eyes traveled over the hard lines of his muscles, past his chest, lingering at his waist, then lower. In the shower, his mouth was on mine most of the time so I only explored his body with my hands.

Now I got an eyeful of him and wasn't disappointed. Long, thick, and impressively hard. My face blazed with heat from his penetrating stare, while he watched me taking him in. I lifted from the bed and curled my fingers around his neck, pulling his mouth down on mine.

God, I needed this...

Needed him...

"Your turn," I whispered, pulling back just enough to get the words out before my mouth clashed with his again. His hardness pressed into my stomach and he growled, low and deep in the back of his throat.

"Maybe we should wait on that."

My hands lowered and wrapped around him and his body became tense. "I'm a firm believer in giving and receiving, Elias."

His lips brushed against mine for another kiss before I gently nudged him toward the bed and kneeled between his thighs. When I took the tip of him into my mouth, he moaned, sliding his fingers into my damp hair, gripping firmly at the base of my head. I moved my tongue over the head, circling it several times then lifting my eyes to see his reaction.

He was incredibly still and quiet but his breathing deepened and the muscles in his stomach tensed and released while his eyes held mine, dark and tortured. I could tell he was gauging me but there was also something

looming in his expression that I couldn't figure out.

"Deeper," he ordered through a murmured rasp and I did.

My lips spread wider and I took him deeper before gliding up and returning to take him in a little more. Eventually he hit the back of my throat and his grip in my hair tightened. His breathing leveled but he thrust into me slowly, keeping his narrowed eyes on me the entire time. I explored and tasted him, using my tongue while he fucked my mouth slowly and when he needed more, he took control moving his hips, sliding between my lips harder and faster. My eyes closed and fingers dug into his thighs, feeling his muscles coil tighter.

I lifted my eyes once more and his eyes were waiting, face twisted with lust and his voice came out raw, "I'm going to cum."

He tried to pull back but I pushed forward, hollowing my cheeks, sucking him harder. His eyes narrowed more, like he wasn't sure then his hips jerked hard and a low moan eased from him as he surged forward with one hard thrust and came with a harsh exhale. He groaned low and dark and my core clenched from the awareness of the pleasure I was giving. I could feel my own arousal heightening from his.

Tears burned the corners of my eyes while I relaxed my lips around him until he pulled back and slid from my mouth as I swallowed what was left. A smile creased my lips when his thumb brushed the corner of my mouth.

Elias was standing again and he brought me up with him. His lips brushed mine before he kissed me harder. A slow sensual kiss that quickly grew needy.

"Now do I get to fuck my *wife*?"

"Do you expect me to say no after that?"

He smirked and pressed another kiss to my mouth, moving his tongue over my bottom lip before pulling it between his teeth.

"You could."

"But you know I won't." I smiled as he crossed the room, heading toward where his suitcase was open on a bench near the wall. He removed a box of condoms which ended up on the nightstand after he removed a sleeve, ripped one open, and covered himself. His heated gaze laid claim to every inch of me while he did so.

He was on me again, hands cupping my cheeks, the length of him digging into my stomach when he claimed my mouth. "You officially have my name, now I get to officially have your body."

I gasped when I was lifted with ease. My legs gripped his sides and my center pressed into his abs. His tongue was in my mouth and I was lost in the kiss until my back sank into the mattress.

Warm lips were against my throat and fingers brushed over my nipples and caressed my breasts. Feather soft kisses followed the trail of his fingers and his tongue. I tensed from the light pressure of him against my thigh, then at my opening, but when he finally sank into me, tortuously slow, inch by inch I shivered with satisfaction. Just that quickly I knew.

I owned his name, he owned my body.

He pulled back and sank into me again, this time deeper than before. More wetness leaked from me, welcoming him and those dark eyes flashed with recognition while his lips curled into a pleased smile.

I lifted my hips against him, forcing him a little deeper and he watched me, face tight while he established a smooth rhythm. The slight discomfort of him stretching me with each thrust and the way my pussy clenched around him was overwhelming. My eyes fluttered and rolled back in my head.

How?

I came quick and hard while he pushed his hips forward, thrusting mercilessly. His arms caged me in, resting beside my head so that his eyes were locked on mine, causing me to spiral even more. The hard possessiveness of his stare sent me deeper and deeper into a state of blissful pleasure.

“Better than I imagined,” he murmured, lowering his mouth to my throat, sucking hard, his teeth nicking my skin in rhythm to this thrust. Once my body settled from my orgasm, he lifted my leg higher and shifted his body so that his angle was different and he sank into me more deeply. He slid all the way out of me and pushed back in, hard and unforgiving like he needed to make me see him, feel him.

Every single inch.

I hummed my approval and his eyes flicked back up to mine. He kept those intense eyes on me as he thrust into me with a little less restraint and my lips parted while his curled into a dark smile before he pulled my nipple into his mouth, sucking hard before I felt his teeth.

Each time he landed hard in me, my pussy clenched, gripping him tighter. His teeth grazed my skin. My shoulder, my neck, my chin. I felt his muscles lock from the effort each time his body pressed into mine, slamming into me harder and faster. A choked sound of desperation slipped from my lips when

my body submitted and I came again, arching up into his chest while he pressed me back into the mattress.

His hand slipped between us, fingers circling my clit, pressing hard with each thrust he delivered. The combination was too overwhelming and I completely fell apart.

While I shuddered through the force of my orgasm, he settled into his, pressing into me painfully hard. The weight of his body followed. After a few minutes he kissed me hard and rolled us onto our sides. His gaze searched mine, brown eyes piercing through me as I inched closer.

“I think I just discovered my favorite thing about being married to you.”

He chuckled lightly and brushed his thumb over my lips. “It can be in your top ten but I don’t know that I want sex to be your favorite thing about being my wife.”

I grinned harder. “Why not, sex is important when it comes to sustaining a happy, healthy marriage.”

“I’m sure it is, but so are a lot of other things.”

“Like.”

“Not sure yet, but we’ll figure it out.”

“We will,” I whispered through a yawn. “But right now, I’m okay with this being a favorite.”

His hand moved down my body until he gripped my hip and moved me in closer to him. I felt at peace so my eyes fluttered closed when he kissed me softly and I allowed myself to drift. Maybe it was everything leading up to this moment—the engagement, wedding, the flight. I wasn’t sure and didn’t care, my body relaxed. When his arms tightened around me I melted into the comfort of his embrace.

* * *

The next morning I shifted from the warmth of soft kisses on my shoulder and my neck. My smile surfaced while I allowed my head to sink deeper into the pillow but I managed to peel my eyes open.

“What time is it?”

“Early.”

I rolled over, tugging the soft sheets to my chest before I pulled my arms from under the bedding and allowed them to rest beside me. Elias was standing over me, bare-chested with his lower half covered in gray pants that

sat sinfully low on his narrow waist. He was bare beneath them because I was eye level with the thick impression that hung loosely against his thigh.

My new favorite thing.

“Then why are you up?”

“I get restless if I sleep too late. I ordered breakfast.”

I nodded and lifted onto my elbows, not caring that the sheet slid down my body, exposing my bare breasts. When his eyes lowered, enjoying the view, heat crawled up my neck with the memory of how we’d spent our first night.

“Why are you dressed but I’m not?”

He smirked, leaning over me, his fingers brushing across my nipples which hardened from the contact. “I had to let the concierge in. Would you prefer I did that naked?”

My brows pinched at the thought. “No.”

“Then that’s why you’re naked and I’m not.” He stroked his fingers over my cheek and kissed me lightly. “Come eat.”

He stepped away from the bed and I watched the systematic movement of the muscles in his back before I tossed the covers back and slowly moved my legs over the side of the bed. The delicious ache of my body had my core throbbing with another reminder of my introduction to married life.

My first stop was the bathroom, where I decided to take a quick shower. I’d gone straight to sleep after my last orgasm and figured the steamy hot water would loosen my muscles and allow me to relax a little more. Once I was out and had washed my face and brushed my teeth, I slipped on one of the silk robes I’d brought with me and joined Elias out on the deck. There was a table full of fresh fruit, croissants, coffee, bacon, eggs and what looked like freshly-squeezed orange juice.

I found a spot at the table, electing for his lap instead of my own chair but he accepted me, loosely draping his arm around my waist so that his hand rested on my thigh. I took that to mean he didn’t object to my seating choice.

“How do you feel?” His breath fanned over the side of my face and smelled sweet like the fruit that lingered in the air, tempting me to turn and swipe my tongue across his lips before landing a kiss.

“Mango.” I smiled and lifted a slice, sliding it into my mouth. “I feel amazing?”

I lifted a strawberry and turned so that I could see his face. A smug smile was waiting for me.

“So you slept well?”

I wrinkled my nose, looking out over the ocean, enjoying the way the sun lifted from it. “Apparently, considering I slept all night. Why didn’t you wake me?”

We’d landed here just after six and after sleeping most of the flight I was surprised I’d slept through the night.

But then again...

My core tightened and I smiled.

He kissed my neck. “Long day, long flight. I figured you were tired.”

“And you weren’t?”

“I slept.”

His eyes shifted, telling of his lie. Although his face was relaxed, I could tell that he was tired.

“It was our first night here and I slept the entire time.”

“We’ll be here a week. Do you need to let anyone know you made it here safely?”

I grinned and reached for the juice, filling my glass. “Nope, I’m officially *your* wife which means I’m officially *your* responsibility. Yours to fuss over and worry about.”

He chuckled and nodded into the crook of my neck. “Indeed you are but Christian might be worried,” he murmured against my skin. The vibration of his voice landed right between my thighs.

“I’ll text him.” I lifted my glass and moaned as the sweetness of the juice hit my tongue and flowed down my throat. “So what’s the plan while we’re here?”

“I can only think of one if you keep that up.”

I grinned into my glass and finished what was left of my juice.

“Not that I object, but maybe we should add some other things to the list.”

“I didn’t make plans. Figured we’d just enjoy each other’s company.” He squeezed my thigh and I sank deeper into his frame.

“Mmmmm. I might be okay with that.”

“Might?”

“Might. Right now...” I lifted and turned so my legs encased him and I was straddling his waist. His hands settled behind me, cupping my ass. “I want to get to know my husband while he feeds me breakfast.”

Elias pulled me in closer so that the length of him swelled beneath me.

His eyes were low and a teasing smile played on his lips as he reached around me and lifted a slice of mango. I slowly parted my lips when he held it before them. After I took a bite, he slid the other half into his mouth. After I chewed and swallowed, I leaned forward and ran my tongue over his lips.

“I could get used to this.”

“So could I.”

I grinned and eased my arms around his neck. “So you like mangoes....”

“I do.”

“What else do you like?”

His mouth brushed over mine again. “*You.*”

I grinned beneath his lips. “Clearly, but what else?”

“My bike.”

He leaned forward and kissed me again. “And the thought of you on the back of it with me.”

“Hmmmmm, I think I’ll pass.”

He chuckled. “You don’t want to be on my bike?”

“Not particularly.”

“Why?” His eyes flickered with amusement.

“Because they’re dangerous and I need all my limbs intact to dance.”

His charming smile expanded. “You don’t trust me to keep you safe?”

It was a trick question. I couldn’t exactly say no without breaking my promise to him.

Trust.

Loyalty.

Respect.

“*You* I trust, your death trap, not so much.”

He chuckled and reached around me, lifting a slice of bacon. And like before, I bit half and he finished what I left.

“I’ll accept that as a compromise.”

“So mangoes and your bike?” I flashed a smile and he nodded, gripping my chin.

“And *you.*”

“And me.” I blushed. “You have to give me more than that.”

“I’m not sure what more to give you. Ask whatever you want.”

“You’re not involved in your family’s business?” I asked cautiously. As far as I knew he had never really been. Christian explained to me that he hadn’t agreed to be now that he was back. I was confused about why. His

brown eyes flitted over my face, slowly taking me in before he answered.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Ez has always been a better fit. He tolerated our father, I did not.”

“Will you be more involved now?”

“If that’s what Ez needs then yes.”

“Mmmm.”

He leaned toward the table and lifted another slice of bacon, feeding me first then himself.

“Are you worried about your financial stability being married to me, Cress...”

My brows slammed together and I quickly shook my head. “No, that’s not why I asked.”

I had my own money as well as my family’s. I didn’t care about his and I didn’t want him thinking that I did.

His smile surfaced painfully slow. “If you *were*, I wouldn’t be offended, and for the record, you married a very wealthy man which means that you are now equally as wealthy.”

“Are you sure? I declined my mother’s advice and skipped the prenup.”

He chuckled and gripped the back of my neck, applying the gentlest amount of pressure. “You don’t need one. Everything I am and everything I own now belongs to you.” With his free hand, a croissant lifted and met my lips. I took a small bite and so did he.

“I invest a lot. That’s where most of my money comes from. I own properties in the city that are managed by other people so I don’t have to be so hands on and one-third of what my family owns belongs to me.”

“One-third?”

Something flashed behind his eyes before he nodded and murmured. “My mother.”

My expression softened. “She was there yesterday but then she left.”

The muscles in his jaw clenched. “She prides herself on ruining anything good in my life. Marrying you was something good. She wanted to ruin it.”

“Did she?”

His expression tensed forming a deep V between his brows before he lifted the croissant to my mouth again. When I refused it, he nudged it against my lips. “No, she didn’t.”

I relaxed and accepted another bite, his followed.

“It’s beautiful here.” My eyes shifted out over the ocean again. His burned into the side of my face, warming my skin.

“*You’re beautiful here.*”

I hummed under my breath. “You’re *biased.*”

“Am I?” His lips tilted sinfully.

“You damn sure are.”

His voice was a low warm rumble that vibrated through me when he laughed.

“Then I guess I’ll have to convince you otherwise.”

I leaned into him and kissed his lips. “You have a week.”

“Only a week?”

“We’ll be here a week.”

“And if I’m not mistaken that ring means you’re mine for a lifetime.”

I grinned as his fingers danced up my spine. “Let’s hope it doesn’t take you that long to convince me.”

“Trust me, it won’t,” he murmured against my mouth before his tongue swiped the seam of my lips and eased between them.

He was right because I was already convinced.

After breakfast, we spent the day lounging in the hammocks attached to the dock that extended over the water from our bungalow. Instead of enjoying our own, we shared one together which was mostly my doing.

How could I already be obsessed with the need to be close to this man?

We talked about nothing important but the conversations felt necessary. I also didn’t mind that I was the one who did most of the talking because whenever Elias did contribute, it was always thoughtful in ways that allowed me pieces of him without having to pry and pull. His quiet presence was a welcomed surprise and made the day pleasantly enjoyable because it felt like I could just be with him in the moment.

Our first day here had been perfect. It ended with an early dinner then my husband made me cum while the sun set and disappeared into the ocean. After we showered and climbed in bed, we talked until I fell asleep in his arms. If there was a such thing as true paradise, I had to be currently experiencing it.

* * *

The next morning I woke up alone in bed again. After I climbed from

beneath the sheets, naked like the morning before, I slipped into the bathroom to shower and prepare for the day before I went searching for Elias. I slipped on one of his t-shirts and left the bedroom.

I passed a table set up for breakfast, similar to the one we shared before but he wasn't at the table, so I moved out into open space, lifting my face to the sun, before I did a quick scan of the surrounding waters.

Toned brown arms cut through the aqua currents moving with precision away from our bungalow and heading back toward me. He did this several more times, moving effortlessly through the water, arms and back flexing with the precise yet graceful movements.

After about another twenty minutes, he swam to the ladder and climbed out of the water stepping onto the deck. Without pausing, he headed right to me, water dripping from his very immaculate body creating a very enjoyable visual.

He leaned in for a kiss then moved past me reaching for the towel, which was draped over one of the chairs, leaving my body in a chaotic mess of desire. The man's presence was so overwhelming, I wondered if I would ever get used to this or him.

“You're up early again...”

“Yeah...”

“Did you sleep at all?”

His body stiffened slightly before he nodded sharply in my direction. “I'm going to take a quick shower then we can eat.”

I kept my eyes on him until he was out of my line of sight then shoved a few slices of fruit in my mouth before heading back into the bathroom. I caught Elias just as he cupped his hand to his mouth and threw his head back, swallowing. When he lowered his eyes and they met mine through the mirror, his expression was hard but he didn't speak. Only lifted three pill bottles and shoved them back into the toiletry kit which he then tossed on the bamboo landing below the sink.

I leaned against the wall, watching him as he walked into the glass enclosure, turned on the water, and stepped under the spray still in his trunks. Eventually he pushed them over his hips and they fell to his feet. My eyes followed but then traveled back up his muscular legs, lingering at the thickness hanging between them before crawling slowly up his chest. His eyes were on me when mine finally made it to his face but his expression was still hard as he watched me, tentatively dragging a soapy washcloth over his

body.

The pills.

He's uncomfortable.

I was well aware that this was a part of who he was but I never wanted him to feel less than or the need to hide from me. Right now he wasn't hiding but he wasn't necessarily projecting that he felt open or accepting of my intrusion.

"Should I leave?"

"Do you want to leave?"

My brows furrowed slightly. "No, but I feel like you might want me to."

His expression softened a little and his eyes lowered to where he'd left the toiletry bag. "Does that bother you?"

"No, should it?"

He searched my face like he needed something that I hadn't given but then his expression relaxed. "I take them every morning. I never forget."

I nodded but kept quiet. I wasn't sure what he needed me to say if anything at all and I didn't like the uncertainty and tension that lingered between us.

"You're safe with me," he said roughly, his jaw tight.

"I know that."

We remained silent and I watched him until he rinsed the soap from his body. When he turned off the water, I met him at the opening of the shower with a towel which he moved over his body, patting himself dry and tossing in the wicker basket under the sink.

He stepped back into the bedroom and removed a pair of shorts from one of the drawers and slipped them on extending a hand to me once they were in place. I moved to him and slid my palm against his, allowing him to lead me to the table where he sat and pulled me down into his lap. His arms closed around my body and his breath exhaled, warmly fanning over my cheek. "You're safe with me, Cress."

My chest tightened because he needed me to reinforce that I believed that to be true.

"I know," I said quietly. He kissed the side of my neck then leaned forward, lifting a slice of fruit which he brought to my mouth. I angled my head back, taking a bite and watching while he finished the rest. After a long pause, he kissed me and smiled.

"You can add this to things that I like."

I chuckled and rolled my eyes. “It still included *me* so you’ll have to do better. Technically the list isn’t growing.”

“I’ll see what I can do about that.”

And with a gentle ease, the tension released and we settled back into us.

NINETEEN

elias

ON OUR THIRD day here I knew I wasn't balanced.

Cress provided an instant calm but when my thoughts shifted away from anything other than her, I felt the loss of control.

Unfortunately there wasn't much I could do about it until we returned home but I did at least attempt to rein in my erratic mind.

"Elias...."

I tensed at the sound of Dr. Temple's voice even though I had left several urgent messages for her to call me as soon as possible.

"Yeah, thanks for calling me back."

"You said it was important." Her voice was calm. I appreciated that considering the three messages I left. I hadn't been sleeping much. A couple hours at most and my nerves were getting more anxious by the day. I stood facing the water with my back to the bedroom where Cress slept peacefully. After a quick glance over my shoulder, I clutched the phone tighter and lowered my head, brushing my hand over my waves.

"Yeah, I feel a little off. I was wondering if..."

"Off."

"Yes, off. I'm not sleeping much and when I do, it's barely anything at all. My mind feels cloudy like I can't focus as much. The changes you made with my meds, you think it could be that?"

She was quiet for a minute before she said in a low even tone, "You missed your last appointment. We had a deal."

"Yeah, I know. Things got a little crazy with the wedding..."

"Which is precisely why you should have made it a priority to come see me."

My jaw tensed and I felt anger creeping to the surface. I missed the

fucking appointment. There wasn't much I could do about that now. Right *now*, I needed her to tell me if these goddamn meds were what had my thoughts unfocused and my head cloudy.

"I'll be there to see you as soon as I get back."

"How long will that be?"

"A few days."

She was quiet again and I glanced over my shoulder to make sure Cress was still asleep. Every morning I was up before her. I worked out or swam to burn the extra energy that I couldn't seem to shake. That had been working but she also helped. I felt calm when she was near me, touching me, or when I was fucking her. When I wasn't I just felt anxious.

"So lack of sleep. Any other symptoms?"

"No, not really."

"You don't feel like you're cycling?"

"No," I said harshly. This wasn't that. I could always tell when I shifted one way or the other. This was different.

"Are you sure? You sound angry."

"I'm fucking sure. I'm not cycling."

She exhaled a sigh. "You've had some pretty overwhelming changes, Elias. Moving home, getting married. It's a lot and as much as you feel like you can handle things—"

"I can," I shot back.

"I'm not suggesting you can't. What I am suggesting is that you have to expect shifts. Are you taking the new meds I prescribed?"

"Yes."

"Every day."

"Every fucking day," I gritted, feeling annoyed that she was hitting me with the standardized clinical bullshit. This wasn't new to me. I understood the importance of remaining consistent. Now more than ever. I had so much more on the line than just my own sanity.

"You're frustrated."

I closed my eyes and swallowed down my annoyance. "Yeah, I'm frustrated. Maybe you're right. A lot of changes. I'll come see you when I get back."

There wasn't a damn thing she could do for me now anyway.

"And until then?"

"I'll be fine."

“Will you?”

“Yeah, I will. I have to go.”

I ended the call and pulled in a slow breath before stalking to the bathroom to take my meds before Cress was up. Seeing the look in her eyes when she caught me a few days ago didn't sit right with me. There were only ever two reactions, fear and sympathy.

Seeing either one in my wife's eyes wasn't a feeling I chose to embrace. There would be more privacy when we got home and I could settle back into my routine. I needed that because I wasn't sure I could stomach the expression she handed me.

I placed my palms flat on the counter and stared into the mirror at myself for a long moment trying to refocus my thoughts. After a minute the calm was back so I left my phone on the counter, moved toward the dock, and dove into the ocean. I'd swim a few laps and fuck my wife when she was up then I'd feel better.

* * *

“You okay?” Cress brushed her fingers over my arm and lifted the drink she ordered. It was her second. It came in a tall cylinder glass and matched the yellow, strapless sundress she wore. No matter how unbalanced I felt, one look at this woman and all was right in my world again.

“Yeah, why?”

“You're quiet.” Her hooded eyes flitted over my face and I leaned in and kissed her cheek.

“When am I not quiet?”

That beautiful smile of hers softened as she pinched the straw that peeked from her glass and slipped it between her lips. My dick responded from the motion as she slowly dragged the bright yellow liquid through the straw.

“You have a point.”

I chuckled and kissed her again but this time on the mouth. “You're tipsy.”

“Maybe.”

Her eyes moved around the cozy little bar we were in. It was half indoors and outdoors giving the feel of being connected to the vibe of the island. A few feet away from our table, which sat in the corner, a band was playing. The sound was slow and bluesy and a few couples nearby were dancing.

Others leaned into each other at their tables or at the bar, enjoying each other's company. The vibe was relaxed.

As much as I enjoyed being in seclusion with Cress, having her all to myself, I figured the change of scenery would do us both some good. Maybe me more than her. When I suggested we head to the resort for dinner she seemed excited about the idea. After we ate, we hung around to listen to the band play. She had a few drinks, I kept to my water.

"Have you been here before?" She frowned at me and pulled her lip between her teeth. I smiled, shaking my head.

"No. Why?"

"Because everyone here seems to be in love and if you came before..."

My smile expanded when her brows crept in but she didn't finish the sentence. "I've never been here before and I've never been in love before, Cress."

Her eyes shifted to mine. "Never?"

"Never."

She hummed under her breath, prompting me to ask, "Have you?"

"Been here before..." Her smile was teasing as she shook her head gently. "Nope."

"That's not the one I was concerned with, but you knew that didn't you?"

Her smile was lazy. "I did and yes, I've been in love before."

My muscles tensed and flexed at the thought but she added. "I was twelve and he was *much* older."

"How much older?"

"Fourteen." Her smile was beautiful and I chuckled.

"That's a stretch." I tapped her nose and she scrunched it. "Yep, but it was unrequited. He was a friend of Christian's."

"Yeah? And what happened with the friend of Christian's?"

"He told me I had the body of a thirteen year old boy and laughed at me when I told him he was cute."

I smirked and my eyes swept her body. I couldn't imagine it ever looking like that of a thirteen year boy but I supposed anything was possible. "Well he should have understood that patience is a virtue because you matured quite nicely."

"Thank you." She smiled lazily and added, "Boys are dumb."

I chuckled. "They are but occasionally that works in our favor. Him being dumb means I get to have you as my wife."

“Hmmm, you have a point.”

“So that’s the only time you’ve ever been in love?”

“Yep. It’s kind of hard to find time for relationships when every hour of every day is committed to your dreams.”

Dance...

“Then that one time doesn’t count which means when you do fall, you won’t be alone and neither will I?”

We’ll fall together.

“That’s a very big promise to make.”

“One I intend on fulfilling.”

Her gaze got heavy and her breathing became slightly labored. “I think I’m ready to go now.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

I leaned in and kissed her, feeling the same.

We got back to our bungalow and didn’t make it past the lounge chairs on the deck. I sat and Cress straddled my waist, pushing back enough to free my dick from my pants. I removed the condom from my pocket and ripped it open but she took it from me and worked it down my length before she lifted herself and sank onto me with a low throaty hiss of contentment.

She looked exemplary straddling my hips, taking in every inch of me. Her pussy felt like heaven, warm and so wet with arousal. My hands moved up her abs cupping her breasts through the thin material of her dress, brushing my thumbs over her pert nipples before I yanked the top down completely exposing them to me.

After a long pause, she began moving her hips, slowly rocking against me, face tight, eyes low. I let her figure out her pace and she settled on a slow sensual ride that had me moaning deep in the back of my throat. My hands fell to her hips and I started thrusting up, forcing her to increase her pace. Her back arched incredibly deep with each thrust. Her pussy gripped me tight, creating a deep ache in the pit of my stomach. I wasn’t going to last long. Not with her riding me like this.

“I’m already addicted,” I whispered, then pushed up as hard as I could. She gasped and her teeth sank into her lip.

The highest of highs and the lowest of lows.

All of them wrapped up in this one woman and she was mine.

So fucking mine.

“Good, because I am too.”

My eyes narrowed on her face while I let her ride me. My fingers stroked her clit and she fell into my chest, sucking hard on my neck until she came with my name on her tongue. I kept fucking her hard until she came down off her high and I settled into mine. Still inside her, I thrust slowly, raining kisses from her temple down to her jaw. She never moved away from me but she sighed, her breath soft and warm against my skin grounded me.

My mind settled.

No more erratic thoughts.

Only calm.

Only her.

I leaned down and kissed her forehead knowing that as imperfect as I was, Cress was everything I never should want but it was too late because now I didn't just want her...

I need her.

* * *

Four in the morning and I couldn't sleep. My body was humming with energy that felt like it was crawling beneath my skin. I'd fucked my wife when we got back from the resort and once more in the shower before we climbed in bed. The minute her breathing leveled and I knew she was fast asleep, I slipped from under the sheets, stripped out of my briefs, and dove into the ocean not concerned that it was just as dark as my mind felt. I swam for at least an hour before washing my body in the outdoor shower then grabbing my phone, checking emails until my eyes no longer focused.

Luckily our departure was vastly approaching and I could get back in Dr. Temple's office to figure out why the hell these meds weren't doing their job.

I need to go back to my old prescription.

After closing my eyes to try and calm my mind, the moment was interrupted by my phone vibrating against my chest. I glanced down at the screen and felt my annoyance spiking. This was the sixth call. The first five I had ignored but this one I decided to entertain.

“What?”

“Is that anyway to greet your friend, Elias?”

“We're not friends.”

“Damn, that's disappointing to hear because I considered us just that.”

“What do you want?”

“Just checking in.”

My jaw clenched. “You don’t need to check in with me. Again, we’re not friends.”

“Right, then I guess I’ll let you go but before I do, friend or not, I wanted to offer my congratulations.”

My muscles coiled tight.

“What?”

“You heard me. I hear congratulations are in order. You got married, didn’t you? Cress Devereaux. She’s nice. *Very* nice, actually, but doesn’t seem like your type.”

His reference about Cress had my fists clenching tight but Reno wasn’t the type of man you exposed weaknesses too. I’d have to kill him if he ever tried to use Cress as one of mine.

But she was and there wasn’t a damn thing I could do about it.

“Are you keeping tabs on me, Reno?” I was barely able to keep my tone level.

“Come on, Elias, you know me better than that.”

I did know him. He was the type that camouflaged threats in casual conversation. Mentioning Cress was his way of letting me know that he thought he could control me.

“I know you, Reno, which is why I’m going to ask you again. Are you keeping tabs on me?”

“No, but word travels. Regardless of where you are, you used to be associated with me. People tell me things. I don’t have to ask.”

“As long as you know you don’t need to fucking ask. My life is no longer any of your business, Reno. It never was. Stop fucking calling me.”

I ended the call, gripping my phone so tightly that I was surprised it didn’t shatter in my hand. I didn’t know how long I sat there before a calm settled over me from something as simple as her touch. A hand on my thigh then her weight on my body as she climbed into my lap. She settled her head on my shoulder and I leaned back bringing her down with me.

“You left me in bed,” she mumbled, voice low and raspy from having just woken up and not being fully awake.

I kissed her forehead and moved one hand soothingly up her back, gripping her thigh with the other.

“I couldn’t sleep.”

She hummed under her breath. “Then I can’t sleep.”

I smiled into her hair and kissed the top of her head. “What about now?”

“Now I can.” She snuggled closer and her scent wrapped around me, the warmth of her body seeped into my skin. Her breathing leveled and she drifted back to sleep and just that quickly my world was right again.

TWENTY

cress

“STOP POUTING and come in the water with me.”

“I’m not pouting.”

It was a lie. I was most definitely pouting. This was our last evening here. The week crawled by at a snail's pace but in a good way. Everything about our time here felt surreal. Nothing existed but us.

Elias and I had been in our own world and it felt right.

Perfect.

I wasn’t ready to go back to the real world. No matter how much I was going to suffer when I settled back into my training after we arrived home, it was going to be worth it. I hadn’t danced in a week but my body had been thoroughly worked over every day that we’d been here. Another reason why I wasn’t in a hurry to leave.

My things at home had been packed and would be delivered to Elias’s home before we returned, which meant that sex would no longer be as private as it had been here. Our bungalow was a mile away from the resort. He and I both walked around naked, freely without a second thought, but when we got home I would be living under the same roof with not just Elias but his brother and his wife.

Their house was enormous and they both occupied two separate wings but still, each time he made me cum, I would know that there were other people possibly within earshot.

“Cress...”

“Can’t we stay here?”

He swam closer but still remained far enough out that I knew he wasn’t getting out.

“We can stay as long as you want but your offseason will be over soon. If

we don't go home, you can't dance."

I shrugged and smiled. "I can dance here, *for you*. Didn't you make me an offer to be your private dancer?"

He chuckled and swam a little closer. Close enough where I could tell his feet were now planted in the sand. The area around our bungalow was shallow.

"Get your ass in here now because if I have to come get you..."

"Fine."

I dove in and before I could surface on my own, Elias's hands were at my waist and I was hoisted from below the water and pulled into his body. My legs naturally circled his waist and my arms snaked around his neck.

"Now don't you appreciate being down here more than you did being up there."

"You're down here so yes."

His arms tightened around me and my center pressed harder into his abs. His intense stare pinned me in place. Something as simple as a look did wonderful things to me. "My calm in a sea of chaos."

"Maybe I prefer being your chaos."

"Yeah?"

"Mmhm. Watching you unravel knowing that it's because of how I make you feel is a rush."

He chuckled lightly. "My wife enjoys bringing me to my knees. That sounds problematic."

"Only if I abuse the privilege."

"Then don't." He winked at me and walked us out a little further until the water reached our necks. I allowed my head to fall back and when my neck arched, he trailed his tongue from under my chin down my chest.

"Are you trying to be another first?"

"Hmmm?"

"Me making you cum in the ocean."

I lifted my head and tightened my arms around his neck. "How do you know someone hasn't beaten you to it?"

"Have they?"

I gently shook my head.

"Good to know."

His arms tightened around my waist then one lifted and his fingers eased into my hair. I was sure it looked a mess but I couldn't tell from the way he

looked at me. I sighed, curling into him, resting my chin on his shoulder.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” I mumbled.

“Then why are you pouting again?” I smiled against his shoulder before delivering a kiss to his warm skin.

“I’m not pouting. Just thinking.”

“About?”

“How easy this feels.”

Too easy...

Like I had done this with him my entire life.

But I hadn’t...

“Is that bad?”

Not bad, just scary. Unsettling because what happens when it’s no longer easy...

“No, but I wonder if it will feel this easy when we leave here.”

He feathered kisses from the curve of my chin down to my shoulder. “It can, if we allow it to be.”

“Then that’s what I want.”

His fingers tightened in my hair, pulling my head back until he could reach my lips. The kiss was soft, easy, sweet. He took his time exploring, tasting, allowing me to feel every swipe and dip of his tongue.

And I did.

All over and through my body.

While his mouth explored, one of his hands did too. It slipped from my hair and eased between us. His fingers dipped beneath the stretchy fabric that covered me, skimming my pussy softly before I felt him sink into me as deep as our position would allow. I rocked into his body while he fucked me with his fingers. Those dark eyes held me captive, taking in every shift of my expression, assessing and gauging.

He felt so good.

Always the right amount of everything.

The harder I pushed against his hand, the more his grin surfaced. Those fingers curled inside me, angled just right.

“Give me this first, Cress.”

“I am...”

But that wasn’t what he had in mind. I gasped when I felt pressure at my other entrance. My eyes locked with his again, narrowing as I tensed a little

more.

“Relax, I got you.”

I nodded and he pushed a little hard, sending the tip in.

“Oh fuck.”

He chuckled darkly and kept going. The pressure of his fingers in both places—one lodged deep, the other pushing in and pulling out at a steady pace—had me feeling full. I didn’t stand a chance against the pleasure building in my core.

“This feels...oh...”

So damn good.

“Not yet, almost though...” He smiled sinfully, chasing the feeling he delivered internally along my skin by kissing my neck and shoulder. His mouth crashed against mine at the peak of my body’s descent. The sinfully gentle rhythm he maintained while I rocked against him was more than I could handle. My eyelids fluttered shut but I still felt the sun explode behind them. My orgasm launched with a traitorous spasm, raging through me like an unexpected summer storm. My pussy clenched around his fingers but he didn’t stop.

“Easy,” he murmured against my ear, before his tongue slowly dragged down the shell to my lobe which he sucked between his lips.

“Easy,” I huffed, slumping into him, with a satisfied smile. He continued stroking me softly, allowing his fingers to remain in me while they slowly dragged over my very sensitive walls.

“We’re never leaving here.”

He chuckled against my neck and I felt us moving. No doubt back to the bungalow so he could finish what he started.

* * *

Just like the flight after our wedding, I slept through most of the return home. This time, I knew the exact reason for my slumber.

Multiple orgasms prior to our journey home and one more on the private plane before I curled into my husband and allowed my sated body to settle into my new routine. Finding comfort in him.

As soon as our driver pulled up to the gate that blocked access to our new home, I felt the tension from our new reality returning. It was no longer just Elias and me. The rest of the world now existed which was evident after we

stepped into the foyer and were greeted by Ezekiel.

“If that’s the face she makes after a week with you, then I might actually feel bad about forcing her hand with this marriage.”

I laughed, peeking over my shoulder as Ezekiel approached me offering a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

“That salty ass look doesn’t have anything to do with me. She didn’t want to come home.”

“*But* he made me, so technically he is the reason for my salty ass look.” I shrugged and Ezekiel chuckled.

“I’ll take that to mean you enjoyed not just the week away but each other.”

“I don’t kiss and tell.” I winked at Ezekiel and he chuckled. “I’m going to head up to our room.”

“Your things are in the room at the end of the corridor,” Ezekiel said.

“Not mine?” Elias queried. I turned to catch Elias’s annoyed expression.

“I wasn’t sure how this week would go. You can move them to your room.”

I smiled as I kept going up the stairs leaving them to do whatever catching up they needed to do.

As soon as I stepped into my new living quarters that still smelled and felt like the man I had been soaked up with all week, my phone was vibrating in my purse. I dug it out and smiled at the face that appeared on the screen.

“Do you have my device tapped?” I asked, accepting the call from Trini while flashing her a brilliant smile.

“No, you told me when you were coming back and I estimated the time, but I *should*. You didn’t call me the entire time you were gone.”

“Isn’t that the point of a destination honeymoon? To get away from your life and settle into your new roles as husband and wife.”

“Bitch fuck that. I needed to know if I was right.”

Her eyes narrowed on my face as I sank onto the small sofa that filled one side of his sitting area.

Our sitting area.

“Oh, but I see I was.”

I frowned a little. “You were what?”

“Right to assume that man was going to get you all the way together.”

I playfully rolled my eyes but reached for my neck, pressing my fingers into the back of it to calm the wave of heat that crawled over my skin.

“I was already together, Trini.”

“No boo, you were not. I’m sure Allen did a decent job but based on the ‘I’ve been properly fucked’ smile you’re trying to hide from me, I’m willing to bet you had a very good reason for ignoring me all week. A very long, thick, and skilled reason.”

I burst out laughing. “You really should be mindful about referencing another woman’s husband's reasons.”

“Yeah, he fucked you properly. Your ass is already possessive of the dick.”

I was.

Very much so.

“Did you get the pictures I sent you?”

“I did and before you let it come out your mouth, no.”

“No to what?” I smirked smugly and she rolled her eyes.

“No, we are not doing a girls’ trip there so the entire time you can be thinking about how good your husband fucked you while you were there with him. I will not be second to his dick so no. That place is officially ruined as a potential girls’ trip location.”

“Fine, your loss.”

“I didn’t say I wasn’t going. I’m just not going with you.” Her eyes narrowed then landed on my face again. “That’s his place?”

“Mmhmm.”

“Let me see.”

“No.”

It felt weird sharing his space with her.

Our space.

“Stop overthinking, Cress. If he wants you there with him, then he’s okay with you making his home your home and that means you can share it with me.”

“I will, just not right now.”

“*This bitch.*” She rolled her eyes again and I blew her a kiss.

“I love you. Let me get settled and I’ll invite you over.”

“You better or I’ll be pulling up, scaling the wall to get to you.”

“Or, hear me out...” I flashed a smile. “You could just pull up to the gate and tell them you’re here to see me. I’m pretty sure they’ll let you in.”

“Shit, they better.” She shrugged. “But things are good though? Like things with the two of you?”

I blushed and answered honestly. “They are. I thought it might feel weird at first, like we needed to adjust but...”

“*But* you adjusted your pussy on his dick all week and now things just flow.”

I laughed hard again, throwing my hand over my mouth. “Yeah, something like that.”

Then I felt him. I lifted my eyes to find his waiting, a cocky grin teased his lips.

“Trini, I have to go. Let's do lunch this week. I'm exhausted and I kinda want to relax for a little bit.”

“Yeah, you do that. You go, *relax*.”

I grinned, shaking my head. “Bye, bitch.”

“Bye, hoe.”

“She seems happy that you're home.”

He appraised me, leaning one shoulder into the framing that separated the sitting area from the rest of his room.

“Only because she's nosey.”

His smile surfaced slowly and settled into a cocky expression. “Nosy about you adjusting your pussy over my dick.”

“Yes and you could have pretended like you didn't hear that.”

“I could have.” He looked around. “Do you want me to bring your things in here or...”

He was hesitant. Shit, maybe he didn't want me in his space. But no, he seemed annoyed that Ez hadn't initially brought my things in here.

“If you don't want me here with you...”

“Cress, I was the one demanding that you live with me instead of your place. Why wouldn't I want you in here, with me?”

“I don't know.” I lifted and moved to him but left some space lingering. “Maybe this week was just this week. I wasn't sure.”

“I want you here...” He yanked me into his chest. “...with me.”

He dropped a kiss to the top of my head and I smiled into his chest. “Good because I kinda don't think I would like not falling asleep with you every night.”

He kissed the top of my head again. “I'll move your stuff then I need to take care of a few things. You gonna be okay here until I get back?”

I felt his muscles tense against me and I tilted my head back and found his eyes almost as tight as the muscles in his body.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. What about you? You okay?”

He hesitated but nodded sharply. “Just got a few things that I need to get to after being gone all week.”

His hold on me tightened before his lips brushed mine. “I won’t be long,” he murmured against my mouth and his body relaxed. So did mine.

But he still felt tense. Just not as much as he had been moments before.

“Okay.”

“Call me if you need anything and Ez is here.”

“I’ll be fine. I’m going to do some standard new wife snooping.” I grinned and he chuckled, looking around.

“The only woman that’s been in here is the one who cleans a couple days a week but I’ll let you have it.”

I watched him move into the adjoining bathroom and listened while he moved around. A few minutes later, I had eyes on him again as he tugged his hands from the pockets of the sweats he was wearing. Their tapered cut did very little to hide the outline of three pill bottles. Two in one pocket and one in the other.

“Be good while I’m gone.” I swallowed down my unease and forced a smile that he returned while I watched him leave. The minute he did, I accepted the fact that as soon as we’d boarded our plane home, *easy* no longer existed.

TWENTY-ONE

elias

I PUSHED my bike much faster than I needed to move through town with reckless abandonment. I timed things perfectly, blowing through green and yellow lights, some red when I missed my mark. The thrill felt good. The rush allowed me to shake the feeling that had been pulsing through me all week. A feeling that only settled when I focused on *her*. Everything felt right when I touched her or she touched me.

I didn't like the way I was losing small bits of control but I also knew that this wasn't like the times before. This was different but the problem was, my mind didn't allow me the comfort of trusting my thoughts or even the way I felt. What seemed logical wasn't. What felt simple could easily be the beginning of something complicated.

Exhaling a slow breath as I pressed the gas to move faster, I leaned into my bike focusing on the hum of the engine and the vibration of it below me. All I had to do was get back to where I had been before things started to shift.

I had left a message with Dr. Temple before we left. She approved it while I was on the plane. So as I pulled up to her office I felt less anxious and when I stepped off the elevator I felt like I could breathe a little easier. One simple change to get me back to where I needed to be.

"Elias."

I tossed my chin, stalking past Dr. Temple. She closed us in her office. While she made her way to the seat across from where I was standing, I removed the three bottles I'd brought with me and slammed them down on the concrete and wood sculpted table that separated us. "There, I brought them but I don't see why you needed 'em. You could have just refilled the prescriptions I had."

"I could have, but I wanted to be sure that these weren't the issue."

“How the fuck could that be the issue and not what you prescribed me. I was fine on those. I was perfectly fine until I started taking that other shit.”

“That was your decision, not mine Elias. If you’re accusing me...”

“I’m not,” I gritted, feeling anxious. It had been a long time since I felt my restraint slipping. I didn’t like the way it made me feel.

She stared at me for a moment longer then lifted, taking the pills with her. She returned with three new bottles and set them down in front of me.

I eyed them and lifted my eyes, frowning up at her. “You just had those here.”

“I had them filled at the pharmacy in the building. You know I can do that, right?”

I nodded, snatching up the bottles one by one, scanning the labels. They matched what I had been taking the past few years. What I knew worked. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. That’s only two weeks.”

She was forcing my hand to make sure I didn’t miss my next appointment.

“Okay.” I stood, preparing to leave but she arched a brow in silent challenge causing me to sit down again.

“What?”

“Don’t you think we should talk about everything that’s been going on with you recently?”

“There’s nothing to talk about. Once I get back to these, I’ll be fine.”

I motioned to the pills and she nodded.

“How about you tell me how you’re settling into things with Cress...”

The mention of her name set off alarms in my head. I ran through my conversations with her trying to single out one time that I’d actually given her that information. I hadn’t.

“Cress?”

“Your wife,” she returned, her expression neutral.

“I never told you her name.”

She slowly lifted a brow. “If you didn’t tell me her name, then how would I know that, Elias?”

My fingers flexed, curling into my palm, then expanding again. My mind was raging once more.

“Yeah, maybe I don’t remember.”

Fuck...

Did I tell her or didn't I?

She shifted, crossing one leg over the other. "Have you been forgetting things lately?"

"No."

The answer came quickly but lacked confidence with it.

Another fucking thing that had me anxious. Forgetting things was simple to most people. A slip of the mind, but not for me. If I was forgetting, then I needed to refocus.

"If you are..."

"I'm not."

"But you didn't remember that you told me your wife's name."

"Because you keep asking me shit that doesn't have anything to do with why I'm here." I lifted the pills. "This is why I'm here. I'm not here about my wife."

She nodded slowly. "You seem frustrated, Elias. You were frustrated when you called me a few days ago. It seems to be getting worse, not better. I'm not doing my job if I don't consider the obvious."

Cress...

She's blaming this on Cress.

"Marrying her doesn't have shit to do with what's going on with me right now. We tried something different. It didn't work. You were the one who said I knew me better than anyone, right?"

"I did say that."

"Then trust that I know what the fuck I'm talking about. What I'm feeling, what's a trigger, and what's not. My wife is not."

"Okay."

I frowned hard at her and she released her expression. "Are we done here?"

"Yes, we're done but I still want to see you in two weeks. If after a few days you don't feel even the slightest change, then please call me."

"Yeah."

I stood, shoving the pill bottles into my pockets. She stood, giving me that look. The one I fucking hated. That look that people gave me when they didn't trust what I was saying but why the fuck should I care. I didn't trust what she was saying and this wasn't working. I needed to find another person to see.

Trust is important.

I don't trust her.

Something wasn't right. My meds were off, yeah. I could accept that, but it didn't feel like she wanted to help. It felt like she wanted to trigger me. Pushing when she didn't need to. Today was different from the first time I'd been here.

Night and day.

Once I was on my bike I yanked my helmet down and twisted the throttle a few times. I needed something to balance me.

Cress.

She was the only thing that helped lately.

Cress.

Temple wanted her to be the problem. She wasn't, she was the solution. The only one I could count on lately. As much as I need the calm she brought me, I couldn't go home until my mind was settled. Until I felt level.

A few minutes later I was pulling onto the highway. I'd ride for a while. That always helped me settle things in my head. Once I did, I was going home to my wife.

* * *

"It's late."

"I'm aware."

It was after two in the morning when I stepped into the kitchen. I hadn't expected anyone to be up, so I frowned at Ez when he looked up from his laptop.

"Your wife was worried."

And apparently so were you.

"Lost track of time."

Fuck.

I realized my misstep the minute the words left my mouth.

"Yeah..."

"Went for a drive. That's all. I'm well aware of where I was and what I was doing. You can relax."

I grabbed a bottle of water from the refrigerator and was on my way out the kitchen when he was up, cutting off my path.

"You went for a drive that brought you home at two in the morning. Which means your new wife was here alone on her first night in this house."

“Were you here?”

“Yeah, Lias, I was here.”

“Then she wasn’t alone, problem solved.”

I pushed past him but didn’t get far. He grabbed my arm and turned me back toward him. “I made a promise to trust you and you made a promise to trust me. I’m upholding my end of the deal, are you?”

No.

I wasn’t trusting him enough to be honest about what was going on in my head.

“I’ve been feeling a little off. Dr. Temple did an adjustment to my meds, so I should be good now.”

“That’s all?”

He stared at me, silently gauging whether or not he wanted to accept whatever response I was going to give.

“That’s it, Ez. You can stop worrying. If it was more, I would tell you.”

Which was the truth. I wouldn’t risk not having the trust of the only person I knew I could truly count on when shit got bad. Ez had been with me during the depths of my lowest points. He’d seen the ugly side of this.

He nodded sharply and his posture relaxed. “Call next time. It’s not just you anymore.”

You have a wife.

“I know. I fucked up. Won’t happen again.”

Being back home in this house was strange enough but walking into my room feeling Cress’s presence was a different level of awareness about how much my life had changed. Her scent replacing mine, her things scattered around my space, her presence in my bed should have felt like chaos but what I felt was calm in the midst of the storm.

I stood over the bed watching her shallow breaths until I couldn’t stand the distance then I leaned over her, brushing loose strands of hair from her face, watching as her dark lashes fluttered over her cheeks. Her expression was relaxed, peaceful. I knew I could exist in this moment and never tire of the experience.

After a quick shower, I slipped into a pair of briefs and eased into bed with my wife. I allowed myself to relax after gently tugging her into me. It was crazy as hell how I’d always thought the simplest shit like watching someone sleep was unrealistic, nothing I would ever find an attraction for. But the minute I buried my nose in her hair and felt the warmth of her skin

against mine, I completely understood the appeal. I watched Cress for a while, allowing her scent to settle into my subconscious. Eventually I felt my own breathing find the rhythm of her shallow breaths and that peaceful state I was beginning to rely on crawled to the surface.

* * *

The next morning, I awakened my wife with my mouth. By the time Cress stirred, I had already been up for hours. I knew I wasn't sleeping but a few hours seemed to be enough to keep me level. With the way my mind was racing it wouldn't settle enough for me to actually get more than a few hours at a time.

She rewarded me with a moan of pleasure when my tongue traced circles over her clit. When my fingers dipped into her, she raised her hips just enough to give me a better angle and her thighs began to tremble. I pinched her clit and her back curved beautifully, reminding me of how graceful and limber my wife was but I preferred her more when she was wild and unfiltered. When I'd pushed her limits to the point where she couldn't maintain the practiced control she was used to.

"I want to be angry with you..." I slid two fingers into her, but kept them shallow while I lifted my eyes to find hers narrowed on me.

"Why?"

"You left me here alone last night."

"And I'm apologizing for that right now." I flattened my tongue and slid my fingers in a little deeper, granting one long swipe across her folds while they worked with a steady pace dipping in and out of her.

"Sex isn't an apology. It's a distraction."

"No?"

I peered up at her for a moment while my fingers dipped lower, faster.

"Shit, no...yes...you're not playing fair..."

I chuckled then roughly sucked her clit between my lips, speaking against her when I released it. "That's the point. Now give me what I want. Stop holding back."

She moaned and swallowed thickly. "I'm not..."

"Yes, you are."

"We're not alone anymore," she whispered.

My brother and Sasha.

“They can’t hear you, Cress. You can yell as loud as you want and they’ll never know.”

It was true, they were far enough away that neither of them could hear anything on this side of the house. They’d have to physically be outside my door. Not that I cared anyway but I respected that she did.

“Are you sure?”

“Very. Now give me what I want.”

She began rocking her body against my face, meeting the rhythm of my fingers. My tongue continued to focus on her clit while I studied her face, searching for the slightest shift signaling that she was edging closer to her release. Her lust-filled eyes were half-closed, eyelids fluttering while she tried her best not to lose control.

I accepted the challenge.

While my fingers continually worked her closer to that release, I gave her a few more measured swipes of my tongue then completely pulled away.

Her body heated and anger shifted into her expression but I smiled, wrapping my hand around her enough to pull her to me. Once I dipped my shoulder beneath her thighs and lifted, settling between her legs, she tensed again and groaned in pleasure when I sank into her.

She was so fucking wet.

Always ready.

I pulled back and shifted in deeper. Just that quickly she released her hesitation and rocked into me, requesting more. I fucked her hard enough to push her limits and was rewarded by the throaty moans and the chorus of my name on her tongue. I sped up and dipped my head, needing to see what she was experiencing. My condom covered dick, slick from her, claiming what now belonged to me. For the briefest moment, I imagined fucking her without anything between us but then reality settled in. That wouldn’t happen. I wouldn’t take the risk.

“You gonna cum for me, Cress?” My voice was rough, being tested by the restraint I used to hold back my orgasm.

“Are you gonna cum with me?” Her smile was teasing but lazy and I answered with back to back deep thrusts. Her pretty lips parted and her chest lifted from the bed while I leaned over her and bit down on her nipple.

“Fuck me.”

“I am, baby, now cum for me...”

I sped up my thrusts and her body tensed and relaxed, preparing to

unravel. The minute she began jerking her hips against me I stopped holding back and came, pushing harder into her until we both eased into a sated state. I lowered my body until it covered hers, mindful of my weight, kissing and sucking her neck until she was limber beneath me.

“I have to go to the studio...”

“When?”

“Now.”

I lifted my head and kissed her mouth. Her eyes narrowed on me and I eased out of her then climbed off the bed. She watched me until I entered the bathroom. After turning on the shower I stepped back into the doorway.

“Come shower with me.”

I didn’t wait for an answer, but a few minutes after I stepped into the glass-enclosed shower, she followed, dipping in front of me. I circled her waist and kissed her shoulder allowing the water to beat against my body and hers.

“Where were you last night?”

I couldn’t keep my muscles from locking, but I didn’t answer until she angled her head back to me.

“I went to see my doctor and went for a drive up the mountain after I left there.”

She turned, staring at me with cautious eyes.

“Is everything okay?”

I gripped her waist and pulled her into me. “Yeah, just adjusting to everything. I needed a minute for my mind to settle.”

“Adjusting to things like me being here?”

“Yes, but it’s not a bad thing and it’s not about you. Routine is important and when things change, I have to step back for a minute to let them settle.”

“Would it help if I had my own room?” Her brows pinched and I exhaled my frustration. I didn’t want her feeling like she was a problem. She wasn’t.

My fucking twisted ass brain was.

“It’s not you, baby. It will never be you, okay?”

She narrowed her eyes on me but nodded and I could see her relax so I kissed her forehead and she pushed into me.

“But you’ll tell me if I need to do something different or if you need me to pull back?”

The sincerity in her voice shattered my fucking resolve. She was promising to do whatever it took for me to be okay.

“I will.”

But one thing she would never have to worry about was giving less of herself. If anything I would selfishly demand more and that was the part that had me on edge. Because if she ever refused, it would fucking break me.

TWENTY-TWO

eress

MY MORNING HAD BEEN PRODUCTIVE. My husband coaxed me awake with his tongue. Something I could easily get used to. Then he followed the pleasure delivered from his skillful mouth with the most amazing orgasm. With only one month left before I had to settle back into training and dancing daily with the theatre, I couldn't skip out on my plans to spend the day at my studio. Spending the day in bed with Elias felt like a much better choice but I had to get my body back in shape and a part of me was worried that I needed to give him space.

He insisted he was fine, but I wasn't completely convinced that was the truth. Which was why I was currently sitting in the coffee shop next to my building sipping on a chai latte while drumming my fingers on the table trying to decide if I was going to betray his trust. Technically I wasn't but that was how it felt, searching for answers online instead of asking Elias directly. A part of me felt like he was holding back and I wasn't sure if that was because he was fearful of how I would react or if he was truly okay and there wasn't a cause for alarm.

I wasn't naïve enough to believe that being married to a man with mental health issues wouldn't be a challenge, but I also wanted to be accepting of how the man he was would adjust things in my world.

I had only known Elias for a little over a month but someone needed to convince my mind, heart, and body. Days felt like weeks and weeks felt like months. I wasn't in love with him, no, but I cared about him deeply and it was different from the emotions I'd experienced with anyone in my past. I wanted him to be happy and whole and I felt a part of that relied on my ability to understand him better.

My husband was a prideful man, strong, resilient, and dangerously

alluring, but also guarded. I sensed that he still felt the need to protect himself from me or me from him. As much as I understood his reasoning—rejection from his father, mother, and god knows who else—that wasn't necessary with me.

I would accept all of him. Even the parts I didn't understand.

Exhaling a short sigh, I lifted the lid to my laptop and keyed in the words I hoped would bring clarity about the man who was quickly claiming possession of my heart.

The importance of routine with bipolar disorder

After a few seconds, several links filled my screen. I decided to bypass those that didn't seem to be from official and trusted sources and clicked on one from a psychiatric study from Harvard Medical School. My eyes began scanning the words that took over my screen.

"...a set routine for your day—everyday—can be a lifeline."

"People with bipolar disorder are especially sensitive to the disruption of routines."

"Routines prevent disruptions to the brain's regulatory system..."

"Disruptions can trigger...mania...euphoric...boundless energy...lead you into depression..."

Was that why he's not sleeping?

Marrying me disrupted his routine?

I continued reading, feeling tension spreading through my body.

"Malfunctioning body clock...causes dramatic mood shifts that define bipolar disorder..."

"Bipolar disorder can leave you feeling helpless as your moods shift from one extreme to another..."

"Routine can help....reduces some uncertainty..."

I read a few more things until I felt a presence looming over me. My eyes shot up from my screen just in time to see Christian settle into the chair across from mine. I quickly closed my laptop and offered him a smile.

"Hey..."

"Hey to you. Everything okay? You look tense."

I forced my body to relax. "I'm fine. Just wasn't expecting to see you. You startled me."

My brother eyed me skeptically for a minute before nodding. "I checked the studio and you weren't there. Usually that means you're done for the day or taking a break. Your breaks are either chai lattes..." He tapped the table

near my disposable cup. “Or a smoothie from Blended.”

I grinned at the awareness that he knew me very well. “I’m playing catch up after an entire week off but trust me, I earned this break.”

Something shifted in his expression. “How was that?”

He’s still uncomfortable with my marriage to Elias.

When he was the one who set things in motion.

“My honeymoon?” I raised a brow paired with a smug grin.

“Yeah, that.” He shifted in his chair and added, “And feel free to leave out the specifics of certain things.”

Like sex.

My smile blossomed. “It was good. The kind of good where I wished we could have stayed longer.”

“Because of the location or the company?”

“Both. Things are good with us. Better than good actually.”

He nodded and I asked, “Are you surprised?”

“More like relieved. I was hopeful and knowing I don’t have to end this newly forged union because he isn’t treating you good makes me happy.”

My husband surely makes me happy.

“Would you end it?”

“Of course I would, Cress. Why the fuck would you question that? My loyalty is to my family first.”

“But you still forced this?”

“It was necessary but if the consequence of marrying an Omari had placed you in danger or somehow caused you to be unhappy then I would never make you follow through. That stands even now. If you change your mind then you come to me and we’ll figure things out.”

He stared directly into my eyes as if trying to fully gauge whether or not I was being honest. If things with me and Elias were good and if I was happy.

I was, so his expression softened when he realized my truth.

“If things change, you’ll be the first to know.”

“Promise me that you’ll really come to me.”

“I promise.”

“And if I should be expecting nieces or nephews you’ll tell me that as well, right?”

I laughed, lifting my cup. “I thought you didn’t want the details.”

His face frowned hard. “I don’t, but shit that’s going to take some time getting used to. A shared lineage between our families...” He brushed a hand

over his head, shaking it gently. “I need a heads up so that I can have plenty of time to get used to the idea.”

“Is the thought really that terrible?”

He deadpanned a look in my direction and I rolled my eyes. “You can relax. We’ve been safe and honestly, we haven’t discussed having children.”

The thought had me tense all of a sudden. I wanted children at some point. What if he didn’t? We had time because my career was my current priority but I couldn’t dance forever nor did I want to. I could easily see myself being not just a wife but a mother.

“What’s wrong?”

“Huh?”

“You look upset. Is there a problem with you two talking about kids?”

Christian’s protective nature vibrated from him. He’d just gone from I don’t want to think about you bearing his children to being upset if Elias was the one who didn’t want me to bear his children. I smiled, shaking my head. “No, there’s no issue. I was just realizing that there was so much he and I need to discuss.” I lifted my eyes to my brother, thinking about something. “Do you regret marrying her?”

He tensed. “No, but I’m sure she regrets marrying me.”

Aja had been withdrawn from our family for years. Mostly because none of us bothered hiding how we felt after finding out she’d aborted Christian’s children and lied about having miscarriages.

“She doesn’t have the right to feel any type of way about you after the things she’s done.”

“I agree but she has her reasons. Even if they only make sense to her.”

“They don’t make sense.”

“I’m not saying they do, what I am saying is that our situation is very different from yours. She and I had an attraction, emotions, and feelings prior to the arrangement ever existing. We cared about each other...”

“Which is what I don’t understand. What changed?”

I could see him warring with whether or not he wanted to tell me and I huffed, rolling my eyes. “I already don’t like her. I’m not sure there’s anything that you could tell me which would make things worse.”

“Don’t be so sure of yourself...” he mumbled.

“Chris...”

His eyes fastened with mine. “She lied to me. I was very clear about what I expected from her and from our marriage. I was honest about how I felt and

my position on certain things and she agreed.”

Having kids.

“She never wanted children?”

He quickly shook his head. “No, she didn’t but she made me believe she did. I trusted that we wanted the same things. I trusted *her*...”

Then she lied about miscarrying three of his kids.

“Did she tell you?”

He shook his head no. “I found out by chance. I thought maybe we needed to seek help. That there might be an issue. I reached out to her doctor and asked for recommendations and to get her thoughts. I knew the minute I asked, something was wrong. She said that Aja and I needed to talk. When I confronted Aja told me she hadn’t miscarried, that she aborted my children. All three. She tried to convince me that our life would be better just the two of us. I was so fucking pissed...”

“But you’re still married to her.”

“For now,” he said firmly.

I decided not to pry any further. I had been wrong. What he confessed did make me hate her more. Why lie? Why make someone suffer from your personal choices? That was selfish. She should have never agreed to marry my brother. They had more of a choice than Elias and I had.

“I’m sorry.” I reached across the table and placed my hand over his, squeezing gently. He flipped his over and linked his fingers with mine.

“Don’t be.” He pulled away, extending to his full height and adjusting his suit jacket. “I have a meeting I need to get to. Come home for dinner soon.”

“With my husband?” I teased and he cringed slightly and nodded.

“I still have to get used to that but yes, he’s family now. He’s welcome at my table as I’m sure I’m welcome at yours.”

Yours.

My brother now viewed me as a part of Elias’s family as well.

Christian rounded the table and kissed my cheek. “I’m glad you’re happy, Cress. That was very important to me regardless of what you may think.”

“I believe you want me to be happy, Chris.”

“Good, because I do. See you soon, kid.” He walked away and just as I was about to go back to my search, my phone rang with a FaceTime call from Elias. My stomach fluttered and my heart danced with excitement while a smile eased onto my face.

“I was just thinking about you.” I held my phone close to the table and

angled my face so that it was level over it.

I wanted to see him and for him to see me.

He smiled, looking dangerously handsome, shirtless with a light sheen of sweat covering his tempting brown skin. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“You want to share what those thoughts were?”

“Hmmm, maybe not or I might not make it back to my studio to finish my last session for the day.”

His face tensed and those brown eyes flitted over my face. “You’re not at the studio?”

“No, the coffee shop next to it. I needed a little break so I came here to get tea and a bagel.”

“How long are you gonna be there? I can come meet you?”

“You’re not dressed.” I narrowed my eyes trying to take in the scenery behind him. “Where are you?”

“At the house. Went for a run.”

“You’re not tired?”

He shook his head. “No, got some rest this morning after you left.”

I didn’t believe him. Elias didn’t rest.

“Oh...”

“So, you want me to come join you?”

“I have a few more hours I need to get in. I was about to head back now. I was just talking to Chris...”

“Your brother’s there?” His tone was harder than necessary.

“Was, he stopped by to see me before a meeting.”

“Yeah?”

“Is something wrong?”

He quickly shook his head. “No, why?”

“You seem upset that Chris was here.”

“Cress, I’m not upset. Just surprised to hear he stopped by. I’m gonna finish my run. How about we do dinner tonight?”

“At home...”

His eyes flashed with amusement then a smile came. “Home?”

I felt my body warm at how easily I referenced his home as ours. Elias was my home now, so wherever he was was home to me. “Should I not call it that?”

He chuckled lightly. “No, I’m glad you feel comfortable enough to say

it.”

“Well after this morning, I don’t have a choice but to be comfortable. You kind of forced my hand...”

And my very loud orgasm.

“Yeah, I did but I still like hearing it.”

And I like saying it.

I cleared my throat. “So, dinner at home?”

“I was thinking we could go out. I’ll make a reservation somewhere.”

“That works too.”

“Any suggestions”

“Nope, you decide.”

He nodded into the screen. “What time should I expect you?”

“Mmm, no later than six.” It was just after two. Another couple hours of choreography and I would be done for the day.

“So, eight is good?”

“Eight is perfect.”

“See you then.” His tone was a low sexy rasp and paired with the handsome smirk on his face my thighs clenched, my stomach fluttered and knotted with the promise of him.

I locked my phone and tucked my laptop under my arm then headed to the door with my tea clasped in hand. I finished what was left of my chai latte and dropped the empty cup in the trash before leaving.

A few more hours then I’d get my reward...

Elias.

TWENTY-THREE

elias

AFTER I TALKED TO CRESS, I ran for another hour, traveling the trail on our property. No matter how many years had passed, I could mindlessly navigate which was exactly what I needed. Once I was exhausted and my limbs were screaming for relief I headed back to the house, stepping into the side entrance of the kitchen feeling the tension in my muscles. A long hot shower would help with that, however, I froze at the sound of my brother's voice. It was only his that I could hear which meant that he was on a call but the next sentence out of his mouth had my jaw tight.

“I’m watching his movements and they don’t make sense. I’m concerned.”

Concerned...

My senses piqued while I heard him moving toward the kitchen but his footfalls quieted a few seconds later.

“The way he’s behaving is dangerous for us. It’s unpredictable and that’s not good considering what we need to accomplish. Pushing him might prove to be a mistake that we’ll have to rectify quickly.”

The muscles in my body locked tight and I started heading in the direction of his voice but Ez didn’t see me right away because his back was to me.

“I will not let him ruin this. If he continues acting erratically then we’ll do whatever necessary.”

“Who are you talking to?” My voice was a low growl that had my brother turning in my direction. He frowned hard, keeping his eyes on mine when he addressed the caller.

“Let me call you back. Yeah, I understand.”

“You gonna answer me?”

“Christian.”

Christian.

He had been with Cress earlier. What had she told him? Why the fuck were they talking about me?

“Is he asking you to watch me?”

I could see the confusion on my brother’s face. “No, why would he?”

“You just said you were watching my movements and they didn’t make sense, that you were concerned.”

“I’m not watching you. I’m watching Samson and so is Christian. He had a meeting with Reid today to clear up some issues between them. Why the fuck would you think I was talking about you? Is there something you’re not telling me?”

“No, I thought I heard my name.” My mind was racing. I hated the lack of trust I currently felt but I knew why I was feeling it. My head hadn’t been level in weeks. It was mild at first but I could tell things had gotten worse.

And so could he.

“You said you had things under control, Lias.”

“I do,” I gritted, glaring at him. He hadn’t done a damn thing wrong but I was still trying hard to simmer the anger building.

The distrust.

The paranoia.

“I don’t think you do.”

“I’m good, Ez. It’s going to take a few days for me to balance. I’m back on my original meds...”

“Days?” he questioned, eyes expressing his disbelief. He knew better and so did I.

Weeks was more like it.

“I’m handling it,” I murmured.

“Elias, if you need help, let me help.”

I inhaled, slowly managing to rein it in. “I don’t. You know how this shit works.”

“Yeah I do.”

“It’s up and down. I’ve had a lot going on but you don’t need to worry. I’m handling it.”

I turned to walk away and he spoke behind me. “But if you feel like you’re not, you’ll let me know, right?”

No.

“Don’t I always?”

Ez had always been my voice of reason up until Lucas. When I spiraled, I didn’t tell him or anyone. I wanted to lose control. I needed the highs and the lows. The launch and the crash. But that was then. Things were different now.

I had a wife.

I wouldn’t do that to her so no matter how much I knew I was struggling, I had to work my way through this and I would.

For her.

* * *

“I think red is my favorite color on you.” The color was a huge factor but the appeal was also the *dress*. The red satin material tied behind her neck and plunged low in the front, damn near to her navel, exposing the outline and curve of her breasts. It hugged her waist but flowed freely at the bottom, stopping just below her knees. Her hair was pinned up, with a few pieces framing her beautiful face so her neck, shoulders, and arms were also exposed.

A sea of brown that had my fingers itching to explore.

Everything about her was alluring. An unyielding temptation.

“And *I* think anything I wear is your favorite.”

“I won’t disagree but if we’re taking it there, you wearing nothing will win my vote every time.”

She offered the faintest smirk before lifting a glass of wine to her nude glossed lips. “You’re very good for my ego.”

I chuckled, leaning back in my seat. “You don’t need me to stroke your ego, Cress. You’re very confident about who and *what* you are.”

“Am I?”

She most certainly was so I countered, forcing her to be honest. “Aren’t you?”

Her smile bloomed wider. “Maybe, but that depends on *what* you think I am.”

Mine.

My reason.

My lifeline.

“My wife.”

“It appears I am, aren’t I?” She lifted her hand and flexed her fingers. “And you’re *my* husband.”

Her eyes lowered to the platinum band on my left hand. My thumb slipped under my fingers and brushed the bottom of the sleek metal. “For as long as you’ll allow me to be.”

She grinned and lifted her wine again. “You’re adorably naïve if you believe that either of us has an out.”

“How the fuck you put adorable and naïve in the same sentence referencing me? That right there might be my reason for an out.”

“Sorry, no outs with us, ever. I’ve always considered marriage as a one and done. It has to work, no matter what.”

“Even if you’re miserable?”

“I wouldn’t ever be miserable because for every problem, there’s a solution. It’s up to us to work together to find a middle ground.”

“And if we can’t then what?”

“Then you’ll be miserable because I refuse to be?” Her smile was sincere but also very confident which made me laugh.

“You’ll never be miserable if I have a say in it, Cress. I’d give up my happiness for yours if that’s what it takes.”

She grinned slyly. “That’s very admirable of you but the only way this works for me is if we’re both happy, so don’t fuck this up and I’ll try my best not to either.”

“Deal.”

But the thing was, she never had to worry about her happiness. Experiencing even the smallest amount of Cress allowed me to realize some things were worth the sacrifice. Sacrificing my happiness for hers was an oath I would take if it meant having any parts of this woman.

“Are you done with this?”

Our dinner flowed with ease. I ordered a steak and potatoes. Cress ordered sides insisting that she needed to start getting back in dance shape which was interesting considering nothing about her had physically changed that I could tell. Her body was worship worthy. Defined curves, lean, toned arms and legs that I enjoyed having wrapped around my body but I also understood the appearance had little to do with her fitness level. Dancing was physically taxing.

“I don’t want to be, but...” She reached for another tempura green bean and I watched as it moved between her lips. A subtle reminder of my dick

having been in that same place. “But yes, I’ve had enough.”

“You sure?” I lifted a brow in challenge and she placed a hand over her stomach and smiled.

“I ate half of your steak and plus what I ordered so yep, I’m sure.”

“How about we go outside to the deck? You can have another glass of wine and maybe if I’m lucky my wife will dance for me.”

“Here?”

“Yes, here. There’s an outdoor bar with a dance floor.”

“Drinks I can do, but I’m not dancing for you here in public.”

No, you aren’t. I’m not willing to share so this dance will only be for me.

“You’ll just have to trust me on this.”

I lifted and extended my hand. She didn’t hesitate. I fucking loved her confidence in me and I also loved the energy that always seemed to travel between and through us.

Every look.

Every touch.

All of it relevant to a bond I had with a woman I would hand over my soul too. All she had to do was ask.

We navigated through the restaurant. Guests were enjoying their meals with their selected company for the evening. My hand rested on Cress’s back, the warmth of her bare skin burning my palm, taunting me with the urge to explore more.

Later.

Tonight was about intimacy not sex.

I wanted to show appreciation for my wife.

She deserved to be revered.

With a discreet nod, the manager let me know that things were set up as requested just before Cress and I moved through the folding glass doors that opened onto the deck. Wood rafting was overhead, laced with string lights, creating an open gazebo feel. The lower perimeter of the deck illuminated with a hazy glow from the same type of lights. The bar offered a soft blue from fluorescent bulbs that were under the wood surface where drinks were served and tall round tables defined the area that was used as a dance floor.

Based on the smile she offered after she fully took in her surroundings I could tell she approved. “I can’t believe I’ve never been here before. This is nice. The food was amazing and this outdoor space is gorgeous.”

And so are you.

“I’m glad you approve, considering you own it.”

“What?”

“Remember what I said. My assets are now your assets.”

“You own this place?”

I stepped closer, allowing my fingers to brush her left hip before I gripped it firmly and pulled her into me. “We own it, Mrs. Omari.”

Her smile grew slowly and my dick followed the motion. “You said you owned properties that were managed by other people.”

“Is this not a property?”

“Well yes, but *properties* was vague and a little misleading. I thought real estate.”

I smiled arrogantly. “I own a lot of shit so you were not wrong in assuming real estate.”

“We own a lot of shit. I need to take a look at how well diversified I am now.”

“I’ll see what I can do about getting that information to you.”

“So, I’m assuming you’re the reason no one else is out here.”

“You assume right. The boss gets what he wants.” I placed a kiss on her neck and stepped away. “And what I want is for you to dance for me...”

In that fucking dress...

“And if I say no?” She smiled smugly.

“Then I’ll be disappointed but I’ll live.”

She didn’t move or speak right away but after a moment she stepped out of her heels, bent at the waist to lift them, then moved to me and handed them, along with the small purse she was holding, over. I accepted everything and she wrapped her delicate fingers around the side of my neck and lifted onto her toes, delivering a light kiss.

“You better be glad I like you.”

I chuckled and moved back, placing her shoes on the deck next to me while I moved to the railing and leaned against it.

She lifted onto her toes, her arms extended out beside her while her back curved softly and those beautiful brown eyes remained on me as she began to move.

There was a song playing through the building’s system. I had no idea what it was because all my mind could process was her.

Watching Cress uninhibited felt like time stood still. It amazed me how graceful and strong she was. Power and elegance cohesively working in

unison. An expression of who we were. Her light to my dark. There was something about this woman that touched the depths of me. It happened without my knowledge but I had no regrets. She was mine. I felt it all over and through me and accepted my fate without issue.

She spun slowly, extending both arms in my direction. Her palms were lifted and she waited with a soft smile on her face. I obliged, stepping to her but instead of taking her hands, I pulled her into me with my fingers pressing into the bare skin of her back. While she locked her arms around my neck, I moved my hands down further to the curve of her ass, bringing her body flush with mine.

“You’re beautiful.”

“Now or when I dance for you?”

“Both.”

She hummed lightly, bringing a smile to my face. Every time she did so, the low thrumming vibrated through my body privately communicating she was in charge.

She owned me.

I didn’t mind.

“Dance with me.”

“That wasn’t our deal.”

She moved away from me but I held her hand, lifting it above her head. She turned beneath our clasped hands before spinning back into my chest. “Did we have a deal? You asked me to dance for you, I did. Now I want you to dance with me.”

Cress worked her hips against me, smiling. If she wanted me to dance, I would dance.

Or at least move with her because that was about all I was willing to give.

“See, that’s not so terrible, is it?”

I chuckled, placing a kiss to the curve of her jaw. Her arms tightened around my neck. “You expect me to say yes?”

“I expect you to be honest.”

She released a soft sigh, leaning into me more but then she slowly eased back, her hesitant gaze tangled with mine. “I looked up some things today?”

Unease settled into my chest and my throat thickened. Things about me...

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, but not because I don’t trust you or that I want to pry, I just want to understand you better.”

She'd done research.

“You didn’t want to ask me?”

“I didn’t want to make you uncomfortable because it feels like you kind of still are about certain things.”

“I am but not because I’m hiding or don’t want you to know. It’s just not something I’m used to sharing so I don’t. You can ask me whatever you want and I’ll do my best to explain things for you in a way that makes sense.”

When I can because my life rarely makes sense.

“So we can talk about it?”

“Yes, always...”

I attempted to pull away, but she tightened her arms round my neck. “Here, like this. I kinda like how this feels.”

“You want to pick my brain while we dance.”

“If that’s okay with you.”

“Anything about you is okay with me.” I pressed my forehead to hers. “What do you want to know?”

“You mentioned routine. I read about why it’s important to you and I want you to know that I’m okay with fitting into whatever your routines need to be. However it works best for you.”

God, she could bring me to my knees with the simplest admissions.

I was her priority. She was willing to fit into my world. She was willing to meet me where I was, accepting and understanding of what I needed. How the fuck was this so easy for her when my own parents whose flesh and blood I was born of weren’t willing to apply the same effort?

“You don’t have to fit into my routines, Cress. *You* are my routine. You have been since the moment I laid eyes on you.”

“But...”

I kissed her hard and when I pulled back my eyes lowered to hers. “You. Are. My. Routine.”

She curled deeper into my hold, pressing her fingers into the back of my neck to bring my face closer to hers. “That’s good to know because you’re mine too. Neither of us exist without the presence or consideration of the other. As far as I’m concerned one without the other causes chaos and I don’t think I’d like that very much.”

I smirked then gently bit down on her lip, soothing it with my tongue after. “Chaos isn’t always a bad thing.”

“When you’re making me cum, no, but that’s about the only time I’m

willing to embrace it.”

“Good to know.”

“And since we’re on the subject. I think I’m ready to leave now.”

“Yeah?”

Her mouth met mine again and after a few swipes of her tongue she pulled back with a smile. “Yeah.”

She stepped away from me, slipping back into her shoes and lifting her purse from the wood railing where I’d left it. “I’m going to head to the bathroom before we go.”

I offered a nod and she disappeared through the opening that led back into the restaurant. I followed, stopping to let the manager know he could shut things down on the patio. The minute he walked away, my phone vibrated in my pocket. I removed it and tensed at a text from an unknown number. My fingers moved quickly, swiping to unlock the device. When I opened the thread, realizing it was a picture of Cress from tonight walking into the bathroom, I froze but the messages that followed had me moving again.

Angel or devil?

Red is certainly her color but I’d have to fuck her first to know which and I will fuck her.

Watching her dance makes my dick hard.

When I do, she’s going to love every minute of it.

Keep her close, not that it matters because if I want her, she’s mine

I moved so fast through the restaurant heading toward the bathrooms that everything around was a blur. I tried my best to focus on the faces I passed, to see if any of them felt familiar but my mind refused.

I needed to get my hands on Cress.

The minute I slammed my palm on the door pushing into the woman’s bathroom, my pulse was pounding in my ears, drowning out all other sounds. I found Cress, safe and alone, her eyes wide and expression startled from seeing me.

“Elias, what’s wrong?”

My eyes darted around the bathroom, but I didn’t answer her. I moved down the single row of stalls forcing the doors open. All four were empty.

“Elias, what are you doing?”

When our eyes locked, hers were laced with enough concern for me to relax so that she would.

“Nothing...” I murmured.

“Don’t tell me nothing. You’re in the women’s bathroom, looking like you’re ready to murder someone.”

Because I am.

“I thought someone was in here. I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“Someone like who?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know? You’re not making sense.”

Fuck because this doesn’t make sense.

“I got a text that said keep you close.”

I wouldn’t share the rest because I didn’t want her to panic. I was already losing my shit.

“Wh...what? Why would someone send you that?”

“I don’t know.”

Her brows pinched like she was thinking deeply. “I’ve had people say and do things before because of my career but if it’s that, why would they send it to you? No one really knows about us. Not yet.”

Someone knew and they wanted to send me a message. It was my job to figure out who the fuck it was and why. Reno was the first person who came to mind but this wasn’t his style and he surely wouldn’t make a trip here just to fuck with me. Someone took a picture of my wife tonight in my restaurant.

“I’ll figure it out, okay?” I made my way to her, cupped her face in my palms, and lifted it slightly so that her eyes met mine. “You’re safe with me.”

“But...”

“You are safe with me.”

“I’m safe with you.” She relaxed but only a little.

“Come on, let’s go home.”

I grabbed her hand firmly, pulled open the door, and stepped into the hallway. Immediately I tucked Cress protectively into my side while we moved through the building. I kept my eyes on the faces around us, none feeling familiar and none paying us more than a cursory glance or a smile of acknowledgment but my mind was already in motion.

Something wasn’t right and it didn’t have shit to do with the way my thoughts had been spiraling lately.

* * *

After I knew for sure Cress was fast asleep, I stepped out onto the

balcony and made the call I had been anxious to make since that first text came through. I sent a text to a trusted source to have the number traced and it came back as a dead end. The messages were delivered from a prepaid number which meant it wasn't traceable to any one specific person. The only information I could find was that the number had just been activated a few hours before I received the text about Cress.

"Elias?" My name with a question mark at the end was how Kev answered my call.

"Where's your boss?"

"I can't tell you that. You left which means you no longer have access to that type of information."

"You really want to tell me no, Kev. We both know I'm not a problem you want. Reno doesn't give a shit about replacing you. I can give him a reason to."

He laughed dryly. "You're not here. I'm not really worried about you at the moment. Reno on the other hand is here which makes his priorities mine. I'm not telling you shit."

"So he's there?"

"Why the fuck are you asking, Elias? Again, you walked away. His business is no longer yours."

Unfortunately, that wasn't true.

He mentioned my wife.

He was on my radar.

"Just tell me where he is."

"Tell me why you want to know."

"Because I need to be sure he's not somewhere he doesn't need to be. Somewhere that might get him killed."

Like near my wife.

"You really think subtle threats are smart when it comes to Reno?"

"Do you really think I give a fuck one way or another?"

He was quiet for a minute. Kev knew me as well as he knew his boss. Answering a simple question was safer than getting on my bad side which he proved.

"He's here at the club."

"You physically see him?"

"Yeah, I'm looking at him right now."

"And he's been there all night?"

“Come the fuck on, I answered your question. He’s here, now get the fuck off my line and don’t pull any stupid shit like showing up with problems because when you walked away, you made it clear what side you were on and it’s not Reno’s.”

Kev hung up on me and I lowered my phone, feeling the tension in my jaw. It would take Reno a three-hour flight to get here. If he was at the club now that meant he wasn’t the one who sent me the picture. Or at least not the person who took the picture. Someone local had to do that.

Not that it made me feel any better. I considered what Cress said. It was very possible that she had stalkers. People who weren’t happy that I married her but my mind felt that it was something different. The problem was whether or not I could trust my mind.

I didn’t...

TWENTY-FOUR

eress

TRINI and I walked into the boutique arm in arm. Since we were spending the afternoon together I decided to do a little shopping. I wanted to get something for later. After the way our dinner ended last night, my nerves were all over the place.

I almost bailed on my friend date. I felt like Elias wanted me to but he relaxed when I offered to share my location and check in throughout the day. That didn't stop me from feeling anxious and looking over my shoulder more than necessary. As the day went on, I relaxed more.

"I missed you. It feels like I haven't seen you in years."

"It hasn't even been weeks. You're so dramatic."

"Yes, I am so don't give me a reason to be." She winked then released me so she could lift a dress from one of the racks. This place reminded me of those boutiques you'd see in movies with eight-foot racks built into stark white walls with a handful of custom items on each, when you could easily fit about five or six dozen and still have room for more.

"What do you think?"

Trini held the skimpy black dress against her tall slim frame. Trini looked more like a dancer than I did. I had more curves, she had more height and a lean body that she spent a lot of time keeping slim and toned with Pilates and yoga classes.

"I think it would be more like a shirt than a dress but I like it."

"Oh, then I'm definitely getting this. Don't let me forget." She placed it back on the rack and moved to another.

"Welcome to Rare Elegance, ladies. Is there anything I can help you find?"

I turned and smiled at the associate when she neared us. She was

impeccably dressed in a dress that looked like a male button up shirt, but it was tapered at the waist and she paired it with a thick brown belt that matched the leather heels she was wearing.

Okay, sis!

“Um, I need something sexy. Red, if possible.”

“Well damn. You’re already trying to spice things up in the bedroom?” Trini grinned at me over her shoulder and I shrugged.

“My man likes me in red and I like him in me.”

I winked at the associate and she produced a devilish grin. “I think I have just the thing for you. A few things, actually. Come with me.”

I followed her to the other side of the shop and she pulled open a shallow drawer which was built into the wall. Above it hung several sheer lingerie pieces. Two body suits, a bra and panty set, and one strapless camisole dress that was split right up the middle.

“We have each of those in red. What do you think?” She pointed to the display items and motioned to the open drawer which had all four in red.

“Hmmm.”

“Bitch what do you mean hmmm, get all four. It’s not like you won’t use them,” Trini said from over my shoulder. When I lifted my eyes to where her voice had been, she was already on her way to one of the other display tables.

“Well...” The associate grinned at me and I shrugged.

“I’ll take one of each.”

She nodded, eyeing me for a minute. “Small, medium?”

“Bottom small, medium top, and medium for the body suits.”

“Got it.” She removed the items then pointed to the counter. “I’ll take these up front for you. Is there anything else I can help you with?”

“No, I think I’m good. I’m going to look around for a bit more.”

“What about this?” Trini lifted a silver silk camisole that was made to wear as a shirt.

“You’re going to wear something under it, right?” I lifted a brow and she shrugged.

“Depends on who I’m wearing it for. Your man likes you in red, mine likes me in nothing but I agree, I like mine in me.”

I burst out laughing while she draped the top over her arm. “I’m getting it.”

“Of course you are.”

“So, you like him in you but do you actually like him?”

A plethora of thoughts of Elias crossed my mind and my smile surfaced with lightning speed which had Trini rolling her eyes. “Never mind, there’s my answer right there on your face.”

“I already told you I like him and that things were good.”

“Yeah you did but I needed to be around you to know for sure. You’re good at schooling your emotions but I know you well enough to feel them and *you’re* feeling your husband.”

“I am.”

I frowned a little thinking about all the layers of him.

“Oh shit, what?”

“Huh?” My eyes snapped up to her and she narrowed hers on me.

“There’s something else and whatever that something is you don’t want me to know.”

I rolled my shoulders back. “There is not.”

“Yes, there is. Did you not just hear what I said? I know you.”

“I heard you, now hear me, there’s nothing.”

She tilted her head to the side. “Is he into kinky shit? Is that it?”

I rolled my eyes. “God, no but you act like that would be a problem. I like kinky shit.”

She grinned. “I mean you do but maybe his kink doesn’t match yours.”

“Would you stop?”

“Okay fine, I’ll stop but you know you can trust me right?”

Not with this.

Not with his secrets.

“I do.”

“Good and no matter what it is, I won’t judge.”

“If there was anything, I would tell you and why the fuck would you lie straight to my face like that? *You* would judge.”

She shot me a cocky grin. “Okay, I’ll judge but not in the way that I would ever hold against you or him. I love you no matter what and if you love him, by default I love him too. *Which means* you get a pass no matter how kinky your shit is.”

I don’t love him.

The funny thing was one word lingered at the end of that sentence.

Yet...

Because I felt like I would. I was already halfway there.

“You’re such a special case.”

“And I wear it proudly.”

“Yeah you do but you get a pass too because I love you.”

“Bitch how could you not. Look at me.” She flicked her wrist, motioning from her face down her body.

“I can’t with you.” I turned to go check out their jeans to the sound of Trini singing with confidence. “Can, do, and will always.”

I lifted my hand, shooting her a bird. I wouldn’t dare lie and say she was wrong.

She wasn’t.

* * *

“God, I’m stuffed. All we ever do is eat, shop, and drink wine. We need new hobbies, boo.” Trini rubbed her stomach and reached for the wine glass that held the last of the deep blood colored liquid. She swallowed it down then released a satisfied sigh.

“There’s nothing wrong with our chosen hobbies. I bust my ass dancing ninety percent of the time. I deserve to unwind with good food and a little shopping with my best friend.”

“So what does that say about me? You have a career. I don’t.”

“You do have a career. A non-traditional one but it still occupies your time.”

She rolled her eyes. “I donate my husband’s money to charities.”

“You also donate your time and they’re really good causes, Trini. A lot of people who would normally be lost aren’t, thanks to you.” She had partnerships with Our Loving Hands and Bridge to Brighter Futures both of which she was very hands on with. I loved her for that and truthfully, she did better than I did because my time never allowed me the opportunity to do more than write a check.

“Still not the same and still not a career.”

“No, it’s not but you do it effortlessly between your spa dates, shopping sprees, and wine binges. Consider your life full and well-rounded.” I stuck my tongue out at her and she threw her head back and laughed.

“Fuck you, Cress. I am well-rounded and my life is very full.”

“Didn’t I just say that?”

“You did, but sarcastically.”

“I was only joking, I *love* who you are. Don’t ever change with your well-rounded ass.”

She stood and grinned glancing over her shoulder. “My ass is well-rounded isn’t it?”

“Bitch no. Half-rounded but nice and firm so consider that as a win.”

“I was going to pay for this but now I’m offended. So ball out with the bill for my extra lobster tail. I’m going to the bathroom.”

I picked up the leather bill holder and slipped my card inside. Only a few seconds passed before someone approached and lifted it from the table. I offered her a smile when she noted she would be right back.

I lifted my phone to see if I had any messages from Elias. I had texted to tell him Trini and I were having an early dinner but that I would graciously accept being his dessert.

He sent back his approval but I hadn’t heard from him since.

I hated how much I missed him.

I was already terrible when it came to my feelings for this man.

“Excuse me, miss.”

My eyes shot up to see a handsome face staring at me. He offered a slight smile and lifted the bouquet of flowers he had in one hand. He was also wearing a very expensive suit and I could see the watch on his wrist peeking from under his sleeve. The guy was obviously well off.

Money didn’t mean safety.

“Yes.” I glared up at him.

“Sorry to bother you but I saw you sitting here and thought maybe you would accept these.”

My eyes moved to the flowers before returning to his face. “Why would I accept flowers from a stranger?”

He flashed me a charming smile. “You probably shouldn’t but I was hoping you would humor me. They were for my girl. I proposed today...”

My expression softened a little.

Shit, she turned him down.

“She said no?” I stated quietly.

He nodded, his smile thinning some. “Yes, but my problem, not yours. I spent a lot of money on these and I’d hate to throw them away. Figured I

might as well pay it forward. So if you'd do me the honor of accepting them it would be greatly appreciated."

"I uhh..."

"Please. I don't think I can handle two nos in less than ten minutes. Even if you throw them away after I'm gone, please just take them. I'll never know and I'll consider it a win."

I softened my position.

"Sure, thank you."

I brought them to my nose and smiled into the bouquet, enjoying their fragrance. They smelled sweet like honey. Perfect Pick was known for their rare and exquisite flowers.

"No, thank you. Enjoy the rest of your evening." He walked away and I lowered the flowers back to the table after smelling them again.

The server returned with my card and I signed the receipt, placed two twenties inside the leather receipt book, and slid it to the center of the table. Trini came out of the bathroom a few minutes later, eyes narrowed on the flowers.

"Damn it's like that?"

"Like what?"

I stood, lifting my purse then the flowers. She pointed to them. "Like that. Your man tracked you down and delivered flowers?"

"Nope. Some guy proposed to his girlfriend. She said no and I got the flowers as a consolation prize. He said he spent a lot of money on them and didn't want to throw them away."

She pointed to the stems which were wrapped in gold silk and housed a black wax circle with PP embossed in it. "Perfect Pick. He spent a grip on those. I wouldn't have thrown them away either."

"Then here, you keep them."

I shoved the bouquet at Trini who took it from my hand. "Awww you shouldn't have." She turned her head to the side, mocking a blush. "You sure you don't want them?"

"Nope, the only man I want giving me flowers is my husband."

"Then why did you take them?"

"She said no and he looked so pitiful. I was going to toss them after he was gone or gift them to someone else. But they're not mine so I wasn't going to keep them."

We started toward the front of the restaurant to leave and she frowned at

the arrangement.

“Shit now you’re making me feel bad.” She glanced around and shoved them into the chest of one of the servers. “Here, happy whatever occasion you want it to be.”

The woman looked at her crazy but didn’t unhand the flowers. She simply smiled, said thank you, and walked off. “Trini, what the fuck?”

“It made her happy. You saw her smile.”

“No, it scared the shit out of her and she was too in shock to refuse.”

“Either way, someone gets to enjoy some very expensive flowers.”

“Unless she tosses them.”

“Not my problem or yours. We did our part so all is right with the universe.”

We walked to our cars, said our goodbyes, and made plans to see each other soon. I slipped into my truck and smiled at the thought of going home to my husband because fuck, I missed him.

* * *

After I got home, I showered and changed into cotton shorts and a matching cropped crewneck. Elias wasn’t in our room but that didn’t mean he wasn’t somewhere on the property. The house was massive and easy to get lost in. I called and texted but didn’t get a response so I decided to search the house but was interrupted as soon as I reached the foyer by Sasha walking in the door. I’d seen her multiple times but couldn’t honestly say we ever had a conversation. She seemed nice enough but not very welcoming.

“Hey...” I greeted her as nicely as possible. She narrowed her eyes my way then rolled them.

Okay...

“Is there a problem?”

“No but give it some time and your marital bliss won’t be so blissful.”

Yeah, definitely a problem but not with me.

“I appreciate the unsolicited advice but I was thinking more if there was a problem between you and I considering I’ve been nothing but nice to you and you’ve basically been a bitch to me.”

“No, no problem at all. Forgive me for not diving right in to be your new bestie but I don’t have room in my contacts to add anyone else. So unfortunately, all I can offer is a big fuck you like I give everyone else that

lives here.”

“Sasha! That’s enough!”

Ez’s voice boomed from the top of the stairs and when I looked up, his expression was explosive and murderous.

And directed at his wife.

“Sorry, I guess my husband has yet another issue with me. Thanks for that.”

Is she really blaming me?

When he reached us she moved to go up the same stairs he’d just come down but he stepped in her way.

“Your problem is with me, not Cress or anyone else in this house. Try to remember that or you’re not going to like how I respond.”

“Yes *sir*, noted and fuck you too,” she rattled off, pushing past him to go up the stairs.

“I apologize.” His expression softened.

“Don’t. Her words, not yours and I really don’t care.”

He studied me for a minute. “Your marriage doesn’t have to be like ours.”

I lifted a brow and smirked. “Oh, trust me. I know that. It will never be like whatever that is.” I pointed to him then up the stairs and he cracked a smile.

“You sound very confident.”

“Because I am.”

“Good. My brother wouldn’t accept that type of behavior.” He tossed his chin over his shoulder since the stairs were at his back.

“And you do?”

“I’m working on it.”

“Speaking of, do you know where your brother is?”

“No, I haven’t seen him since this morning.”

“He’s not here?”

“No, not that I know of. Did you call him?”

“I did. He didn’t answer.” My shoulders tensed which I didn’t hide very well because Ez stepped closer looking concerned.

“The other night, when he didn’t come home until late, did he tell you why?”

“He did. Said he needed to clear his head and went for a drive up the mountain on his bike.”

“And you believe him?”

“Should I not?”

“No, you should. It’s what he told me.”

“And you believe him?”

“Yes, I do. He’s adjusting. Elias is good at self-managing when things get too stressful. He knows what he needs. You can trust that he will do what’s required to stay level.”

Level.

“He mentioned the disruptions to his routine. I’m sure all of this has been stressful. Our marriage, me moving in here, and the simple task of figuring stuff out with us.”

Ez adjusted his stance, lowering his chin. “Trust him to do what he needs to and if you ever get concerned about him, you can come to me.”

I drew back, shaking my head.

“I trust him and I need him to trust me.”

“Doing what’s right for my brother is not betraying his trust, Cress. Always remember that. He will never hold that against you.”

I nodded.

“I’ll come to you if I think it’s necessary.”

“Good.” He offered a smile. “I love my brother. My parents might not have been good for or to him but that’s not the case with me. I see him. I always have. I believe you see him too and I appreciate that. So does he.”

I returned a smile. “I do.”

Ez offered a nod and walked away but his acceptance and trust that his brother was safe with me lingered.

TWENTY-FIVE

elias

“HERE. I don’t know who pissed you off but the way you took it out on anyone who was crazy enough to step in that ring just made me a very rich man for the evening.”

I shook my head at the cash Cannon was trying to hand over. I wasn’t done yet. My muscles ached and I could already feel the bruises surfacing on my abs and chest. No one ever touched my face. I wouldn’t let them. A black eye was a lot harder to explain and it wasn’t just Ez who I would be explaining to anymore.

“Take it. You earned it.”

“I will when I’m done. Give me one more fight.”

Cannon’s face tensed and his eyes circled the basement where he was holding the fights this week. The locations changed month after month because cops didn’t like illegal gambling or having to deal with men who got the shit beat out of them because they needed a few extra dollars. I didn’t need the money. I needed the pain.

“If I do, that makes four. You sure you want to do that. You won the rounds but they got some good hits in.”

“You a doctor now?”

Cannon chuckled, shaking his head. His ego was just as expansive as mine. “Nah, I’m not but I do give a shit about you even if you don’t come back in a few weeks.”

“I will after you give me one more.”

“Elias...” He wasn’t feeling it but I didn’t give a damn.

“If I die, no one knows I was here.” I shrugged. “Your name will never come up.”

“I don’t give a fuck about that, but I do give a fuck about having to deal

with Ez if you go down.”

“Dump me out back and pretend you don’t know how I got there. Problem solved.”

I wasn’t going down.

I had a feeling he knew that as well but with the slight chance that I did, he didn’t want any parts of it.

“Fuck. Don’t make me regret this. One more and that’s it.”

I tossed my chin and he walked away. I watched him point to me when he reached the table that handled the bets and their eyes shifted with uncertainty but Cannon was the boss so they would do whatever he told them too.

A few seconds later, he offered me a nod then walked away. I shoved my hand into my bag and removed my phone, noticing several missed calls and a text from Cress.

I miss my husband. I wish he was home with me.

I closed my eyes briefly, needing to slow down my thoughts. I had to get this out of me before I granted her wish. Instead of responding, I locked my phone and tossed it back into my bag, bouncing my knee while I waited for the next fight to be called.

About another ten minutes passed before I heard my name over the rumble of voices shouting at each other with their expectations for the next fight. When my name was called, they erupted into chaos. Three fights were pushing it. Four was suicide by any sane terms.

I wasn’t sane.

When I stepped up on the platform I kept my expression blank, void of emotions. There was no cage or fancy ring. Just wood shoved together to elevate the fighters enough to be viewed by everyone in the building. It also made it easier for Cannon to break things down and move to a new location when necessary.

“You sure you want to fight me. You’ve been lucky so far. That luck might have just run out.” He was cocky. His ego was driving him but that was no match for what was driving me.

My need to feel pain.

My need to remember that I was still here even if I didn’t always feel like I deserved to be.

“It should have been you, not him.”

“You should talk less.”

His lips curled into an arrogant snarl.

While the moderator rattled off the rules, I focused on my opponent. I didn't know him. Hadn't seen him before that I could remember but that wasn't unusual. People traveled for these fights. Cannon brought in a big crowd who wagered high bets.

"Elias. Dodger. Keep it clean."

We sure as fuck wouldn't do that.

I glanced at the announcer before he backed away from us. That was the signal to kill or be killed. Dodger charged me, bringing his right fist with him. I let him land the blow, so he followed it with several more to my abs and ribs. It hurt like hell but I didn't bother moving until he swung at my face with a left hook. I stepped back then lunged forward catching him with an uppercut that connected under his chin, jerking his head back.

He growled, rushing me, dipping low enough to tackle me around the waist, trying to bring me down with him. When I didn't fall, his fists landed against my lower back until I wrapped my arms around his neck and forced him away from me. I didn't let go. I kept squeezing until the veins in his neck protruded and his face turned red.

"Let me go, you fucking lunatic."

I smiled slowly and shoved hard, sending him crashing to his knees then I brought my elbow down on his head back-to-back. He stumbled to his feet, shaking his head. The crowd got louder but all the voices blended together. I had no idea which one of us they were rooting for nor did I care.

"You ready to really fight me now?"

I smirked and lowered my arms to my sides. He frowned, confused about what I was doing. But then I charged him, landing a left then right dead center of his face. Blood leaked from his nose and mouth as he released a low growl.

He rushed me again, landing several blows to my ribs and when I didn't fight back it pissed him off even more.

"Fight me back, you fucking lunatic. They said you weren't right in the head but now I see just how much. Your wife know how goddamn crazy you are? Is that why she's fucking off behind your back?"

White light flashed behind my eyelids, temporarily blinding my focus. "What the fuck did you just say?"

His lips curled into a snarl. "I said, I'm gonna fuck the shit out of your wife after I send you to the hospital.

Wife.

Wife
Wife.

The text from the other night flashed through my head and I snapped. I felt the exact moment when the scale tipped and I no longer had control. In a matter of seconds, I reached him. My fingers spread wide around his head and I squeezed with all my strength before slamming my knee into his face over and over again.

When I let go, he dropped to his knees then fell forward but I didn't let up. I kicked him several times in the ribs until he flipped onto his back then I stomped his face, over and over again. Everything around me went mute.

Bodies rushed me, pulling me from Dodger's bloody body then I was shoved back until I lost my balance and fell from the platform. My back hit then my head bounced against the concrete. My eyes rolled back in my head and I faded.

When I opened my eyes again, I was in my brother's truck. He was staring at me with a look I recognized. I had fucked up. My body was sore and my head felt cloudy. The pain pushing through my skull made me feel nauseous.

"What just happened, Elias?"

"I took a few fights. It's not a big deal. Needed to blow off some steam."

I shifted from the passenger seat of his Bentayga Azure and tensed from the pain in my ribs.

"Four fucking fights. Do you realize how crazy that is? And if they hadn't knocked you on your ass you would have killed the last guy. Do you know what the fuck that does to us? How it complicates everything we're trying to do right now."

I did but I wouldn't admit that right now.

Couldn't.

"You make some calls and it's no longer a problem."

That wasn't necessarily true but right now my logic wasn't exactly solid. My head hurt, my body hurt more, and all I kept thinking was that I wished I had killed that guy. I didn't know why I wanted to, so badly until...

"My phone. Where the fuck is my phone?"

"What does it matter?"

"I need my goddamn phone." My eyes moved to the windshield trying to figure out where the hell I was. When I recognized my house, I turned to Ez. "Is she home? She's here right."

“Do you even fucking care?”

Yes.

More than I had the right to.

“Is she here?”

Is she safe?

Dodger had threatened Cress. That was why I wanted to kill him. I damn sure tried.

“She’s here but you need to tell me what the fuck is going on, you’re not going in there.”

I stared at my brother for a long moment knowing I needed to do the right thing. I needed help. I was losing my shit and that meant I wasn’t any good to him or to my wife.

“My phone.”

“Fuck that phone. What is going on?”

“Give me my goddamn phone and I’ll show you.”

He needed to see the text.

That was the only way this would make sense.

He reached beneath my seat and lifted my bag which he tossed in my lap. I jerked the zipper then lifted my phone. Before I could get to the text I initially wanted to show him, new ones had my mind racing again.

What the hell?

Why is she with him?

Smiling...

Accepting gifts...

My body began to physically vibrate with anger as I read the words that followed the attachment of photos.

Do you trust your wife?

You shouldn’t.

I told you I would fuck her.

She enjoyed it too.

Look at the smile on her face.

And just in case you’re wondering. That’s because of me, not you.

I growled and was moving. I heard Ez behind me but didn’t stop. Not even when he tackled me. I shoved him hard, but he didn’t give.

My body felt the way I hit the grass in every bone and every muscle.

“Get the fuck off me.”

“No, not until you tell me what is going on?”

My body was vibrating again.

“Ez, I’m warning you. Get the fuck off me or you’re going to regret it.”

“Sorry, I can’t do that.”

“Move. Now,” I yelled. The roar of my voice echoed through both of us. My head thumped harder. It felt like someone was knocking me in the temple with a hammer. I growled hard and shoved again, but Ez didn’t budge. He moved. It was swift then there was a gun aimed at me.

“You gonna shoot me, Ez. You wanna kill me like they killed Lucas?”

“If I have to, I will. I won’t kill you, but I will do whatever I have to, to keep you here. Don’t let it come to that.”

“Fuck you. You wanna shoot me. Shoot me. It’s not gonna change anything. I never should have fucking married her. This is a joke to all of you, isn’t it? A goddamn joke.”

“No Elias, it’s not. I know that’s what you think right now but it’s not the truth. You know that’s not the truth. It’s just what your mind is telling you.”

I laughed. “You think I’m crazy. This isn’t about my goddamn mind. Look at the text. Look who she’s with. Who she’s been fucking behind my back.”

I pushed my phone into his chest. He grabbed it, backed away, but kept the gun aimed at me. Now my chest and not my head. When I tried to stand, he made sure I knew that wasn’t a good idea.

“Don’t fucking move. I promise I will pull the trigger, Lias. Please don’t make me do that.”

His eyes lowered to my phone and he frowned hard, using his thumb to swipe.

“Who sent you this?”

“Who the fuck do you think?”

“Ezekiel, what are you doing? Move that gun.”

I growled, swinging my eyes toward the sound of her voice. “How long? How long have you been fucking him?”

“What?”

“Don’t play dumb. I said how long?”

“What is he talking about?” Her eyes left mine and went to Ez.

“Cress, you should leave,” he said calmly.

“No, she’s not going to answer me. She’s gonna stay right here and answer my goddamn questions. How long?”

Cress was confused and scared. I could see it. Feel it, but my mind

wouldn't let me hold onto that. It wouldn't let me calm down enough to think rationally. I couldn't fucking think at all.

"Please tell me—" she tried again but I cut her off.

"No! *You* tell me. How fucking long?" I yelled then grabbed my head. The pain kept growing.

"Cress, leave. *Now*. Take my truck. The keys are in there. Go home."

Home.

Home.

Home.

This was her home.

"No, I'm not leaving..."

"If you don't I'm gonna have to shoot him. That's the only thing that will stop him. Do you want me to do that? Do you want to see that?"

Her eyes bounced between me and my brother. "No."

I barely heard her but I saw her move. My eyes only focused on the phone she clutched in her hand.

Was she about to go to him?

Was that why she left so easily?

I cuffed my head again, closing my eyes, trying to stop the pain and the paranoia. I knew that was what this was, but I couldn't do a damn thing about it.

Rational thoughts would not come.

And when they did, they wouldn't stay.

"You're just delaying this. She's gonna answer my fucking questions."

"She will. Just not tonight."

I laughed dryly, clutching my head. "Yeah, fine. Not tonight."

"I need to call someone. Is her number in here?"

"Whose?" I frowned at him and he tipped my phone.

"Your therapist. What's her name? Who have you been seeing? I'll call her unless you want me to take you somewhere?"

No.

Fuck no.

"Not here and I'm not going anywhere." I ground my teeth from the pain that shot through my body when I tried to get up. He moved closer, extending a hand but I shot him a look that made him step back.

"Why not her?"

"Because I don't fucking trust her."

And I don't trust you either.

I walked toward the house, needing him to follow me. I wasn't staying here and I damn sure wasn't talking to a goddamn therapist.

Cress was going to answer my questions.

Tonight.

Pictures didn't lie. She was with him and she was going to answer for that shit.

“What do you mean you don't trust her?”

“I said I don't fucking trust her.”

Or you.

Or my wife.

“Get someone else.”

“I've got a list in my office. Come with me,” he mumbled, watching me. The gun hung loosely in his hand next to his thigh.

I shook my head and moved to the stairs instead, slowly sitting down.

“I'm not going anywhere.”

“Elias...” he warned.

“You threatened to shoot me, Ez. I believe you'll do it. She's gone. You made her leave. What the fuck do you expect me to do? I'm not going anywhere.”

Lie.

Lie.

Lie.

This was the game. Say whatever I needed to say to get them to leave me the hell alone.

“Elias.” He tried one more time and I shook my head.

“I'm not going anywhere.”

His eyes remained on me and I exhaled sharply. It hurt like hell. “I'm not and give me my phone.”

“For what?”

“Because I need to make sense of this shit.”

He hesitated but nodded sharply and walked toward me handing it over. A compromise I was sure.

“There's an explanation.”

There is and she's going to give it to me.

“I know.”

“Do you?”

“I do. Call somebody and we can talk this shit out. I know I need help right now. I feel it. I’m not right, Ez. That wasn’t me out there. I see that now. I hear you.”

Lies.

Lies.

Lies.

Five minutes. That was all I needed to get out of here. As soon as he turned his back, I would be gone.

I needed answers, *tonight*.

And I was going to get them.

“I’ll be right back.” He didn’t want to leave. He didn’t trust me to do the right thing.

I didn’t trust him either so I guessed that made us even.

As soon as he was out of sight, I got one last text.

Another photo.

Him walking into her apartment.

A calm settled over me instead of rage.

They could have each other but not until I honored my vows, even if she hadn’t.

Until death do us part...

Because now I was going to kill them both.

TWENTY-SIX

cress

WHAT THE HELL JUST HAPPENED?

My hands shook as I keyed the code to enter my apartment.

I left without my purse or any of my belongings because what else was I supposed to do? Ez threatened to shoot his brother.

Elias accused me of cheating on him.

How?

Why?

As soon as the light flashed green on my keypad, I stepped inside my apartment. I faced the door, my body trembling and nerves splintered. This used to be my safe space, my haven, but now my apartment felt foreign, like a temporary spot because it wasn't home anymore.

He was my home.

I inhaled a cleansing breath which did nothing to settle my nerves. My body was physically shaking with uncertainty.

What the hell just happened?

"Hello, Cress."

I froze. The deep voice I didn't recognize calling my name shot a bolt of fear through me. I quickly turned, pressing my back against the door, narrowing my eyes in the darkness of my apartment to find a shadowy figure standing across the room. He moved and my hand lifted to the doorknob as discreetly as possible but then the lights came on. I blinked several times trying to focus after the adjustment and my fingers curled around the stainless handle to my door.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

I froze again and relaxed my fingers.

"Come in, have a seat."

“No.”

He exhaled like he was annoyed. He seemed familiar but I couldn't figure out why it fucking mattered. He was in my apartment with a gun.

“Cress, please. Have a seat. The more you cooperate, the easier this will be.”

He lifted the gun and motioned to the sofa a few feet away from me.

Never fight unless you know you can get the upper hand.

Remain calm.

Use rational thinking.

Strike when they least expect it.

Things that Christian and my father had told me over the years rushed through my head and I slowly moved deeper into my apartment and took a seat on the sofa. The side closest to the door. *Just in case.* He moved closer, stopping right in front of me and my breath hitched.

I recognized him.

“I know you.”

“Yes, you do. It's time we officially got acquainted.” He smiled arrogantly. “I'm Samson Julian.”

A hand was extended which I frowned at. He smiled wider. “Not there yet? That's understandable.”

“What are you doing in my apartment?”

“I'm waiting for your husband, just like you, beautiful.”

Waiting for Elias.

I frowned harder. “You knew who I was when you gave me those flowers.”

“Of course. My associates and I have been watching you for a while. This had to be planned just right. You and your husband have disrupted a lot of things we had set in motion and I couldn't have that. *We couldn't have that.*”

“I don't understand.”

“Let's start with the simple facts.” He moved closer and I flinched. His eyes were hard. “You can relax, I'm not going to hurt you. I'll leave that to your husband.”

“Then you're wasting your time because he would never...”

“Are you sure about that?”

I was until tonight.

He was so angry and erratic.

“Positive.”

“You trust him?”

I nodded slowly.

“You shouldn’t. At least not with his current mental state. He’s been unraveling for a couple weeks now.”

I frowned at him and amusement flashed behind his eyes. “Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed the changes?”

Yes. I have.

“What changes?”

“I can’t say specifically but since Temple has been fucking with his prescription I’m sure paranoia is one of them. Erratic thoughts, lack of sleep, distrust in those who are close. Specifically his wife and brother.”

Tension filled my body.

Was that why Ez threatened to shoot him and made me leave? He thought Elias would hurt me if I stayed.

“How long?”

“How fucking long have you been cheating on me?”

His words circled my mind and my body tensed more.

“He thinks—”

“That you’re being unfaithful to him, with me.”

That’s what this is about?

“I haven’t been.”

“The truth doesn’t matter. Only what is perceived and I’ve painted a pretty vivid picture. *Pictures* that have been sent to Elias to make him believe that you have.”

“I just need to talk to him. He’ll believe me no matter what you’ve done.”

He chuckled lightly. “Cress, your husband is not in the most rational headspace. Dr. Temple has worked very hard over the past month and a half to guarantee doesn’t have the ability to think logically. I’m sure, right about now, he won’t believe anything that makes sense. Only what I’ve put in his head. And when he shows up and finds you with me, I’m willing to bet this won’t end well for either of you.”

“Or maybe it won’t end well for *you*?”

He shrugged. “I’ve considered all possibilities. If it comes down to it, I’ll end him then I’ll end you...” He rolled his shoulders back. “Officer, let me explain. I’ve been seeing her for months. Elias found out, followed us here, lost his mind and he shot her. I had to defend myself.”

My hands were shaking again. “No one will believe that.”

“Everyone will believe that. There are pictures of you and I together. Pictures that were sent to his phone. One of which showed me entering your apartment, tonight, using the code *you* gave me. Then there’s the small but yet relevant detail that your husband is spiraling. He’s been off his meds for weeks. If you’ve done your research, then you know what that means. He won’t be thinking rationally. Everything I’m saying will make perfect sense to anyone who collects all the evidence. Evidence that I’ve manipulated to tell my version of the story.”

“Why?”

“You know why, Cress. Your family and his united again fucks up business for a lot of people. It was a simple fix. Make history repeat itself, which wasn’t hard to do. We paid off his therapist, who agreed to mess with his head and now we have the Omaris and the Devereauxs at war again. Two more siblings with blood on their hands. He kills you, I kill him, problem solved.”

“You sound so sure of yourself. No plan is perfect. Things change, people aren’t always as predictable as you believe them to be.”

No matter how much my husband was spiraling, I believed I could get him to truly hear me. To see me, to know that what seems real, isn’t. We were real. What he felt for me and what I felt for him was real.

“True, but I’m banking on that crazy muthafucker believing what I tell him to believe. If he doesn’t, I’ve already told you what will happen...”

You’re going to kill him...

“Now, I’m guessing we don’t have long before he shows up. Based on the timeline I received from the people I had sitting on the house, he left not long after you so we need to get things moving. Take your clothes off. I really want to sell this.”

“No...”

I was playing with fire.

He moved closer and within seconds had fisted the front of my shirt, the barrel of the gun pressed into my chest beneath it. His free hand yanked the side of my shorts, forcing them down.

“I don’t have time for this shit and it’s really a shame. If we had more time, I would really enjoy you...”

His fingers glided over my hip. He was distracted so I had to use that to my advantage. My hand moved and I touched the gun at the same time I held my breath and lifted my knee using all the force I had. I made contact and he

buckled, losing his grip on the gun enough for me to snatch it from him. I bolted to the door, swung it open but didn't get far. I collided with a hard frame that threw me off balance and caused me to drop the gun and stumble back.

Elias.

His eyes swung around my living room before they circled back to me, slowly crawling down my body. The lower they traveled the wilder his eyes became and the tighter his muscles locked beneath his clothes.

"Elias..." I slowly lifted my hand and placed it on his chest

"Get your hands off me," he growled. I swallowed thickly and shook my head, but he grabbed my wrist and yanked it roughly away. He looked like he was out of his mind.

Because he was...

His rational mind.

"Please wait. It's not what you think."

"I saw the pictures. I know exactly what this is."

"Cress, *baby*. Let me handle this." My head swung around to Samson who had his hands lifted. This son of a bitch was really going to push this as far as he could.

"Please, baby. I don't want you to get hurt."

That was exactly what he wanted. He wanted Elias to believe that I was betraying him.

"You fucking coward," I hissed at Samson before I moved closer to Elias, placing both my hands on his chest. His muscles tensed and coiled beneath my fingers and his eyes lowered sharply to where I was touching him.

"I know what you think you see, but I need you to focus on me and listen."

His eyes darted past me to Samson then lowered to mine again. He tensed all over and his demeanor slipped a little more and not for good.

"Elias, *please*." My voice was trembling but I could do this. I could make him see me. No matter what was going on with his head right now he was still in there. I just needed him to focus.

I could see his mind warring as his eyes bounced from my hands on his chest to what was happening behind me. I didn't care about Samson. Only Elias. The longer I touched him the more his jaw hardened. He was being defensive because his trust was shot but I didn't back down.

"This isn't what you think," I said softly. His body rumbled with the

growl that moved through his chest and settled into his throat.

“He paid your therapist to mess with your prescription. He had people following me so he could send you pictures that looked like I was betraying you but I wasn’t. It’s not true. None of it’s true.”

“Don’t you dare fucking move,” Elias roared, lifting his arm higher. Samson must have tried to come near us. But I wasn’t focused on him. I needed Elias to hear me.

“Elias will you please listen—”

“I don’t need to fucking listen. I know what I saw. What I see...” His eyes lowered to mine then moved past me. “He’s here in your apartment. Why, Cress?”

The accusation pierced me in the chest. I would never do this to him. Not what he was thinking, what he believed, but right now, he didn’t know that.

“Because he knew you would come. How did you know he was here, Elias? Think about that? *How?*”

His jaw flexed then his eyes were on me again. “Someone sent you a text of him showing up here, right? *Why?* Think about it. Does that make sense?”

His jaw flexed again and his eyes moved from me to Samson who decided he wouldn’t fucking shut up. He was going to keep trying.

“Cress, don’t baby. He’s not going to believe you. Let me handle this.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Elias yelled and I could feel his muscles locking tight again.

Something moved in the hallway behind Elias. When I focused on the movement, I realized it was Ez. He gently shook his head and lifted a finger to his lips requesting that I not give him away. A moment later, everything around me was moving. Ez injected Elias in the neck with something. Someone else grabbed him. I didn’t see who because several other men rushed into the apartment past me with guns drawn, aimed at Samson. I could hear Elias struggling, yelling from the hallway for whoever had him to let him go then hands were on me.

Christian.

I turned to find him pulling me down the hall and into my bedroom where he slammed the door.

“Oh fuck. Thank God. You’re okay.” He yanked me into his chest squeezing me so tightly that I could barely breathe.

When he let me go, his eyes moved around my room until he grabbed a pair of sweats that were tossed on the bed and shoved them into my chest.

“Put these on. We’re getting out of here.”

I stepped into the pants but backed away when he reached for me.

“Wh...what’s happening? How did you know to come here?”

“Ez called me. *You* should have fucking called, Cress.”

“Why? I didn’t know about any of this.”

I could have called when I left the house but I didn’t. I was too worried about my husband, my marriage...

“But you knew about Elias, didn’t you? You knew about *him*. You knew he wasn’t right in the head. He’s fucking crazy and you kept that from me.”

“He’s not crazy!”

I rushed my brother and got in his face. A calm settled over my brother but not the peaceful kind. The one that thrummed with violence and murderous intent.

“Ez just had to drug your husband, Cress. If we hadn’t shown up, if we hadn’t gotten here in time, tell me what you think would have happened?”

Someone would have gotten hurt.

Possibly even me.

When I didn’t respond, he edged closer. “I asked you a question.”

“This isn’t his fault,” I said quietly.

“This *is* his fault, Cress. The man is unwell.”

“My husband is not perfect, but neither are you. You wanted this and now here we are so don’t you dare...”

“I didn’t know all the details,” he roared, eyes dark and wild. “Had they told me, I would have never agreed to any of this.”

“Well too fucking bad. I married him. He’s my husband—”

“Who would have put a bullet in your head because he thought you were cheating. This is done. I’m ending this shit tonight.”

I laughed arrogantly. “You can’t end shit. *I* married him, not you,” I hissed through clenched teeth.

Someone knocked on the door then I heard Ez’s voice. “Can I come in?”

Christian and I remained in a standoff until I shoved him out the way and yanked the door open. Ez’s eyes bolted from me to Christian before they settled on me when I spoke. “Where is he?”

He frowned a little and I clarified. “My husband.”

Ez’s posture stiffened a little while brushing a hand down his face. “My guys took him to the car so that I can take him home.”

“And Samson?” Christian questioned from behind me.

“We have him.”

“Good, let me take care of Cress then we can handle that problem.”

“You’re not taking me anywhere. I’m going *home* with my *husband*.”

“No the fuck you’re not.”

“Yes, the fuck I am.”

“What is wrong with you? Do you not understand what could have just happened here tonight?”

“Yes I do.”

“Cress...” Ez said slowly and hesitated when my hard stare landed on him. “Christian is right.”

“I sure as fuck am,” my brother seethed before adding, “She don’t need to be anywhere near him and won’t. Ever again.”

“Careful, Christian. He’s still my brother and it’s not your decision to make, it’s hers.”

“He’s right, Chris. It’s my decision.” I turned away from Christian and focused on Ez. “Take me to him.”

His expression shifted through something. “As much as I agree that your marriage to my brother is your decision and yours only, I do agree that right now is not the best time for you to be with him. It’s going to take him a few days to get level and a few weeks to fully become balanced again. Maybe you should go with Christian, just for now.”

“No, absolutely not. I listened to you earlier and you see how that ended. I shouldn’t have left. I could have talked to him. Made him hear me. Leaving made things worse. You already threatened to shoot him. How can I be sure you won’t?” I narrowed my eyes on Ez who glared back at me.

“I would have shot him to keep him under control if it came to that. I wasn’t going to kill my brother, Cress,” he defended.

I knew he wouldn’t but I would say whatever I needed to in order for them to know that I was going to be wherever my husband was.

“Well, I still don’t trust you. You made me leave and he needed me.”

“I thought it was easier—”

“For you or me because sure as fuck not for him.”

“He doesn’t trust anyone right now, Cress. Give him some time. At least a few days.”

I quickly shook my head and lifted my chin defiantly. “I can’t do that. He needs to know that I’m in this with him, no matter what. I promised I would be and I’m not breaking my promise.”

Again.

Because I already had when I left earlier...

“Cress...” Christian tried but I shot him a look that had his jaw tight before I turned to Ez.

“Take me to him, now *please*.”

Ez looked past me at Christian who released a sigh of irritation, shook his head, and threw his hand up.

“Not my decision to make. Apparently my opinion doesn’t fucking matter,” he gritted then pushed past me.

I moved to leave behind my brethren when Ez stepped in front of me. His expression seemed wary. “Are you sure about this? He doesn’t trust anybody right now. It could get ugly.”

“I can make him trust me and if not, I can handle whatever happens if he doesn’t.”

It was a lie.

My heart was already breaking from what I knew he believed. How he must have felt—*feels*—thinking that I betrayed him.

“Come, let’s go. He’s probably out by now. I sedated him. You can wait in the car with him while I make sure none of this is on camera and figure out how much it’s going to cost me to make sure none of the residents saw or heard anything.”

This was a part of the process. That much I understood even if I hadn’t been involved in this side of my family’s business.

Ez was protecting his family and mine even if right now Christian wanted to murder both him and Elias. *And probably me too.* Ez was doing what needed to be done. My brother would too but that didn’t mean he would be as forgiving about the decisions I was making.

I didn’t care.

I followed Ez out of my apartment to the elevator and into the garage. There was an SUV parked right beyond the doors. Two men stood outside of it as if they were on guard. Guarding my husband. They stepped out of the way when Ez approached the rear passenger door. “How’s he doing?” he asked one of the men.

“Out cold. Been out for a few minutes now.”

Ez nodded and looked at me. “You sure about this?”

“Yes.” I frowned and he pulled the door open. Elias was sitting upright, slumped against the door. His eyes were closed and his face was relaxed. He

looked so peaceful. A complete contrast from the murderous man who I had just encountered in my apartment. “Can I?”

“Go ahead. They’ll be here if he comes out of it but he likely won’t. What I gave him will keep him down for at least the next six to eight hours.”

“Why so long?”

“He needs it,” Ez murmured. When I turned to look at him, his eyes were focused on his brother and not me. I could see the strain of his emotions.

“And what about Samson?”

Ez glanced at me, eyes narrowed. “Don’t worry about that.”

I was about to say something but he shook his head, demanding I didn’t. Instead I climbed into the back of the truck and eased across the seat, gently positioning myself next to Elias. I brushed my fingers over the side of his face then exhaled a shaky breath, snuggling up close to him. I laid my head on his chest and closed my eyes.

I hated this so much, but there wasn’t much I could do about it now.

I heard the door close and Ez’s muffled voice telling them to keep an eye on things and that he wouldn’t be long. I tuned everything else out because nothing else mattered but the man I was bound and determined to protect.

TWENTY-SEVEN

elias

MY LIMBS FELT HEAVY.

My mind was groggy.

I struggled to lift my arms but I managed and rubbed the heel of my palms into my eyes trying hard to smooth the heaviness I felt in my eyelids. That heaviness made it hard for me to peel my eyes open so I stopped trying for a minute.

A familiar scent filled my nose and lungs with each labored breath I took in and my mind went racing again. Erratic thoughts flooded my mind until I was finally able to open my eyes. My head followed, lifting from the pillow and my vision cleared when my eyes moved around the room trying to make sense of where I was.

My room.

“Easy...”

Ezekiel.

I followed the sound of his voice to find him sitting in a chair not far from my bed. He looked exhausted. Eyes tired, body slumped as he leaned into his elbows which were pressed into his knees. His chin rested in his hands while his fingers extended up the side of his face.

But that look in his eyes.

I knew that look.

Hated that goddamn look.

“What happened?”

“You don’t remember?”

I quickly shook my head and my brain felt like it scrambled from that simple move. My temples throbbed and there was a pounding in my head. It hurt to keep my eyes open but I did. I kept them on Ez.

“No...” My voice was hoarser than usual. Another sign that something wasn’t right. How long had I been down? Had I crashed and if so, when? Where?

“None of it?”

“No...” I said with a little more force.

Ez didn’t flinch. Not even a little. He only lifted, correcting his posture, but then slouched down in the chair. Leaning back against it, not saying a word. His eyes though. The look of them was loud.

Really fucking loud.

What the fuck had I done?

“How do you feel?” His voice was level. Almost calm.

“Fine,” I gritted, but that was a lie. I struggled to throw the covers off and struggled to sit up and get my legs over the side of the bed. The pounding in my head was out of control.

I felt confused, angry, unsettled.

Most of all, not right. I didn’t feel right.

“Do you remember what you did?”

My mind was muggy. My thoughts weren’t clear. There were only pieces but those pieces were like shattered glass and didn’t make sense.

Cress, half-dressed. Another man. A gun. Her pleading with me.

The clearer the memories became the more labored my breathing was. I felt my temper spiking and my thoughts shifting to a dark place.

“You remember now?”

My eyes landed on my brother’s. His were narrowed now. Accusing and angry, concerned but I wouldn’t deny the most important emotion, acceptance.

“Tell me?”

“You pulled a gun on your wife.”

My body tensed and he continued, “You thought she was cheating. She wasn’t.”

The text. The pictures were now clear in my mind.

“It was all a lie. They wanted you to believe that she was.”

“Who?” I growled.

My memories were coming back. I felt the rage climbing.

“Reno, Samson, Temple.”

The names had me still.

“Yeah, all of them together. They fucked with you, Elias. Reno got pissed

because you left. Samson was pissed because marrying Cress meant shutting him down...”

“And her...”

Temple.

“She wasn’t influenced one way or the other. They paid her enough to choose a side and she didn’t choose you.”

“I didn’t trust her. I did at first but then something didn’t feel right...”

“She fucked with your meds. Gave you something different than you thought you were taking. It was subtle enough that you didn’t notice the difference at first. I didn’t notice until it was too late.”

“They kept fucking with me.”

Ez nodded. “She didn’t betray you, Lias.”

I knew that.

Now that my mind was somewhat rational. It didn’t make sense, none of it, but when I got like this...

My thoughts came back. Slowly. The way I talked to her, the way I treated her. I hurt her and now my fucking heart hurt.

“When did she leave?”

There was no way she stayed.

We wouldn’t recover from this.

She wouldn’t forgive me. I wouldn’t forgive myself for fucking this up. I promised her I wouldn’t.

I lifted up from the bed. My body was sluggish. It was a struggle to stand, to move, to think.

“She didn’t.”

I froze, dropping my chin and lowering my eyes to the floor.

“She didn’t leave, Elias. She’s here. Right outside the door, I bet. When you started to wake, I asked her to give me a minute...”

He didn’t know what he was going to get.

How I would be.

He was protecting her, *from me*.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” I moved slowly to the bathroom. I heard him behind me. His moves were also cautious. I could feel them. He stopped in the doorway, not speaking until my eyes swept both counters. “The old ones are gone. I took them. Didn’t trust what she gave you. I had Dr. Shore write a new prescription. I had it filled for you this morning. Had it checked to make sure

it was right.”

She'd fucked with my meds.

“Thank you.”

He nodded sharply. “This time was different, Elias. Nothing like before. You usually cycle for a couple hours max but this time...”

“How long?”

“Days.” I frowned hard at him. “Each time you came out of it, we put you back under. It got pretty bad.”

“Days?”

“Yeah, three.”

“She was here?”

“Wouldn't leave. I told her to. Christian wanted to drag her up out of here but she refused. Stood her ground. Wouldn't leave.”

“Why?” I swallowed hard. “If it was that bad...”

“Said she was your wife. She wasn't leaving.” He shrugged and I laughed bitterly.

She should have left.

I didn't deserve her grace.

Didn't deserve for her to stay.

“I need to take a shower.”

“We'll talk later.”

“Yeah, we'll talk later.”

I turned on the shower, removed my clothes, and stepped in. I didn't bother waiting for the temperature to adjust. The showerheads hit me from three different angles and my body prickled with an awareness. I needed to feel. My mind and body were numb. The past couple weeks had caught up with me but one thing, one person, weighed on me more than anything.

Cress...

My wife...

I closed my eyes and leaned against the tile, allowing the heavy spray to beat down on my skin. Eventually it moved from cool to unbearably hot. Still I didn't hurry. Just stopped there, giving myself time to feel alive again. After what felt like forever I managed to wash away some of the unease that crawled all over my skin. I dragged a towel over my body then walked back into my bedroom, dressed in a pair of sweats. I walked to the balcony, opening the doors enough to step outside. The sun was bright and warm against my skin. I had no idea what time it was or even what fucking day it

was nor did I care.

“Hey...”

I dropped my head at the sound of her voice but only for a minute to gain my bearings. I turned and there she was. Hair a mess, pulled high on her head, pieces falling loose around her face and at the nape of her neck. She wore one of my t-shirts which landed past her knees and loose white sweatpants that were pulled up to her calves. She looked like she was barely hanging on but she was here for me and the most beautiful I had ever in my life seen her was right here in this moment.

“Can I come out with you?”

That crushed my fucking heart for the millionth time.

She was unsure about me, about us.

“Yeah...”

She walked right to me. Right into my chest, hugged my waist and let her head rest on my chest. I hesitated but eventually I hugged her back. Her body was loose, relaxed against mine and I buried my face in her hair.

The tightness in my chest settled. That feeling like someone had wound a rubber band around my ribs and was pulling tight, gone.

“I missed you.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” she stated quietly.

“I missed you more.”

She hugged me tighter and I kissed the top of her head. “I fucked up. I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t do anything. Don’t apologize.”

I felt her lips flutter over my chest. Soft kisses that I should have barely felt crawled all over me.

“That’s not really the truth, is it?”

“The truth is whatever I say it is. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“We should probably talk about everything.”

“We should and we will. Just not right now. Right now, I just want you, this, us...”

She lifted onto her toes and I hesitated just before her mouth reached mine but the minute it did.

Fuck.

She was everything.

She would always be everything.

My chest was tight again.

In such a short time she became the most important thing to me. Knowing she stayed stalled something in me but feeling her now, kissing her, made everything bad good. Everything dark, light. I felt like I could breathe.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered against her mouth.

“Me too,” she gave back and I pulled away, narrowing my eyes. She huffed. “You needed me. I should have known. I will from now on. I’ll know.”

“Cress, this has nothing to do with you.”

They’d fucked with my head.

“I’m not saying it does. I’m just saying, you needed me, and I wasn’t there. If you fucked up. So did I.” She smiled softly. “We’re even. We move past this and figure out the rest.”

I chuckled, shaking my head. This fucking woman...

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Her smile was a reminder of all things good in the world. My world. “You feel like going out?”

“Out?”

“Outside, maybe for a walk or something. It might feel good to get out the house.”

For me or her?

“You been to the studio?” She looked away but I caught her chin and guided her eyes back to mine. “You’ve been here the whole time?”

She shrugged. “I didn’t want to leave you.”

“You could have. Should have...” I said the last part under my breath and she followed it with a kiss.

“I’m yours and you’re mine. We stay together.”

I laughed lightly and kissed her again. “Let me put some shoes on and we can go out.”

I tugged on a shirt, grabbed a pair of running shoes, and she put on slides before heading out back toward the trails I usually ran on. My body was still sluggish but the more I moved the more lucid my muscles felt.

“It’s nice out here?”

She tucked her body into my side and I draped an arm around her shoulders, kissing her forehead. “Yeah. Feels good.”

“I was worried about you.”

“I know.”

I lowered my eyes and hers were waiting. “I’ll be alright in a few weeks. Takes time. Ez made sure my prescription was right this time.”

“I know.” I frowned down at her and she added, “You were in and out but I made sure you took them...” She peeked up at me. “Your pills. The doctor said it was important and that we shouldn’t wait.”

“What doctor?” I stopped and turned to face her.

Who the fuck had she been talking to?

“Dr. Shore. We talked,” she added quickly. “Not about you. I mean kind of but more about what you have. I asked questions. He answered them. I hope that’s okay.”

“Yeah, it’s okay.”

I draped my arm over her shoulder again but when I tried to move, she slipped in front of me and swallowed thickly. “I know you don’t trust me right now...”

I trusted her. She’d earned it. She shouldn’t trust me because I hadn’t.

“I trust you, Cress.”

Her eyes flitted over my face. “I’m not talking about those things that happened, what you thought. I meant you don’t trust me with everything else...”

My disorder.

My hands cupped her face and I brought mine down to hers. I wanted her to see me. To know with certainty. “I trust you. With all of me. Every fucking part of me, Cress. I promise I do, okay?”

And I’m going to make sure you never question that again.

“Okay.” She leaned into me, stealing a kiss. Damn I loved her fucking kisses but more than anything I loved her too because what else could this be that had my heart feeling like it was about to fucking explode each time I remembered that she was here and she was mine.

She was still mine.

* * *

Even if everything in my life wasn’t perfect, my day was. Cress and I spent an hour walking the trails, then we had lunch and just talked. It felt so fucking good to just exist without worrying about anything or anyone but us. My problems were still there. They wouldn’t disappear but today, she was the only thing that mattered.

That evening we watched movies or she watched movies. I watched her after she drifted off to sleep midway through the first one. I knew she was exhausted. Could see it in her eyes and feel it in the lack of energy that she usually had but wasn't there. She had been with me the entire time. Stressed and worried. She wanted me to be okay and that drained her mentally and physically so I was grateful that she was good now. That she could relax enough to get some rest. She needed it.

I hated to leave our bed but I needed to talk to Ez. Needed him to fill in the things I didn't know or couldn't remember. So I untangled Cress's body from mine, tucked her beneath the covers of the new bedding we replaced after stripping the sheets I'd been in for the past three days, and kissed her forehead before I went to find my brother.

He was in his office stretched out on the leather sofa, with a glass in his hand resting on his chest, the half empty bottle on the floor below him. I was sure I had something to do with why that bottle was almost empty.

"I got you down that bad?"

Ez turned his head toward me and laughed lightly. "You can take credit for the empty bottle over there. This one belongs to my wife."

"Don't you think it's time to do something about that?" He narrowed his eyes my way before lifting, lowering his legs to the floor, and refilling his glass. "I've been a little busy with other things but I'm working on it." Ez tipped his glass in my direction before he turned it up until the glass was empty.

"You okay?"

"Are you?" he shot back, barely hiding the emotion laced in his words. That wasn't about his wife. It was about me.

"I will be."

He nodded but his eyes never left mine. I heard his voice in my head. Confident and unwavering.

If you die, I die.

There was no need to take it there. My words wouldn't mean much right now. I had to show him and I fully planned to. But first...

"You handled things?"

"Christian and I did."

"Reno?"

"Handled. Very slow and very painful."

"Temple?"

“She’s currently detained and facing federal charges for illegally distributing a controlled substance for no legitimate medical reason. She was soliciting sex in exchange for drugs or at least that’s what the charges are.”

“Charges that you fabricated.”

He shrugged. “It’s far less than she deserved but I’m not on board with killing women. She can hopefully spend the rest of her miserable existence in prison.”

He was right, she deserved far worse. “I wish her the fucking best.”

“I’m sure you do.”

I didn’t. I wanted her to die a slow painful death just like Reno and Samson.

“Are we good?”

My brother stared at me for a long moment before he stood and extended a hand to me. I accepted and he pulled me to my feet and into his chest. He hugged me and I hugged him back. “You’re crushing my fucking ribs.”

He laughed dryly. “Good. Maybe you’ll think logically the next time you think it’s a good idea to take four fights in one night,” he mumbled as he stepped away from me. He lifted the bottle and walked to his desk, placing it on the corner along with the glass.

I couldn’t remember much about that night. That was how mania worked. The rush made hours feel like minutes and that meant not retaining a lot of what happened. “What about Cannon?”

Ez spoke through his irritation. “That little wild muthafucker is still alive and well but he also knows that you don’t fight in his rings anymore.”

“How’d he take that?”

“You know him. You tell me.”

Not very well.

“I’m gonna head upstairs. It’s been a long week.”

Yeah, it has.

He headed to the door of his office but paused. “We’re good Elias but so that we stay good, I need you to promise to see someone. At least for a while. I talked to Shore. He said he can take you if you’re cool with that.”

“I’ll talk to him.”

“Thank you.”

Mental health wasn’t just my issue. The harsh reality was that it belonged to the people who loved and cared about me too. They suffered just as much but in different ways. I didn’t know how much more patience they would

have with me but I also never wanted to find out if there was a limit. That meant I had to make this work. Not just for me, but for them too.

TWENTY-EIGHT

eress

“I LOVE WATCHING YOU DANCE.”

“You love having sex with me after watching me dance.” I glanced at him over my shoulder then pulled on my sweatshirt. The good thing about Elias gutting one of the rooms on the floor below us and having it transformed into a dance studio was that he was always close. The bad thing about my new studio was that...

He was always close.

At least once a week my session ended with a follow-up session that consisted of him testing my flexibility. Let him tell it he was helping me stretch my muscles after I worked them so severely in preparation for my upcoming season. We were in a good place after things fell apart *that day*.

It had been two months since *that day*.

It was how I referred to the best and worst time in my life.

So much had changed between and about us. Some good and some more of a challenge but whatever end of the spectrum things fell on, he and I faced them together. We made things work for us. *Our rules, our way.*

Elias had his good days but he also had some not so great days. We worked through them. Sometimes alone and sometimes with Dr. Shore. Sometimes those were really rough like the one we spent discussing, Elias’s guilt about not preventing what happened to Lucas the night he did.

With things out in the open, I had to address my feelings on what happened between him and Cole. It was a very emotionally charged session and the days after were just as emotional. We had to find a middle ground and my acceptance came from knowing that Cole had taken a life because he was high and irrational. Elias had taken a life because he was just as irrational and his mind was spiraling.

I couldn't condemn one without condemning the other so I chose to let the past be the past. A very hard and emotional decision to make but one I had to be at peace with. Dr. Shore was there to help us express our true feelings and I was grateful because things got pretty bad that day.

Elias still struggled with the three of us being a team because it left him open and vulnerable. That was hard for him but I understood. Elias understood that I sometimes needed help navigating things with him so he allowed me that. Today would be one of those days where I needed Dr. Shore to help me navigate and my nerves were frayed.

"I won't deny the truth. I promised to never lie to you so you're right. I love sex with you after watching you dance but in my defense, I just love sex with you regardless of when it happens. I also love that I'm the only one who gets to experience your uninhibited performances."

"Yet another reason why I now have a studio in house with a stage for your private performances."

"We made a deal. No more Chapter House and you still get to be as free as you want. For me but it's now a win for both of us since you agreed to negotiate the no touching clause."

As if I had a choice.

"My husband is so charming and romantic."

"Is he?" My body collided with his by way of his hands on my waist.

"He is. You could learn a few things. You want me to have him hit you up?"

He chuckled then kissed me hard. "Yeah, you do that."

"I'm about to head downstairs. Shore should be here by now."

My stomach somersaulted. "Do you mind if I come today?"

He frowned at me but shook his head. "No, I don't mind. We have a deal, right?"

Yes.

He never denied me.

"We do."

"Anything you want to tell me before we go in there?"

Routine and consistency.

He needed it.

I now understood how important both were when it came to keeping him level.

"I just want to talk about my career. Some changes that might happen in

the future.”

“Changes?” The muscles locked in his shoulder and his jaw went tense. “Something happened?”

I knew he was thinking about Shilo. Not that he needed to worry. Shilo had learned his lesson about being respectful not just with me but with the entire company. I was sure some behind the scenes conversation happened outside of his personal chat with Elias months ago. But I never asked. I didn’t care.

“No, nothing happened...”

“Then what changes, Cress?”

“With Shore, okay?” I lifted and pecked his lips.

He was uneasy but I needed this. I needed support to have this conversation. Elias kissed me on the forehead and slipped his palm against mine, intertwining our fingers. His way of letting me know that my decision to sit with him during his session was okay with him.

We moved through the house and greeted Dr. Shore once we entered the living room. He stood and shook both of our hands offering a subtle smile as he waited until we were both seated side by side before he began.

“I wasn’t aware that you were joining us today.” He turned to me, his expression welcoming so I wasn’t worried or offended by the statement. Through the months of Elias meeting with Shore, I’d learned that he was very matter of fact with most things. It helped keep the lines defined with his handling of Elias but I always felt welcomed and that my presence was valued.

“I had a few things to discuss.”

“Is that so...” He glanced between Elias and me and I nodded.

“Okay then where would you two like to start?”

“She can go first. Something about her career so that’s the priority.”

I tensed at what he must be thinking. I had purposely been vague, not wanting to say the wrong thing.

Dr. Shore turned his eyes on me. “Cress, you’d like to discuss your career?”

“I would.”

“Please...” He sat back, crossing one leg over the other. His demeanor was calm and soothing as always. Elias placed his hand over mine where it rested between us and gave me a gentle squeeze of reassurance. I swallowed the tension in my throat and began.

“I was thinking that maybe I would take some time off in the future.”

“Why would you do that?” Elias frowned hard at me but I kept going.

“Because it might be difficult in a few months. The season gets hard and there’s back to back shows. All my time will be dedicated to practice and performances.”

“You don’t have to babysit me, Cress. I know that you’ve been around more, especially since we put the studio here at the house but...”

“It’s not that.”

Samson having access to me had twisted something in Elias. He felt responsible and because he did, he was more adamant about keeping me close without pushing too hard. That was why he’d built me a studio at the house and I loved him for wanting me safe and protected. I understood.

“Then what is it...”

“Elias, give her space to say what she needs without inserting your opinions. Don’t assume. Let her be clear about her reasons. Once she’s expressed her feelings on what she needs then you’ll have a chance to give your thoughts.”

His eyes shot over to Dr. Shore. This was the hard part for him. He was a proud and confident man. Having another man moderate how he could speak or respond to *his* wife was a struggle. That he was accepting of the process allowed me the comfort of knowing he was truly committed to being open, honest, and vulnerable when it came to me and our marriage.

He allowed it.

“Go ahead,” he mumbled but his voice was strained with a forced control.

“Taking time off is not because I feel like I need to be here with you. You’re doing the work. You don’t need me holding your hand.” His fingers tightened over mine and I smiled. When I lifted my eyes his were there. Intense and assuring. “It’s just that it might be difficult to finish the season because I’m *pregnant*.”

Elias’s body went stiff beside me. I couldn’t look at him. Not yet because...

What if he didn’t want this?

What would that do to us?

I knew his struggle with accepting the idea of kids. We discussed it randomly one night while in bed a few weeks after *that day*. He was concerned about a child inheriting his disorder. That broke my heart because it was proof that he was ashamed of that part of himself. I never wanted him

to be. I loved everything this man was.

Was it difficult at times? Yes, but never in a way that made me regret being with him, loving him.

“How?” His voice trembled with uncertainty. “We’ve been careful.”

“We have. We’re always careful but one time we weren’t.” He swung his head in my direction, brows pinched, body stiff. *He remembered.* The night after he came out of things a couple months ago. We spent the day together, it was nice. I was exhausted so I crashed early but when he came to bed late that night, things got raw and emotional. We needed each other and neither of us paused to consider the consequences.

Today we had to. I had been doing so for a little over a week once I’d gotten the positive result.

“That night?” His tone was low.

“Yeah.”

“If I may...” Dr. Shore interjected. We both turned to him and he continued. “Before you move further, Elias, I would like for you to express how the news of this pregnancy makes you feel. It’s important that you be allowed to give Cress your thoughts without them being influenced by hers.”

He wanted Elias to speak freely without the hesitation or pressure of knowing what I wanted the outcome to be.

“I...” He cleared his throat. “Kids are complicated.”

“Please be more specific with what you mean by complicated, Elias.” Dr. Shore wanted him to say it out loud.

I’m afraid of having a kid who ends up being like me.

He nodded stiffly. “Complications like why we’re here now, discussing the possibility of *our* child in the company of someone else...” he said harshly but it was more defensive than an attack on me or Dr. Shore.

But that still didn’t stop me from whispering, “I’m sorry...”

“Don’t apologize. You’re completely justified for bringing this up here and I’m not upset.” Elias lifted my hand and placed a kiss on my ring finger. “This part will always be hard for me but I’m adjusting.”

“Cress, do you want to address your feelings on his concerns about the two of you having a baby?”

I didn’t speak right away and Elias felt my hesitation because he kissed my temple and whispered against my ear, “Communication.”

One of our expectations with this marriage.

Trust.

Loyalty.

Respect.

Communication.

His way of reminding me that it was okay for me to openly communicate my thoughts and feelings. He expected me to express myself, even if it wasn't always what he wanted or needed to hear.

"I understand and know that his fear of a child in his image is a reflection of how he feels about himself. It's not about *us* and not *me* specifically..." I looked at my husband. My eyes to his so that he could not just hear me. He needed to feel my truth just as profoundly.

"I love you. Everything that you are and everything that you're not because it's *you*. You're *not* what the world may feel is the standard or normal but who the fuck cares what the world thinks? You're mine. My opinion, my voice, my love is all that matters. I love all of *you* and whatever parts of you this child may inherit I will love just as wholly and completely. I will always love you the way that you love me and more importantly the way that you deserve. That same love is what our child will deserve. You won't let anyone make them feel less than because you understand how devastating that can be. You won't let anyone hurt our child physically or with their thoughts or actions because you're a protector. *My* protector and you will be our child's protector as well. I'm not worried. I've *never* been worried."

"Elias..." Dr. Shore edged him cautiously. I knew why. I could feel it too. My husband was overwhelmed. He needed a minute to process.

After a long moment of silence he released my hand and stood, crossing the room. His back was to us and my eyes drifted to Dr. Shore who silently communicated that the decision was mine. Some things he helped us navigate, others he left in our hands. He did so to always make sure he didn't become a crutch in our relationship. I appreciated his consideration and honesty.

You decide if you want to go to him or if he needs space.

I stood and walked toward my husband. Stepping in front of him, I circled his waist and rested my head on his chest.

"Talk to me."

Silence.

He did however close me in his arms and kiss the top of my head.

"You want this baby?"

"Yes," I released on a soft exhale.

“Me too.”

But...

“Tell me?” I said softly.

He held me tighter. “I don’t want you to be disappointed.”

They way my parents were...

It hurt to know that was what he was feeling. Even if he didn’t say it. I knew.

“This baby is you, Elias. I could never be disappointed.”

I lifted my chin and he lowered his face until his hovered over mine. Eyes expressive with his struggle while he searched mine. He found what he needed because his body relaxed and a smile surfaced slowly. So incredibly fucking slowly.

“Then we do this.”

“You sure?” My heart felt lighter while I waited for the final confirmation.

“Yeah I’m sure.” His voice was confident and strong.

“I love you.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah...” I smiled wide and his mirrored mine before he kissed me.

“Me too...”

And two became three...

epilogue

EIGHTEEN MONTHS AND SOME CHANGE.

ELIAS.

“Look EJ, you see Mommy up there.”

He smiled up at me and clapped his little hands.

This kid.

Elias Cress Omari Junior.

My son.

He wasn't a junior but that was how we filled out his birth certificate. It worked because I didn't have a middle name and who the fuck was going to tell me no? It was important that EJ be considered as equal parts of both me and his mother so she agreed to his middle name being her first. She'd fought but I was adamant. The name Cress was gender neutral so it fit our needs. But again, who the fuck would say a word to me or my kid about his name?

Never knew a love like the one I felt the day he was born. I accepted him and loved him from the day Cress told me of his existence but damn if that failed in comparison to what I felt when he took his first breath and was placed in my arms.

I fucking cried.

For two days I fucking cried.

He was so perfect. The kid had equal parts of both his mother and me but she swore his personality was all me. That scared the shit out of me in the beginning. I watched him like a hawk, analyzing, studying, trying to make sure there were some parts of him that I didn't give him, but it was too early to tell. Either way, I didn't care, I loved him with everything that I was. I would always love him with everything that I was.

EJ and Cress were the only good things I could claim as my own. There were days when I didn't feel worthy but then she smiled at me, kissed me,

and I was convinced that she was meant to be mine.

When my son smiled at me with those bright, innocent, expressive eyes, looking at me like I was everything right in his world, I knew even if I didn't deserve him or his mother I was going to work overtime to ensure they were never disappointed on my behalf. I was far from perfect but for them I didn't have to be. For them I just had to show up and give them the best parts of myself. That was always enough but of course I gave that and more.

I ran my hand over his head and he threw it back against my chest and smiled up at me.

“Mommy dance.”

“Yeah buddy, she's dancing.”

This was her first performance back after ending her last season early after finding out she was carrying our son. I struggled for the two months she danced after we found out. She trained hard. Then there was the small detail of trusting her partner to lift and spin her in positions that if they failed, both her and our child would have been at risk.

Drove me fucking crazy but she told me to trust her.

So I did.

I'd do anything for her, for our son, and she would do anything for me. That was proven a million times over.

She stayed.

I wasn't easy. Loving me was a bit of a challenge. I knew that but I also knew that she wouldn't have it any other way. She told me that once when I was spiraling. Most days I was level. It was easy to do what was right to ensure I was, especially when I thought about who would suffer if I didn't do the work. Some things I couldn't help but what I could control, I did. She was the only one who could reach me at times and she claimed that position proudly. Said I made her shades of gray come alive with my colors.

My chaos to her calm.

My dark to her light.

We worked.

A strong man was often shattered by weakness, my mental health was that for me but Cress never accepted me using it as a crutch. She pushed me to accept everything about myself and I did because she loved me through the insecurities and challenges.

“You ready to be a single dad?”

I frowned at Christian who grinned. “That's basically what you'll be

during her season. She will live and breathe this place.”

I know.

That made me jealous but I loved her passion. It made her who she was and I learned to accept that her love for dance in no way competed with her love for me or our son.

“I’m ready for whatever she needs to be whole.”

He chuckled, shaking his head. “You’re a good one. I give you shit all the time but I know you love my sister and I respect the man you are for her.”

“Should I cry now or later?”

He grinned, ignoring me to focus on my son. “What up, dude?” Christian held his hand out, palm facing EJ who mirrored the motion. The two slapped hands and EJ rocked against me laughing. He was guarded and didn’t accept or deal with many people, but his family? EJ loved them.

“Mommy, pretty.” He bounced in my lap, clapping his hands as Cress took a bow after allowing the other dancers to have their moment. She and her partner Li clasped hands and bent at the waist. When she lifted Shilo presented her with a massive bouquet of roses. They were from the company. A ritual. But I still didn’t like that shit.

I stood, lifting EJ into my chest. “Mommy is *beautiful*. Let’s go see her.”

He placed his tiny hands on my cheeks and leaned into me, grinning. After a quick show of affection, a kiss to his cheeks, I turned to Christian. “Didn’t Jona make it?”

The muscles in his jaw flexed. “Missed her flight.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, I’m starting to think I need to put eyes on her. She’s seeing someone. Claims it’s a friend but I think it’s more.”

I smirked. “You need her single just in case another arrangement opportunity arises.”

His eyes landed hard meeting mine. “No, done with that. The fucking stress the two of you put me through...”

I chuckled. The truth about who I am was still a sore spot, but we were good now. “It worked out.”

“Yeah, it did.”

“You coming backstage?”

“No, give her my love. I have plans.”

“Plans? Sounds personal.”

“It is, so keep that part to yourself. Cress will know when it’s time. For

now, just plans.”

He and Ez were both going through similar situations. Their marriages had failed. Separating wasn't as easy as they wanted it to be which meant the process was moving slowly.

“Not my business.”

“Whether I like it or not, it is. We're family now. One affects all.” He shrugged, brushing a hand over EJ's head.

“Later, buddy.”

“Wayter...”

Those Ls didn't quite land yet but fuck if that wasn't the most adorable thing.

I watched him leave then gathered our son's things. Now it was time for me to go show appreciation for the woman who completed me.

* * *

“You were perfect tonight.”

“There or here?” Cress smiled softly and her body shivered as I trailed my fingers up her thigh until my thumb pressed her clit.

“Both...” My fingers glided across her slick folds then I eased one between them.

“Mmmmm, which was your favorite?”

I chuckled, leaning forward enough to gently bite down on her left nipple which I then soothed with my tongue. “That's a trick question.”

She smiled, slowly spreading her thighs wider as she pressed the balls of her feet onto the floor. Her back was perfectly arched, hands lightly resting on my shoulders, leaving about a foot between my chest and hers while she straddled my thighs.

Graceful and sexy as fuck.

“It's not a trick question. You're allowed to have a preference.” Her eyelids fluttered when my fingers circled, pushing in deeper. “Oh fuck.”

Not yet, but soon.

“Watching you dance takes my breath away, no matter what stage you're on but here in the privacy of our home when you don't feel the need to be poised and controlled is my favorite. When you dance with an audience present, I have to share. Here, I don't.”

“Selfish.” She leaned into my chest and allowed her lips to graze mine.

“Very selfish. Now cum for me.” I took her mouth hard and possessively. She moved with me, allowing her hips to rock to the rhythm of my fingers pumping in her. Two of my favorite things were watching her dance and making her cum. The first led to the second which she was inches away from. “Let it go baby, I got you.”

“Oh...” Her voice was strained as she unraveled, thrusting against my hand, curving her back while her head dropped between her shoulder blades and her face angled toward the ceiling. I traced the length of her neck with one thumb as the other pressed hard against her clit. Her moans filled the room as she shook with an orgasm, praising my name.

She trembled, still feeling the aftershocks of her release but managed to free me from my sweats. I pushed my hand into my pocket and removed a condom. She took over, getting it on me, then sank down onto my dick with a sharp exhale.

My hands moved up her sides to her breasts, while she started with slow circles, grinding against me. I’d let her have her moment.

“You know, the first time I saw you dance at Chapter House, I knew you would be the one woman to bring me to my knees.”

“You didn’t even know who I was.”

“Didn’t matter. I felt you.” I thrust up beneath her and she groaned from how deep I landed.

“Just from watching me dance?” Her smile was seductive but her lips parted slightly when I grabbed her hips hard enough to slam into her again.

“That was a part of it, but mostly, I just felt you. Something about you that I couldn’t make sense...”

“And now...”

“Now you’re the only thing that makes sense.” Affection flashed in her eyes. Deep brown eyes that owned me. This woman had effortlessly claimed every inch of my heart. The only reason she had to share was because she gave me a son.

My hips lifted in deep measured strokes. She felt like perfection, drenched, throbbing with a custom fit that was just for me. I took her nice and slow but each thrust sent a message.

My heart.

My lifeline.

My wife.

I let her cum twice, coaxing her through each one with easy, contained

thrusts then I settled into my own descent knowing that nothing would ever be better than this. Than her. Than us.

Pure fucking ecstasy.

She fell against my chest and heaved a breath which brushed over my neck, sending another round of awareness to my still pulsing dick. “I love you.”

“Yeah?”

She kissed my shoulder and smiled against it. “Yeah.”

I was completely and utterly in love with this woman. There would never be any uncertainty or reservations because I knew she felt the same.

Which was why I kissed her forehead and everything in me settled with the promise of everything good. “Me too.”

The End!

afterword

Thank you for trusting me to breathe life into Elias and Cress. From the moment they spoke to me, I knew these two were special.

You may have also noticed a few details sprinkled in about their family members: Jona, Christian and Ezekiel and you will find out more about these complicated souls in the future.

The intention for this novel was to bring to life the beautiful and unconventional love that blossomed between Elias and Cress. I pray you enjoyed their journey. You'll see them again, layered into the lives of their siblings, when it's their turn to invite you into their worlds.

I sincerely appreciate you allowing me to share these beautiful souls with you.

XOXO

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