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MONSTERS & MUSES
PREQUEL

SWEET
SIN

SAVR. MILLER

SWEET
SIN

SAV R. MILLER

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 Created with Vellum

Contents

[Author's Note](#)

[Playlist](#)

1. [Kal](#)
2. [Elena](#)
3. [Kal](#)
4. [Elena](#)
5. [Kal](#)
6. [Kal](#)
7. [Elena](#)
8. [Kal](#)
9. [Elena](#)
10. [Kal](#)
11. [Elena](#)

[Thank you for reading!](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Sav](#)

Author's Note

Sweet Sin is a short 16k word prequel to book one in the Monsters & Muses series, Promises and Pomegranates. It is not required reading, but may enhance your overall experience.

This prequel was originally published in the Omertà Christmas Anthology and as a freebie online.

Sweet Sin is a dark mafia romance, and contains mature content and themes that may not be suitable for all audiences. For a detailed list of potential triggers, **please** visit savrmiller.com

Reader discretion is advised.

*For those who prefer the violent, broody villains.
May you find your Kallum Anderson.*

Your fate is mortal: what you ask for isn't.

OVID

Playlist

"Dark Allies" - Light Asylum

"Heavy" - Jeremy Zucker

"Another Way Out" - Hollywood Undead

"Watch Me Burn" - Michele Morrone

"Joke's On You" - Charlotte Lawrence

"Killer" - Valerie Broussard

"bloody valentine" - Machine Gun Kelly

CHAPTER 1

Kal

I'M A WOLF IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING.

A predator living amongst his prey, acting as if someone's out to get me, too.

Hoping that the blood between my teeth can be forgotten, the stains of the lives lost at my claws erased. Fighting back against the rigid rules of a society that's only ever sought my submission.

Crime and violence pump through my veins, the single defining purpose of my life for the last decade—hell, maybe even longer than that. It's hard to believe my villainy began only when I started being paid to do it.

No, the wolf lives inside me, hiding out during the day and pretending the townspeople don't know the truth. Pretending they can't see the ghost of Death himself in my shadow, following me around like a curse I'm powerless against.

In fact, it's not a curse. Not in my line of work.

It's a blessing.

The beast doesn't wither under pressure, doesn't give in when faced with adversity. His bloodlust is insatiable, his appetite for agony unhinged and unconquerable.

No matter how many times I try to run away, try to deny myself the release that comes from life escaping this earth, it lies there waiting for me to return. To welcome the perverse darkness that calls my body home.

Even now, as I wrench my fingers between the lips of a man who's done my employer wrong, reveling in the way his jaw pops as it yields to me and shoving the green silicone dildo from his bedside table down his throat, I can feel a piece of my mind trying to reel me in.

But the evil is stronger, its hold deeper.

Magnetic.

Still, as the man writhes on his mattress, naked and bound at the hands and feet, bleeding from where I've removed all twenty nails, I realize this isn't the sickest part of me.

Sure, there's a deep sensation of satisfaction that washes over me as I slap a strip of packing tape down over the attorney general's mouth. A brutal punishment, but the mafia hates thieves, and as their fixer, I get to dole out justice as I see fit.

A guttural gurgling begins in the back of the attorney general's throat, and he brings his bound hands to his mouth in an attempt to free himself, but it's no use.

Hopping up on the bed beside him, I pull out my phone and open up my security footage app in one hand, pushing down on the sex toy with the other, trapping his fists between my palm and his mouth.

He put up more of a struggle than I'd anticipated, the smug bastard. Most people who steal from or borrow and don't return payments to the mafia are at least somewhat remorseful.

They typically have the decency to apologize and plead for their lives, even if it never works.

I don't give a fuck about being merciful to men as vile as me, but it sure makes my job taste sweeter.

As the man at my side goes limp, eyes wide open but unstarling at the popcorn ceiling of the motel room, I watch the girl on my screen as she peels off her bloody, ragged clothes, secure in the comfort of her expansive bathroom, reminding myself that this was the last task I had before I go and

see her for myself.

It's my holiday ritual, climbing to her balcony like Romeo trying to get to Rapunzel, or however that fucking fairy tale goes.

But my infatuation with the girl isn't the stuff you find in happily-ever-afters; it's nightmare fuel, horror with a vengeance. The kind of filth you find on the dark web where people go to satiate their most shameful, depraved desires.

My girl puts on a show, shimmying her hips out of the tight jeans she has on, and my cock stiffens at the sight of her creamy thighs.

I can't stop myself from imagining how it'd feel to bury my head between them, or from wondering if the little whimpers she makes when she tosses around in her sleep sound anything like the moans she'd make soaking my chin with her pleasure.

She's as untouched and pure as fallen snow—at least, that's what she needs people to believe. But I see the black and blue splotches coloring her skin, see the gash at her ribs that drips with her fresh blood.

I *know* her, and as she pulls the sports bra over her head, baring the heavy swell of her breasts and that tiny pomegranate tattoo that no one else knows she has, I can almost feel the arousal course through her veins.

The second she steps into the shower, I see it; hot water scalds her skin, washing over sore muscles and cuts hidden to me. A normal person might wince against the pain, maybe grit their teeth, but not her.

Not my little Persephone.

Her jaw slackens a fraction as she turns toward the plexiglass door, smoothing her hands down over her curves, and then falls open on a sharp gasp. There's no audio with my footage, but I know what she sounds like.

I know everything about her.

When her hand drifts over her stomach, nimble fingers traveling lower to mix the pressure of pain and euphoria, I click out of the app, unwilling to allow my voyeuristic tendencies to cross that line.

The first time I watch her come undone, I want to *be* there, not watching from behind some fucking screen. I want to be the reason she comes, want my name to be the one she purrs as her pussy spasms and her nerve-endings explode.

Pocketing my phone, I move off the bed and begin clean-up; my boss, the don of Boston's most notorious crime family, might like evidence, but I've never been one to give it to him.

Since *he* hired *me*, Rafael Ricci's had to come to terms with trusting my judgment.

Once I've cleared the body from the room and bagged his remains to toss in my basement wood-burning stove later, I get to work cleaning the aftermath.

The routine starts by exchanging the stiff motel linens for clean ones I picked up on my way in, removing the plastic mattress cover—which I slip on before I've begun my interrogation—and getting to work removing any gore that's splattered elsewhere.

After I've scrubbed the brown shag carpet of its biological traces, I deodorize and disinfect, the weight of my medical background refusing to let me leave until things are up to hospital code.

Using a bioluminescence device, I scan the area for any remnants of the dead man, heave my bags over my shoulder, and slip out the back exit.

Tossing the bags into my trunk, I slide behind the wheel of the black Buick I rented when I got into town and reach into the glove compartment for the book of poetry I keep there.

I know she memorized the pages torn from it at an early age. I know she pours over every book of poems she can find from the public library, trying to recreate the same feeling my copied words elicited in her as a child.

Even if they weren't meant for her at first.

I barely knew her as a child. Wasn't around much, and when I came to town, her parents kept me occupied.

But she certainly knew me, and in the two years since her eighteenth birthday, she's made her intentions clear.

I know she won't find what she's looking for elsewhere, because it's not in the words, it's in the gesture.

Poetry gifted, not poetry borrowed.

Words that made her feel considered, if only because her father despised her love of literature.

That was long before he asked me to keep an eye on her.

Long before my thoughts turned depraved and hungry.

CHAPTER 2

Elena

“YOU DROPPED THIS.”

My heart kick-starts, shifting into overdrive as I lift my gaze from the worn wooden pew in front of me. Familiar, rich brown eyes stare back at me, heavy and menacing in their unwavering perusal, as if trying to peer into my very soul.

The sharp, angular curve of his jaw gives me pause; I’ve never seen him without at least a hint of stubble, and that he’s likely shaved specifically for this occasion causes the cracks in my heart to double in size.

Frissons of unease ripple inside the organ, partly at having this dangerous man’s undivided attention, and partly because being inside St. Leonard’s so soon after my return home feels like a conflict of interest.

A tendril of jet-black hair swoops down over his smooth forehead, and my fingers twitch where they’re pinned beneath my thighs, itching to push it away.

Always looking, never able to touch.

He holds out a slip of paper, crumpled between two long, muscular fingers. Everything about this man screams *fit*, and I can’t stop my eyes from raking over his dark form hungrily, despite the context of the situation.

Impossibly tall, probably six-foot-four, maybe even six-foot-five, my father’s hitman towers over the congregation, looking more out of place than if the Devil himself had stepped inside the aged building.

His all-black, custom-tailored suit clings to his muscles, shoulders straining against the expensive fabric, and something quick and punishing tears through my gut, resonating between my thighs.

A feeling I've never felt before and can't quite place.

One that makes my bones ache.

From the corner of my eye, I can see my family making their way from the altar, giving their last stoic regards to the golden casket parked there. My nonnino, the barely retired Don Ricci, murdered in cold blood before he had much of a chance to enjoy civilian life.

That's the problem with the mafia, though. Once you're in, there's no getting out. The reach of Ricci *famiglia* business stretches and refuses release, tightening its grip on its members until they eat, sleep, and *breathe omertà*.

Papà stops and shakes the hands of every passerby, doing his political duty to remain professional and reserved, even in times of duress.

When we were kids, he'd tell my sisters and me not to let emotional attachments surface in our everyday lives, because once something you love can be located, it can be used against you.

Which is likely how my grandfather ended up hanging from the rafters in his old barn earlier this week, while his favorite horse ran loose through downtown Grafton.

Reaching out, I tentatively take the piece of paper from the man at my side; a chill runs up my arm as our fingers brush. His skin is as icy as the December Boston air, and a soft gasp falls from my mouth before I'm able to stifle it.

I don't miss the way one corner of his dark pink lips tugs up, though the rest of his expression remains unchanged. The impossible, unflappable Doctor Kal Anderson, regarding me in the flesh for the first time in two years.

Of course, I've been working on my English teaching degree with clinic

hours at my alma mater, the Fontbonne Academy, and he's been... *distant*.

Stuffing the scrap of paper into my coat pocket, I force my gaze ahead and try to calm my racing heart. I don't need to unwrap the paper to know it's got his chicken scratch handwriting on it, or to remember one of the dozens of lines of poetry that have been etched into my heart over the years.

Poems he left as birthday gifts during his rare visits.

Mateo de Luca seems to appear out of thin air, dragging crooked fingers through his light brown, cropped hair as he searches the church for me.

My betrothed since birth, Papà's attempt at securing an impenetrable alliance between Ricci Inc. and Bollente Media. And though I go along with it for Papà's sake, I'd kill to be out from beneath the scope of that man's dirty little thumb.

There's an evil presence inside Mateo unlike what I usually see in my father's men. It's cruel, wicked, and seeking a vessel to mold and possess and pour himself into.

The kind of monster that develops out of boredom and a false sense of superiority, not because he truly enjoys the darkness.

"Elena, my darling," he exclaims, his voice bouncing off the columns and murals inside as if we're not at a wake. Bending once he reaches me, he scoops me roughly into his arms, nearly pulling me into his lap in front of the entire church. "I've been looking all over for you. Your mother said you got in last night. I was surprised that I didn't hear from you."

Kal averts his eyes, but I don't miss the way his jaw clenches, nor do I miss the way my body heats at his reaction.

But I try not to read into it, because that's what he wants.

Gripping the hem of my black, cashmere dress to keep from flashing my father's oldest friend, I clear my throat and try to wrench away from Mateo. "Holiday traffic was kind of a drag, so I went to bed as soon as I got home."

Mateo pinches one of my cheeks, and I wince as the pressure hits a sore inside my mouth. I'm still healing from a fight yesterday afternoon—at a

diner a few miles from the Academy while I waited for Enzo, our family driver, to pick me up for winter break.

The bruises on my knees and ribs and the cut on the inside of my left thigh are why I'm wearing a sweater dress and thigh-high leather boots, despite the fact that St. Leonard's is notoriously warm inside.

"Want me to give you a ride to the reception?" Mateo asks, finally releasing me. "We could stop for some of that pomegranate frozen yogurt you like."

I *do* like the frozen yogurt, but the idea of being stuck alone in a car with this man for any length of time makes me nauseous. "Sorry, but I think Papà wants me home to help set up for tomorrow."

He pouts, his dark skin shimmering in the bright, fluorescent lighting. "Come on, E. I haven't seen you in months; spend some fucking time with me."

Beside us, a throat clears, and then a large hand is wrapping around my bicep and yanking me from my seat into a standing position.

"I've been asked to make sure she gets home in one piece." Kal drags me into his side, my body on fire everywhere we connect.

"Oh, come on," Mateo scoffs, pushing to his feet. "Like they trust you with her more than me. You're liable to murder her and dump her body in the Charles."

"Sure that's the hill you want to die on, Mateo? You may be too stupid to be afraid of me, but that doesn't change what I'm capable of."

"Is that a threat?"

"Speak to her like that again and I'll make it a fucking promise." Kal squeezes my arm, and I whimper, shuffling closer to try and get him to let up. The scent of whiskey and cinnamon assaults me, and I feel a little light-headed as I inhale deeply, my nose brushing against the fabric of his suit.

Mateo's eyes narrow, then he smirks and pulls me from Kal's grasp, wrapping his arms around me in a tight, suffocating embrace.

“Be good, my darling,” he says, glaring over my head as he presses a chaste, pointed kiss to my hair, although I’m not really sure why.

He’s not affectionate, unless it’s trying to cop a feel, and he’s definitely misdirecting annoyance to the one person in this room that could make it seem like he never existed in the first place.

Not that my reluctant savior’s interference means anything. Kal’s just protective because he’s my father’s friend and employee. Not because he cares about me.

He’s made that abundantly clear.

Frankly, I’m not convinced the man has a caring bone in his entire body.

And yet, the book of poems he left me as a child, the words that inspired me and got me through the stilted, lackluster life of a Ricci daughter, suggests otherwise.

CHAPTER 3

Kal

MY GOLDEN GODDESS DOESN'T SAY A WORD AS I PEEL OUT OF THE ST. Leonard's parking lot, fingers flexing over the leather steering wheel as I attempt to control my rage.

The visceral reaction I had to Mateo grabbing her, claiming her, was wholly inappropriate, but like all storm surges, I was powerless against it.

What I really wanted to do was put a bullet through de Luca's brain, bend his fiancée over the church pew, and shatter her innocence as he bled out beneath us.

But I didn't.

Couldn't.

Even if not for the audience, taking that step with Elena isn't something I can afford.

No matter how badly I want to.

There's just too much at stake.

"You had no right to drag me out of there," she says after we drive about a mile in silence, staring out the window as downtown whips past, Christmas wreaths and trees and the Santas on every corner blurring as I weave through traffic. "That was my *nonnino's* wake, and you just plucked me from it like his death didn't matter."

Gritting my teeth, I steal a glance at her. She wraps a strand of chocolate-colored hair around her index finger, holding it there until the tip turns

purple, before finally releasing it.

It's how she distracts herself from me, the onslaught of pain from loss of circulation pulling her mind from thoughts she shouldn't have.

My sweet little masochist.

"Would you have rather I left you to fight off your *beloved* in the confines of his car?"

Imagining his hands on her soft skin, smoothing along her curves, or wrapped in her dark tresses makes me see red. My skin prickles, blood boiling just beneath the surface, and I shift in my seat to try to tamp down the fire spreading through me.

"He's not my beloved," she mutters, crossing her arms. The gaudy ring on her left hand catches in the overcast sunlight, sending a hot spark of fury uncurling in my chest. "He's nothing but a thorn in my side."

Pulling up in front of the Ricci's luxurious Louisburg Square home, I park at the curb and switch off the engine. "And yet, you're marrying him?"

Lifting her chin, she meets my eyes, and I feel lost in the golden swirl of her gaze; it's warm and inviting, soft like wintertime and the edges she hides from the rest of the world.

"Is that a question, *Kallum*?" She breathes my name, her ruby red lips curving around each syllable the way I wish they'd curve around my dick, and I swallow over the knot that forms in my throat. "I'm afraid you already know the answer."

Irritation bubbles up inside me, at her compliance to this world she has no business being a part of, and at how much I want her and cannot have her.

Fuck, who I wouldn't murder just to sink inside that virgin pussy for one goddamn night.

What cities I wouldn't burn to be able to pretend, for a brief moment in time, that she could be mine.

"*Why* are you marrying him?" The question slips out before I have a chance to stop it, deafening in the space of the vehicle.

“What else would you have me do? Defy my father and risk excommunication, or... worse? Jesus, even I have to draw the line of rebellion somewhere.”

Pursing my lips, I lean back in my seat and tap my index finger on the wheel. Unlatching the child safety locks, I unlock the doors and stare out the windshield as snow begins to float from the sky. “Maybe you’re not who I thought you were.”

Her face falls, her heart-shaped jaw clenching as if to keep from bursting into tears.

She moves, unbuckling her seat belt, and her rosy pomegranate perfume wafts my way, causing something in my chest to quake with longing.

“Maybe I just know how to pick my battles.”

CHAPTER 4

Elena

I SEE THE MOMENT KAL'S PATIENCE WITH ME WANES; SITTING HERE IN HIS car, I'm stunned too stupid to move as I watch the calm, collected soul I've always known exhale from his body.

His eyes darken to a black I've never seen, homing in on me with a determination I don't quite understand.

Pressing my back into the car door, I try to put as much space between us as I can, not wanting to be in the direct line of fire of this feral man.

Sweat breaks out along my hairline, my dress suddenly too hot and too tight for my body, my tongue swelling three sizes too large inside my mouth.

"Get out." His voice is a sharp growl, cutting me to the bone. But fuck if I don't like the way it slices against my skin.

"Excuse me?"

"You fucking heard me, Elena. I won't ask again."

"What the hell? You forced me to leave the church before I was ready and now you're kicking me out of the car?"

He reaches across me, pulling on the door handle and forcing it open. My breath catches as his arm grazes my chest, but then he's resituating himself in his seat and turning the car back on.

One hand scrubs at his clean-shaven jaw, so rough against his skin that it bleeds red beneath his touch.

Violence practically clings to him, itching to be set free from where he

tries to bury it in his soul.

And even though it's stupid, and dangerous, and he's convinced himself he doesn't want anything to do with me, I want to be the one who sees him break. Want it to be me he takes his rage out on.

"Make me."

Eyes bugging out, his chin whips in my direction. "What?"

I shrug, pulling the door shut and shifting so my dress hikes up my thighs as I spread them slightly.

Throat bobbing over a swallow, his gaze locks on my fingers as I glide them up my legs, slipping just below my hemline.

His breathing grows shallow as I continue the ascent, letting out a soft whimper when I reach the lace of my panties.

"Stop," he grunts, still watching me. Waiting to see what I'll do next.

Smirking, I slip my index finger beneath the elastic of my underwear, swiping lazily at my seam, dipping between the soft folds of my sex.

Kal's nostrils flare, his fists curling so tight around the steering wheel that it wheezes under the pressure, and I can't stop the moan that falls from my lips as I swirl the pad of my finger around my clit.

It throbs, desperate to have him see me come undone, for him to know that every time I've ever touched myself, it's been to the image of him.

Moving my fingers faster, my breaths come in rapid spurts, my mouth hanging open as my eyes stay on his. Anguish colors the harsh planes of his face, sending shivers of delight and misery echoing through my body in white hot waves.

Delight because it's obvious he wants me, even if he won't admit it out loud.

Misery because he denies me.

But if that's how my handsome Hades wants to play, I'm not above manipulating the confession from him.

Even if I have to ride my own hand to *Kingdom Come*.

“Do you remember what I asked you for on my eighteenth birthday?”

For him to kiss me. Fuck me.

He'd refused.

Kal freezes. “I haven't changed my mind.”

“Really?” Pulling my hand out from under my skirt, I lave over my finger with my tongue, slurping up the arousal collected on the tip.

His jaw locks.

My pussy weeps in protest, but I ignore it, lifting my knee and hoisting myself over the center console.

“Jesus Christ, Elena, what the hell are you doing?”

I launch myself into his lap before he has a chance to push me away, planting my knees on either side of his hips.

My dress bunches up just beneath the curve of my ass, but as I settle onto the tops of his thighs and grind into his pelvis, I don't even care.

Gripping my hips, he starts to shove me off of him, but I slide my hands behind his neck and lock them there, my hold iron clad.

Papà put Ari, Stella, and me in self-defense classes at a young age, and one of the first things they taught was how to get too close for a perpetrator to be able to attack.

Kal digs his fingers into me, and I writhe on top of him, the pain causing euphoria to build in my lower belly. “Goddamnit, little one, you're asking for trouble.”

Ignoring the jab, I move my hips faster, leaning slightly to create friction on my clit. My panties are soaked, cold where they're pressed against his pants, but I'm too far sucked into a web of pleasure to give a shit.

“Give in, *Kallum*. Take from me before Mateo does.”

He groans, the sound ricocheting off the windows, using his hold on me to increase my speed and pressure. I feel him harden beneath me, my brain locking in on the sensation of his thick cock between my pussy lips.

“I'm not like the boys from your little private schools. I'll ruin you and

not think twice about it.”

Pressure coils tight inside my stomach, electricity zinging through my veins. “So *ruin me.*”

It takes a moment; he sweeps his gaze around, inspecting the street for onlookers, but the windows have fogged up so much at this point that it’s impossible to see out or in without some effort.

Goose bumps pop up on my skin the second some kind of switch flips in him, desperation bleeding from his movements.

Tearing the neckline of my dress, Kal’s mouth latches on to the space where my throat meets my shoulder, sucking so hard and fast that I cry out from the intensity.

His hands snake up my thighs, heavy and deliberate, and I’m still riding his pants-clad cock when his fingers find my dripping core.

“Merry fucking Christmas to me,” he growls against me, biting the space he’s just kissed until I’m sure he breaks the skin.

My eyes roll back, my body bucking as he seems to drink from me, a vampire feasting on its willing victim.

Long fingers probe through my folds, the lewd sounds of my arousal making my cheeks heat, and then he pulls away to reach into the glove compartment. “Put your hands behind your back.”

I obey, disengaging from his neck while he drags a black satin ribbon out and shuts the door.

There’s a red stain on the corner of his mouth, and for a moment he looks positively unhinged.

Fear surges through me, mixed with a strange sense of excitement, and I lean forward to lick the blood from his lips.

It’s metallic and sweet, my essence mixed with cinnamon lip balm, and my pussy seems to ignite at the taste.

But he doesn’t give me what I really want.

CHAPTER 5

Kal

I'M THREE SECONDS FROM SHOOTING MY LOAD INSIDE MY SLACKS AND NOT finishing what I started here when Elena starts lapping at my mouth, sucking her own blood from my flesh like a goddamn siren in heat.

My dick is enraged, gorged beyond belief as she dry fucks me, the scent of her intoxicating little pussy making my vision blur.

I have to end this before I do something I regret. Something I can't fucking take back.

Pulling the ribbon through my fingers, I take her wrists in my hands and knot the fabric around her joints, pinning them together in a way that won't cause nerve damage.

Her chest rises and falls against mine, the lace of her bra where I tore the outfit scraping against my suit jacket with each breath.

Ensuring the knot is fastened, I lean forward, dragging my tongue along the bloody bite mark by her neck and relishing in how she shudders *into* me and not away.

As if she too has sick, violent desires.

Of course, I already know she does. The bruises and cuts on her glorious skin hint at it, and the way she rode my lap while I tore into her proves it.

Still, that doesn't change the facts. Doesn't change the reality that I cannot have her, and certainly not like this.

Trailing my lips up to her ear, nipping the lobe so hard she squeals, I flick

my tongue against her tragus. “Get the fuck off me.”

I haul her up and dump her into the seat next to me before she has a chance to protest, reveling in the gasp that tears from her chest. She maneuvers around, hands still bound behind her back, and glares at me. “You’re an asshole.”

Shrugging, I shift the car into drive and reach past her to once again open her door. “I tried to warn you.”

Sputtering, she shakes her head. “Aren’t you gonna untie me?”

“You’re a tough girl, remember?” I wink, keeping my foot on the brake pedal and moving to shove her out onto the sidewalk. She spills like a drunkard outside her home, drawing attention from people as they pass by to look at the Christmas decorations. “Figure it out yourself.”

A KNOCK on my front door draws me from my security feed; very few people are aware that I own a house on Linden Street, the rest content to believe that a man dubbed Doctor Death by the rumor mill in every town he’s ever lived isn’t a resident within their city limits.

On the monitor, Elena assists her two younger sisters with decorating the large flocked Christmas tree in their foyer, while Rafael’s mother sits on the couch drinking a bottle of Chardonnay.

Grieving, I suppose, though I’ve never quite understood the concept. What’s the point in crying over a man who chose to live the life of a criminal? How can you delude yourself into believing there’s any other possible outcome for a made man?

Elena alternates between feeding lights around the tree to the middle child, Ariana, and nibbling on peanut butter fudge from a tray in the kitchen.

She’s barefoot on their hardwood floors, wearing skinny jeans and a T-shirt of some obscure band from long before she was even born, constantly

checking over her shoulder as if she expects trouble to appear out of thin air.

Her naivety makes me chuckle.

Like she'd ever know I was there in the first place.

I can still smell her on my fingers, even though I've washed my hands until they bled. Can still feel her grinding on my cock, her wetness coating me, seeping into my flesh as she chased her release.

It should've been enough to sate my hunger for her, and yet it feels as though it's done nothing but fan the flames.

Pushing away from my desk, I get to my feet and slip from the office as the knocking grows incessant, hoping carolers haven't decided to stop by again this year.

Keying in the code for the room, ensuring no one could accidentally see my workspace, I move down the hall, taking the stairs two at a time, and throw open the front door.

Elena's mother stands on my doorstep, a red parka buttoned up to her delicate chin. Dark eyes peer into mine as she presses her pink lips together, familiarity floating in the depths of her irises that I refuse to read into.

Something sharp flares in my chest, an abscess that's gone untreated for far too long and is now infected, more sinister and malignant than ever before.

Reaching for the doorframe, I grip it in my palm and keep myself from swaying beneath her penetrating perusal. "Carmen. To what do I owe this immense displeasure?"

Her foot taps on the concrete, a look of annoyance flickering over her face. "It's rude not to invite people in when it's snowing."

Glancing over her shoulder as flurries drift from the gray sky, I slide my gaze back to her and do my best to ignore the irritation spiking in my gut. *Things were just going too well for me.* "It's rude to show up to people's homes uninvited."

"Ah, but that never stopped you, did it?"

A tic forms in my jaw, thrumming through the muscle there and pulling it tight.

Stepping out on the porch, I yank the front door closed and pounce on her, wrapping my hand around the slender slope of her neck and pressing her into one of the porch columns.

I don't press hard enough to rob her of air or leave a mark, my fingers placed just so she's aware of who she's dealing with.

I'm not anything like the idiot boy she once claimed to love. The *child* so desperate for attention and affection that he debased himself at her feet to get it.

Something that looks a lot like disappointment flashes over her face as her skull connects with the pillar. "It's nice to see some things never change, Kal."

"You've got three seconds to explain what you're doing here, before I take you down to my basement and send you home so disfigured, even the man who's been buried in your dried up pussy the last twenty years won't recognize you."

"Mature." She rolls her eyes, then narrows them when I don't move. "I might be more willing to confess if you took your hands off me."

"You're a part of my world, Carmen. Don't pretend to be ignorant of why I am the way I am."

Because your evil made me like this.

Still, I release her, if only because it burns my palms to have my hands on her skin so soon after caressing the smooth curves of her daughter.

My obsession, my ruin. *My Persephone*. The one woman I'd kill to have rule at my side.

And yet, the woman in front of me is the main reason I know I can never have her.

CHAPTER 6

Kal

NORMALLY, I WELCOME SILENCE.

Crave it, even.

After a decade of either relishing or squirming in the agony of others, the deafening quiet became the only solace available. The only place I could go where not even my darkest sins could try to kill me.

I try not to think about how it morphed into a psychological *need*.

Tonight, the silence only furthers my own personal torture, twisting the white-hot metaphorical knife of betrayal and admonition in my gut until it feels like I might pass out from the pain.

My fingers grasp at my cotton bedsheets as I thrash from one side to the other, replaying the words of my former lover—if you can call her that, given the fact that I was a child during all but a year of our “relationship”—in my mind like a broken record.

How could Carmen ever think that showing up and begging me to leave her daughter alone would do the trick?

That it wouldn't create an even greater impossibility between us, make me salivate for the young, untouched flesh even more?

'Please, Kal. If you care about her, or me, at all. You'll leave her alone. Each time you even so much as look at her, it puts her in danger. You know what The Elders would do if they thought she'd been impure before her wedding night, and that's not even including what Rafe would do.'

The thing is, though, I don't.

Care, I mean. At least about anything other than hurting Carmen and defiling Elena Ricci. Claiming her for myself and ruining her soul beyond repair.

Something tells me she'd enjoy the fucking ride, too.

And as much as I want to resist the twenty-year-old goddess, as much as I don't want sinful thoughts of her delicious ass running rampant through my mind, I can't stop myself.

Can't wrench out of the depraved fantasies playing on repeat behind my eyelids, amplified by the silence cloaking my bedroom.

Her mother may have ruined my childhood with her abuse, but my interest in Elena has nothing to do with Carmen, outside of the fact that it pisses her off.

In truth, I just *want* Elena.

Throwing off my comforter, I yank on a pair of discarded black slacks and head for my office, tossing the deli owner passed out in the corner a disgusted look.

For a moment, I consider resuming my work on him—lustful depravity aside, my main focus is supposed to be the job Rafe brought me to town for: figuring out who leaked word of the Riccis' business being used as a front for a sports betting ring.

I don't know that Tony Pesognelli has the exact answers, but I'm willing to bet a greaseball like him isn't innocent.

Still, even as I prod his knee with a branding iron, waking the balding man from his fitful slumber, my heart isn't in it.

Sighing as he sobs into his ball gag, something I had leftover from the last time I entertained a lady years ago, I stalk to the other side of the room and flop behind my desk.

Propping my feet up on the wooden surface, I exhale and pull a manila envelope into my lap, opening one side and studying the pictures in it.

My computer monitor comes to life, indicating movement on the security feed, but I don't look immediately.

Instead, I peer into the deep, warm brown gaze that haunted my memory long before Elena ever did.

Black hair twisted into an elegant braid that hangs off one pale, freckled shoulder, a smile that beams for another as she stares off beyond the camera.

There's a softness here I don't see often; she's absent of the sharpness I feel in my veins and the tar in my heart. Everything that makes me *me*, and evil by default.

A monster.

Part of me wonders which girl I'll destroy first.

Carmen's words echo through me as I shut the envelope and tap my keyboard, bringing the camera feed up with the push of one button.

Elena stands in front of the floor-length mirror in her en suite bathroom with her sister Ariana checking her makeup. Preparing for the Christmas-slash-birthday shindig the Riccis throw every year.

I normally make it a point not to attend. Crowds and I don't exactly mesh.

But as I zoom in, my gaze roving over my little Persephone's curves, exaggerated in the skin-tight, blush-colored gown she has on, I notice the slightest hint of a fresh bruise on her right shoulder blade.

The average onlooker might not see the hand-shaped shadow, might not see the wince as she turns to apply mascara to her sister's eyes, but I do.

And as I watch her, my obsession expands, a balloon stretching to accommodate as much air as it can before it pops.

My girl likes to fight—that's a common fact around Boston. But there's something about this particular mark that makes my insides shrivel.

It looks too familiar to be random.

And as I stalk back to my bedroom, pull on a dress shirt and my trench coat, I know exactly how to quell the typhoon of noise wreaking havoc on my mind.

CHAPTER 7

Elena

“ARE YOU OKAY?” ARI’S FACE TWISTS, CONTORTING INTO A MASK OF concern. She tucks light brown hair behind her ears, rubbing her thumbs over each lobe twice, before her hands drop to her sides.

It’s a calming gesture Nonna taught us when we were kids, insisting the ears are the gateway to healing the rest of our bodies.

She’d say the things we allowed ourselves to hear had the potential to poison our minds, and that once the mind was poisoned, it was a slippery slope before the rest of our bodies wilted as well.

Evidently, she didn’t know there were plenty of other ways to poison your mind.

Like allowing lust to cloud your judgment and dry humping a man almost twice your age.

A man not only employed by my father and feared by everyone, but who’s also made it clear he wants very little to do with me.

My hand goes to the hickey he left on my neck yesterday, the flesh tender as I slather foundation over it. The makeup barely hides the purple constellation, and his teeth indentation feels permanent.

It makes my core throb, little sparks of desire igniting low in my abdomen, but I ignore it as a wave of nausea nearly knocks me into the sink.

I’ve already covered as much of my black eye as I could with several layers of a thick concealer, after sitting with a bag of frozen peas on it half

the night.

Ari hasn't mentioned anything about it, which tells me I've done a decent job of erasing the evidence of Mateo's temper.

He'd been angry that I left yesterday, and frankly, it was stupid of me not to think there'd be consequences.

Mateo's been proving our whole lives that he'll stop at nothing to have me, and that he'll obliterate anyone who tries to stand in his way.

And while I know I don't deserve the treatment, don't deserve him putting his hands on me, there's very little I can do.

Papà's on edge all the time, and he needs this wedding to work to try to bridge the gap between all of Boston and Ricci Inc.'s reputation.

Unfortunately, in this world we live in, our loyalty lies in our blood bonds, and I refuse to be responsible for my father's downfall or be killed in the face of my defiance.

Besides, it's not like Mateo left our brunch date without a limp. A black eye in exchange for making the asshole impotent is about as fair as it can get, I think.

"E?" Ari frowns, poking my stomach with one manicured finger. "Hello? Are you even listening to me?"

Blinking myself from my runaway train of thought, I offer her a soft smile and close the tube of foundation, inspecting my shoulder to make sure the mark's hidden well enough. "Yes, and I'm fine. Just... a little distracted, with everything going on."

She tilts her head, watching me with doe eyes. "You don't seem like yourself. You haven't mentioned the fact that it's your birthday even once."

"Honestly, the novelty starts to wear off once you've had two decades of birthdays."

Her face screws up, and she smacks her pink, glossy lips. "Uh, if you say so. I'm gonna bask in them 'til Papà stops buying me Cartier handbags."

I laugh softly, shoving her with my shoulder. She pulls away from the

white marble countertop in my bathroom, adjusting her cleavage in the light blue crushed velvet dress she has on. “You know everyone coming tonight is either related to us or off-limits, right?”

“What’s your point?”

Cocking an eyebrow, I wave my hand in her direction. “Isn’t all *this* overkill?”

“I’m not gonna dress homely just to make our family comfortable. You know what Nonna always says.”

“Dress for the job you want, not the job you have.” I roll my eyes at the snippet of stolen—and, frankly, coming from a woman who’s never worked a day in her life, tone-deaf—wisdom, and point at her stiletto heels. “So, when did you decide you wanted to be a hooker?”

“What, you think I won’t pull out all the stops to get Kal Anderson’s attention?”

My stomach drops, my heart lurching into my throat as she smooths her hands over her stomach, checking out her ass in the mirror.

Gripping the edge of the sink until my knuckles turn white, I try to steady my voice. “Kal won’t be here. He never comes to these parties.”

She shrugs, unaware of my sudden change in breathing. “A girl can hope, can’t she?”

She shouldn’t, my heart screams, wanting to lash out and hurt her. Hurt *someone*, rid myself of the fingerprints the bad doctor left on my soul.

Not wanting me is one thing.

Humiliation is another, and when he left me tied up outside our house just yesterday, I’d resigned myself to a fate of not knowing Dr. Anderson beyond the persona he wields in public like a weapon.

A dull ache flares in my temple, but I ignore it as I give my sister a phony smile. “Well, good luck with that endeavor. You couldn’t *pay* me to try to impress that vile man.”

Ari smirks, flitting to the doorway, leaving a trail of floral perfume and

sunshine I can't begin to understand in her wake. "Luckily, you're not the hooker."

The door swings shut as she pushes past it, and I buckle, my elbows landing on the counter with a harsh thud as another wave rolls through me.

But this time, there's no pain accompanying it; instead, the nausea ripples from the cracks in my bleeding heart and the knowledge that mafia women don't ever get what they want.

Pinching my eyes shut, I suck in several deep breaths, trying to steel myself against the emotions warring on my insides.

The air around me seems to shift, dropping significantly enough to cause goose bumps to crop up along my skin, and a dark, inky presence settles in, gluing to my body like a second skin.

I swallow over the dryness in my throat, slowly lifting my head and peeling my eyelids back, meeting the harsh, hungry gaze of the man my mother calls Hades incarnate.

"Good thing my admiration of you comes free of charge, little one."

CHAPTER 8

Kal

ELENA'S WARM BODY TRIES TO ESCAPE MINE, BUT I MOVE IN CLOSER, trapping her against the bathroom sink.

Her heat calls out to me, flames I want to burn my skin, and I can't force myself away, even as logic screams at me to stop and take stock of our situation.

But reason has given way to obsession; this girl bleeds into even the recesses of my brain, blotting out everything I know to be fact.

Years of medicine, murder, the quest to regain a family that never wanted me in the first place and leave the one I chose long ago—Elena Ricci blots all of it out, a black hole absorbing my entire universe until all that's left to see and *feel* is her.

“What are you doing here?” she snaps, caramel eyes glaring at me through her reflection, making my cock twitch against the curve of her ass.

Pushing her dark hair over her shoulder, I glide my palms over the crisscrossed back of her dress, reveling in the way the fabric paints a checkerboard on her creamy skin.

I freeze, fisting the material where her back ends and using it to pull her more fully into me. “What do you *think* I'm doing here?”

“If you think I'm letting you anywhere near me after yesterday—”

Gripping her throat in one hand and her shoulder in the other, I step back just enough to spin her around, shoving her into the counter once again, this

time forcing a harsh breath of air from deep in her lungs.

It rips through her chest, our bodies vibrating where they connect, and something inside of me shifts. A tectonic plate loosening, gearing up for an earth-shattering quake.

“It’s your birthday. I owe you a gift, don’t I?”

Her pulse jumps beneath my hand, and a bead of sweat pops up along my hairline as I rake my gaze over her form, practically fucking drooling at the perfection.

Her tits press obscenely against my chest, threatening to spill out of the tight dress she’s in, and the bite mark I left on her almost preens in the soft lighting, glistening beneath the makeup she tried to hide it with.

Bending down, I run the flat of my tongue over the mangled flesh, ignoring the powdery taste and reveling in the shiver that skates along her spine.

“Do you suddenly not want me, little one? Is that where that sentence was going?” Sucking the spot between my lips, I feast on her until she bows into me, a low whimper escaping her perfect mouth.

She trembles as I release her with a loud pop, shifting to my full height and running my thumb along the slick, dark oval marring her.

Scowling, she tries to push me away, but I grab on to the bowl of the sink and force her to spread her legs so I can wedge myself even closer.

The dress she has on doesn’t allow much room, so I reach down and haul her up onto the counter, then rip the skirt right up the middle.

“*Jesus!*” Elena squeals, moving to hold the fabric together as I fit myself between her legs. “What the hell is wrong with you? You rejected me *yesterday.*”

“I changed my mind.”

“You changed your mind,” she deadpans. “Are you seriously *that* fickle?”

“Not fickle.” My fingers find her bodice, and the thin fabric rips with the slightest tug, revealing a lacy, nude bra and matching panties.

The taut lines of her flat stomach rescind and reappear with each breath she takes, and I push the straps off her shoulders, letting the dress pool underneath her. “Completely and utterly deranged, my little Persephone.”

Instead of wilting like a dead flower under the heat of my gaze, Elena straightens her shoulders, pushing her tits into my chest.

My dick leaks behind my slacks, desperate to strip her now and ask questions later.

But something catches in the light; her left eye shines, the hint of a shadow decorating the lid, highlighting broken blood vessels.

Fury swims in my veins, diving deep and refusing to let go, reigniting my main purpose for showing up here.

“Elena,” I say on an exhale, barely able to see past the red blurring my vision. “Where’s your fiancé tonight?”

She swallows, eyes widening slightly. *She knows I know. Knows I can see what others can’t.*

Licking her lips, she releases her hold on her dress, baring her glorious body to me as she slips off the counter.

“Why are we talking about him? I thought you came here to give me something.” She tilts her head, sliding a hand up my chest, wrapping it around my neck. “I was hoping it’d be a bit more personable this year.”

“Are you saying what I’ve brought you over the years wasn’t good enough?”

“Poetry of others is *fine*, but I want something crafted by you, *Kallum*.”

Unsure of why she’s protecting that son of a bitch, but momentarily placated by the feel of her hands on me, I narrow my eyes. “I don’t write poetry.”

Scoffing, she takes a step back, resuming her place on the sink. She spreads her legs and uses an index finger to pull the scrap of lace between them aside, revealing her pretty, pink pussy.

Liquid fire spills down my spine, coating every single nerve ending and

thought in third-degree burns.

“No one *writes* poetry. You *live* it. *Breathe* it. *Embody* it.” She grins devilishly, licking one finger and bringing it down to circle her clit.

Sitting there, stroking her dripping pussy, Elena looks like the predator here. Like a wild cat who’s finally ensnared her prey and intends to torture it before she brings it the swift release of death.

“They teach you that at the liberal arts school you go to?”

“*You* taught me that. All those poems you left me over the years showed me that art, especially the written kind, exists inside us. Either you *are* poetry, or you aren’t. You can’t fake it. Can’t fake the things you feel in the very thread of your soul.”

The thread of your soul.

Her breaths grow fast and shallow, her strokes longer and languid as her hips move in soft thrusts on the counter. My cock is rock hard and angry as hell, ready to sink into her, but my mind is having trouble keeping up.

I want to punish everyone in her life, and the best way I know how is to take what she’s always been willing to give me. To shatter the last shred of innocence she has, take the sacrificial lamb like she begged me to two years ago.

Fuck her mother, her father, the limp-dicked fucker I’m finding as soon as I leave here. Fuck the rules, my past, and this messed up world we live in. Fuck the fact that she’s young and has the entire world at her fingertips.

Undoing my belt with frantic, shaking fingers, I unzip my slacks and let them fall to my knees, moving closer. Her eyes lock on to mine as I grab her wrist, pulling her hand up and sucking her finger into my mouth.

Dizzying, tangy flavors explode on my tongue, and I have to stop myself from moaning out loud.

Fuck, this is wrong. She’s engaged, I’m a murderer, and my intentions here are nowhere near as pure as I’m making them out to be.

I’m going to ruin her, and the consequences will never even faze me.

But I don't stop.

Can't stop.

None of my other sins ever tasted so sweet.

She pulls my dick out with her free hand, and I release her with a moan when she grips me, pumping slowly. "I thought you wanted a poem."

Shaking her head, she guides me to her pussy, gliding the tip through her juices, and I close my eyes for a moment as I try to maintain my grip on reality.

Everything is shifting so quickly, the object of my obsession fast becoming the vixen of my absolute greatest pleasure, and I'm having a hard time separating arousal from restraint and reason.

"I want you to recite poetry on my pussy. Make me *feel* it with your cock."

I curse under my breath, once again gripping her throat, bending to the other side of her neck and biting until the skin breaks there, too. I lap at the blood that beads in the cut, knowing in the back of my brain that this is unsafe and still unable to stop.

She groans, pushing the head of my dick between her lips, and I suck harder. Furiously. As if draining her of her blood might cure me of the obsession.

When I pull back, she smiles, delirious. "You're gonna have to try a lot harder if you want to hurt me, *Kallum*."

"Do you *want* me to hurt you?"

"I've come a million times to the idea of you marking me, spanking me, making me bruise and bleed." Heat flares in her gaze as I tighten my hold on her neck. "I want you to scar me."

With my free hand, I fist my cock, slapping her clit with it until she writhes on the counter. "This won't be pleasant."

"Stop talking and fucking show me."

Growling at her insolence, I shift, sliding my hand up to grip her chin and

force her head back against the mirror.

Downstairs, a Christmas party full of drunk Italians and made men rages on, and I know her fiancé is around here somewhere.

But none of that registers as she raises her hips, a challenge on the tip of her tongue; not giving her a chance to spew regrets or irritate me further, I snap my hips forward, shoving my cock so deep that the thin barrier of her innocence gives without resistance.

CHAPTER 9

Elena

“*THIS WON’T BE PLEASANT.*”

Well, no one can call Kallum Anderson a liar, that much is certain.

My lungs sit on the brink of complete collapse, straining beneath the grip of his fingers on my throat and the fire raging where his dick is seated inside me.

Hips flush with my ass, Kal leans so I’m bent back over the sink, grinding my skull into the vanity mirror.

“*Christ.*” The one syllable is a hiss, a single gust of air pushed between clenched teeth. “You have to fucking relax, Elena, or you’re going to break my cock with how tight you’re squeezing me.”

I manage to choke out a snort. “I thought pussies were supposed to be tight.”

“They are—fuck, yours *is.*” His dark eyes find mine, stirring something warm in my belly. “But if this isn’t comfortable for you, it’s sure as hell not going to be for me.”

“Don’t pretend like you care about my *comfort.* You were just talking about ruining me.”

“You *begged* me to, you dirty little slut.”

If possible, my inner muscles draw even tighter with the derogatory term he hurls, and his nostrils flare. Pulling his hips back slightly, he shifts, sliding his cock out halfway.

I tense, my ankles instinctively digging into his ass in an attempt to keep him lodged in me. It hurts, but he's right.

This is exactly what I asked for.

His pain, his passion, his punishment.

A choice to be ruined.

My choice.

Still, I whimper. "It hurts."

A cruel laugh works its way past his lips, and with a snap of his pelvis, he's once again buried to the hilt. "I warned you it would."

The tip of him feels like it's in my stomach, and I let out a breathy squeak. My body recoils of its own volition, trying to escape the agony he's wringing out of me even as dopamine rushes through my veins.

Every pain receptor in my body responds to the intrusion of this dangerous man, but my brain drives in the opposite direction, welcoming brutality with open arms.

Kal's hands keep me in place as he begins a slow assault, his grip on my neck slipping as sweat percolates under his palm.

I pinch my eyes closed and tighten my legs around him, trying to reconcile the conflicting sensations erupting in my core.

On the push in, it feels like I'm being split in half.

Literally. I think he could saw me in two with his fat cock, and he sputters when I tell him so, glaring down at me as he pulls back out, leaving just the head in.

"Fat cock," he spits, voice laced with venom. "Where the hell did you learn to speak like that?"

"None of your business."

His expression darkens, and without another word he thrusts up, shunting himself as deep inside of me as he can go. Long fingers flexing, he drags me away from the mirror by my neck, bending me like a soft pretzel.

My breathing scatters, my tendons straining beneath his hold.

But I'm so warm, my blood humming like birds greeting the morning sun, that I barely notice my body breaking for him.

Don't notice how dangerous he is, or how this connection is already proving volatile.

All I know is it feels *incredible*. Pleasure mixing with pain, sparking into this colossal fire that neither of us have intentions of putting out any time soon.

"If I learn you've let another man touch you," Kal says, but it's so hard to focus as he starts fucking me again, each cant of his hips more forceful than the last. "I'll *kill* him. Cut out his heart and let you watch him choke on it."

A flutter shimmies through my veins, contracting my muscles. Maybe it's because I grew up with the violence, or maybe I'm just fucked in the head, but the image he paints doesn't deter me the way I'm sure he wants it to.

I want to tell him about Mateo. To confide about the abuse I've put up with for years, because that's what was expected.

But I don't, not wanting to sully the moment.

Instead, I meet those nearly-black eyes and squeeze around him until his grip on my throat turns menacing. It scatters my breath, creating a burn that glides down my esophagus, exploding somewhere in my chest.

"Awfully possessive for a man who didn't want anything to do with me twenty-four hours ago," I manage, and then he's shifting, hitting that sweet spot that I wasn't aware of until this moment.

His cock drags against it, and he tightens his fingers until my vision slackens, spots forming around the edges.

Sudden pressure on my clit has me bucking up, eyes widening; I glance down and find his thumb circling me, drawing figure eights over my sensitive flesh.

A moan grates through me and an inferno rages in my belly, heating me where his touch leaves me cold.

"Two years ago, you begged me to take your virginity," he says, keeping

his voice low. Dangerously low—it rumbles inside my chest, like he’s somehow managed to seep into my pores and now has a residence in my veins. “I refused. Tried to do the *good thing* and stay away from you.”

My mouth falls open as he shoves my head back, and my skull smacks against the mirror. Pain splices across the bone, echoing down my spine, and my pussy flutters as my body wars with itself.

He saws in and out, it feels like I’m being broken in half, my thigh muscles screaming where I’m spread open around him.

His gaze remains trained between our bodies, watching as he disappears inside me.

Maybe it’s the endorphins pumping through me, but his hands are somehow everywhere at once, sweeping and squeezing and plucking.

He rolls my nipple beneath one thumb, and then drags that same print over the mark on my shoulder; I hiss at the contact, but I don’t resist when he pinches the skin and finally lifts his head.

I feel a droplet of blood bead in the bite wound.

“But?” I prompt when he doesn’t continue. Because there’s *always* one.

A muscle thumps beneath his eye. “*But...* I can’t get you out of my goddamn mind, Elena. And I’m not a good guy, so for tonight, you’re all fucking mine. You’ll do whatever I say, when I say it, and how I say it.”

My heart ricochets around inside my chest as his pelvis drills into me, relentless in its assault. I’ve seen enough porn at this point to know what comes next; his facial features tighten and twist, and I swear I feel him swell as he drags his length against my inner walls.

He brushes over the cut in my flesh and brings it up, liquid crimson staining his skin.

Without faltering in his movements, his hand slides up my chest to squeeze gently at the sides of my neck, keeping me in place even as it feels like my body drifts out to sea. Then, he touches his thumb to his lips, darting his tongue out to swipe slowly over the digit.

Shock spirals through my stomach, rippling through my ribs, and pressure mounts in my core. Heat shoots through me, something wild unfurling in my bones as he bends, lining our mouths up but refusing to kiss me.

I don't know why, but the denial makes me feel crazier. Warmer. I'm unmoored, floating in a cloud of pleasure as I chase the tail-end of my release.

"And maybe when I've stuffed you full of my cum like the little dumpster you are," he breathes, and I smell the whiskey on his teeth, cool mint, and *blood*, "you'll understand what I meant when I said I'd *ruin* you. It's never going to be like this for you again, my little Persephone, because no one else fucking owns you the way I do."

I shake my head, too focused on the white noise rushing between my ears to grasp the gravity of his words. Or to recognize that they're what I've always wanted to hear from him.

My body responds, though; his head dips to my neck, lips sealing around the wound. I feel him draw more blood from me, drinking like a fucking demon who hasn't tasted humanity in centuries.

"So fucking wet," he growls, and I don't know if he means my pussy or the flesh he's sucking, but it makes my chest light regardless. "Can't believe I stayed away as long as I did, knowing this sweet little pussy was waiting for me. God, she's fucking hungry, isn't she? Needs to be filled, hm?"

I don't respond, my mouth slackening as he pounds me into the sink, and he grunts in disapproval.

"*Tell me*, Elena. Tell me how badly you want to drip with my cum." A nip at my skin has my back bowing, and my pussy flutters around him. "Beg for it, my little slut."

"Oh, *god*, please. Please, Kallum."

It should be beneath me to beg this man, but I'm so far fucking gone that I can't bring myself to care.

Besides, the animalistic sound that tears from within his chest makes me

feel as though the begging isn't even for me. It's almost as if he needs permission, still.

Needs to know I'm right there with him.

He bites again, and the flare of pain is my undoing. I clamp down around him as he pushes all the way in and freezes, his sweaty pelvis pressing against my ass, my thighs glued to his hips.

A choked moan falls from my lips as I come, and I squeeze my eyes shut, tremors racking the length of my body.

Stars burst and fires extinguish behind my eyelids, my muscles tangling with euphoria until all I can see and smell and feel and *think* is Kallum.

How he looms like a depraved god over me, wringing the darkest desires from my bones and playing them like a xylophone.

When he pulls back, red paints his mouth. There's something so erotically fulfilling, completely hedonistic, about my blood coating his flesh that it pushes another orgasm through me just as his floods him.

His groan, throaty and soft, makes my heart seize; it echoes on as he pulses inside me, hot cum coating my womb. Marking me in the most primal, most dangerous way.

"*Christ.*" Kal coughs, as if his release has physically drained him.

An obscene squelching sound splatters in the air as he slowly withdraws from me; my pussy clenches around nothing, and I feel the loss in my fucking soul.

They say you feel fundamentally different after losing your virginity—or at least, that's what my family's always preached. And I do, but it's not because my innocence was suddenly eviscerated; it's because I didn't realize how right it would feel, having Kallum Anderson inside me, until he no longer is.

Maybe I should feel bad about that, knowing what I do—that this is a one time thing, and soon I'll be walking down the aisle with another man at my side.

But I don't.

Not even a little bit.

And that realization is as terrifying as it is freeing.

Kal's sharp brows knit together as he fists his dick, and I glance down for the first time, getting a good look at it; veins bulge against the thick shaft, tracking up to the bulbous head, and a shudder works its way over me.

He strokes, rubbing life into his partially-flaccid length, and raises his chin to meet my gaze.

"You've made quite the fucking mess," he says, and a chill races down my spine as I note the blood-and-cum mixture splashed across his skin. "Now, get on your knees and clean me up."

CHAPTER 10

Kal

ELENA RICCI ON HER KNEES IS A SIGHT TO BEHOLD.

A work of art deserving of being auctioned off to the gods, the only entities worthy of her fierce beauty.

As she situates herself on the tile floor, she reaches for the straps of her dress, pushing them off her shoulders. Since I tore it down the middle, the fabric parts with little effort, slipping away and pooling around her.

The breath evaporates from my lungs as her tight, perfect body comes into full view; watching her on security cameras these last few months is nothing compared to the masterpiece that is the real thing. She's smooth and soft, everything a woman should be.

A balm for my sharp, harsh edges.

Practically a goddess in her own right.

Gritting my teeth against the thought, I suck in a heap of air and try not to focus too much on how goddamn right all of this feels.

How I came to ruin her, but the destruction here tonight has only been my own.

Her breasts rise and fall with each second of immobility that passes between us, and when she shifts, I get a glimpse of the pomegranate tattooed beneath one. Its red ink is a stain I might mind under normal circumstances, but I know the reason she got it.

That she marked herself for *me*.

If she's wondering why I don't join her in her nakedness, she at least knows better than to question it. Lithe hands slide up over my slacks, pausing where they're caught above my knees, and then she scoots closer, eyeing my cock with an awestruck expression.

One part reverence, one part curiosity, and the rest an all-consuming hunger.

"Are you sure this is safe?" she asks quietly, no doubt apprehensive about the virginity smeared along my length.

One of my brows arches. "Are you questioning my medical expertise?"

"More like your sanity."

She has a point there. I'm questioning it myself.

"If you truly think I'd put you in that sort of danger, I'm not sure we should continue."

Her golden eyes flicker to mine. Panic swirls in them, and I don't like the way it makes my chest tighten. How her fear robs me of air.

"If you want to stop, we'll stop," I mutter, half-hoping she does. The other half of me screams in protest, desperate to be inside of her again.

"I don't want to do that," she whispers, reaching up to wrap her hand around the base, giving a short pump as she tries to get her fingers to touch. They don't, and she swallows, sinking her teeth into her bottom lip.

Smirking, I nod my chin. "Clean me up then, *slut*."

Stroking slowly, she watches me carefully, seeming to gauge my reaction so she can adjust accordingly. Her inexperience sends a spiral of dirty pleasure through me; the twenty-year-old mafia princess may have talked a good game before, but the innocent aura ebbing around her now tells the truth.

I don't know if she's refrained from others because she always wanted me to be her first, but I'm sure as fuck not going to question the gift.

Discomfort wedges behind my ribs at the thought, warring inexplicably with the warmth she provides. As if on a reflex, my teeth grind together and

impatience courses through my veins.

My hand moves, tangling in the roots of her dark hair. “Your mouth,” I rasp, unable to keep the desire from my voice even as it hardens. “I said *clean* me, not spread it around. Put my filthy cock in your mouth and suck it into your pretty little throat until you can’t breathe.”

“I’m not—”

Without waiting for her to finish that sentence, I shove her hand away and fit my crown against her. I don’t force my way in, letting her know silently that there is still a choice here.

We stare at each other.

My heart skips a beat.

Her eyelids flutter.

Then slowly, so fucking slowly, she parts her lips. Flicks her tongue against my slit. A deep blush darkens her cheeks as she tastes me for the first time, and then she pitches forward, impaling her skull on my dick.

She maintains eye contact as she drags herself off, just enough to drizzle saliva over my tip. Then she moves back in, bobbing slowly.

A hiss escapes me as she massages the flat of her tongue against the vein on the underside of my shaft. Exploring, tasting. Attempting to please me.

My grip on her hair intensifies as my hips jerk into the movement, pushing as deep into her mouth as I can go.

Retching around me, Elena tries to wiggle free, scraping her nails over my thighs as I start to cut off her oxygen supply.

“*Fuck*. Such a perfect little slut, choking me down like this. I should flood your stomach with my cum, make sure you’re not able to eat for days because of how full I’ll leave you.”

She hums, and I groan, pinching my eyes closed as her throat struggles around me. Flashes of euphoria color my vision, and I snap back to attention just as my release threatens in the base of my spine.

When I look down at her again, I see her hand drifting between her

thighs, toying absently as she chases her own orgasm. I swell slightly, the sight of her getting off on my depravity so fucking alluring that I almost can't find it in me to resist.

But I have to. At least for right now.

Our night is far from over.

A mixture of sticky fluid connects her mouth to my dick as she sits back, gasping for breath. Sweat glistens across her forehead, and I swipe the string from her, severing us as I yank her to her feet.

“Have you ever done that before?”

She shakes her head, and I can't stop the grin that stretches my face.

“A night of many firsts, then.”

Before she says anything else, I haul her into my arms and move to the shower; I don't step in, unable to move much more before I absolutely have to be inside her again, and the next time I take her against the glass stall door, my movements are slow and calculated.

I take my time learning the cadence her body craves, relishing when she clenches around me and moans my name as she buries her face in my neck.

When she comes again, I damn near pass out from the sensation, and I can tell she thinks we're done now as she sags against me.

When I pull out and set her on her feet, she frowns, pressing her palms into the glass as she gathers her bearings. “You didn't...”

“Don't fucking worry, little one. I'm *going* to. When you get to that bedroom, I'm gonna push you down on that plush mattress and fuck you so hard you forget your own name. Then, I'm gonna come while I'm deep inside you, paint you like my own little porcelain doll.” I grip her chin, leaning down to lick her bottom lip, reveling in the taste of us on her. “I like waiting. Making you work for it. When I come for you—in you—it'll be because you earned it.”

She shudders, and skitters from the bathroom without another thought.

I suck in a deep breath, willing my cock to get ahold of itself, before I

follow her. The Boston skyline peeks through the curtains on her balcony door, and the glow of a bedside lamp and the white Douglas Fir Christmas tree in the corner are the only light we're provided right now.

There's something poetic about it, as she stretches out on the mattress. Parts her thighs for me, a gift all its own, as if aware that all I wanted this year was her.

The Ricci family Christmas party rages on downstairs, and I can't help wondering why no one has come after their precious heir.

Why no one has thought to check on their princess, to save her from the evil she's so hot for.

A little thrill races through me as I think about Mateo waltzing in when I'm buried balls-deep in her. How red his face would get hearing her call my name, coming on my tongue, moaning for me the way she never will for him.

God, I'm sick.

Fucked in the head.

Even that isn't enough to keep me away.

"Flip over and look at the wall. Don't move," I tell her as I walk to the tree, considering for a split second that maybe this isn't the best idea.

That I could tuck tail and run before I've done any real damage. Sure, she's less pure now than she was an hour ago, but purity is merely a social construct, anyway.

Taking Elena Ricci's virginity isn't quite enough to blacken her soul. To shred hers to pieces the way mine was years ago.

It doesn't eliminate the inherent goodness inside her.

Doesn't really make her mine.

Yet my feet are rooted in place as I stare at the LED lights twinkling in the plastic branches. My stomach cramps at the idea of leaving her half-satisfied, and me without having taken full advantage of the guise of privacy here in her bedroom.

Once I leave here, the illusion stops. The notion that she belongs to me,

that she's the Persephone to the portrait of Hades that everyone depicts me as... all of that's over.

And I'm not ready, or willing, to give it up.

Not yet.

So instead, my hand whips out, yanking one strand of lights from the tree; it topples over as they unravel, crashing to the floor. I don't bother fixing it as I pull the plug from the wall and turn back toward the bed.

My dick leaks as I take in the sight of her rounded backside, the puffy, abused flesh winking from between her legs. My palm itches to turn more of her creamy skin crimson, for the color to expand beyond where it's smeared across her pussy and inner thighs, but I want her to beg for it first.

"Kallum," she whimpers, and I can see her arousal dripping from her.

"You may be the birthday girl," I start, inching toward her with the lights wrapped around my fist. "But I refuse to rush the celebration, little one. You asked me to do this, remember?"

Ever the obedient little slut, she keeps her gaze trained on the white upholstered headboard. Her body stays in place, even as her fingers clutch at the goose feather comforter, as if bracing herself for me.

She huffs, shivering slightly when I drag the tip of a bulb across the arch of her foot.

I ignore her, reaching for her ankle. Looping one end of the lights around my index finger, I pull the strand over so it constricts around the digit, knotting gently.

If I tug on the length anymore, it'll tighten, refusing to release me, so I'm careful as I remove it and lift her foot, slipping the loop around her.

Fastening another knot on the adjacent wooden bedpost, I move to the other side of the footboard, dragging the lights along with me.

With just the one string to work with, securing her to the bed is a bit awkward at first; she shifts as I work another loop around her other ankle, spreading her legs to accommodate the strain of the binding.

“What are you doing?” Her voice is a whisper, and she starts turning her head, trying to get a look at what I’ve done to her.

“Being festive.” For the first time I can remember, the sight of Christmas lights doesn’t fully irritate me. Even though they’re not lit up, I can’t deny how good it looks having her bound and at my mercy.

I can smell her—smell us—as I kneel on the edge of the bed, brushing her hair off one shoulder.

“What do you think Mateo would say if he could see you now?”

She glances at me from the corner of her eye, shaking her head. “He wouldn’t care.”

“No?”

Nibbling on her bottom lip, she shifts, adjusting her grip on the bed. “He’d just expect a turn after, I’m sure.”

Fury rages inside my chest, hot and blistering as it tries to seize control of my brain. The primal, animalistic part of me wants to march downstairs and find the limp-dicked fucker in the crowd, drag him by his balls upstairs, and force his eyes open with hooks so he’d have to watch me make a mess of his fiancée.

That part of me thirsts for his blood—and not in the way I crave Elena’s.

My gaze falls to the slightly purpled skin on her cheek, hidden beneath concealer.

The bruising on her shoulder, older than the mark I left moments ago.

The yellowed patch below her ribs that I’m just noticing—too large to be the result of a hand, or even a fist.

Blood boiling, I push to a standing position and glance at the door. All logical thought flees as I think of him putting his hands on her—*hurting* her, and not in the name of making her feel good.

Mateo de Luca wouldn’t know what makes Elena Ricci feel good if it reached out and stabbed him in the fucking heart.

She may be his in name, on paper, but he hasn’t spent the last two years

infatuated by her every waking move. Hasn't spent that time exchanging poetry with her, erasing the bad memories associated with the act with her light and innocence.

He doesn't know her. Doesn't know she belongs to me, if only by extension of a centuries-old myth.

That her soul calls to mine, and her pleasure is mine to create.

"Don't," she mutters, as if sensing the direction my mind has veered. "He's not worth it."

"He may not be." I pause, my heart kicking against my chest. "But you are, little one."

Still, as I start toward the door downstairs, a furious pounding comes from the other side.

We freeze, eyes darting to one another and locking in place.

Like maybe if they don't hear us inside, they'll go away.

"Open the fuck up, *carina*." Mateo's voice bleeds through the wood, punctuated by what I imagine to be the side of his fist. Even with the barrier between us and the calculated wording, I can tell he's wasted. "Ariana said you were hiding out in your room. You're always hiding out, like you don't want to be seen with me. What's the fucking problem? Come celebrate your birthday with your man."

Gritting my teeth, I turn back toward Elena.

She drops to her elbows, defeat pouring through her limbs. "Untie me."

My eyebrows shoot up. "No."

Her head whips around, eyes narrowing. "I wasn't asking."

"And I wasn't done with you." Maneuvering beneath the lights between the two bedposts, I situate myself between her spread thighs, reaching up to grip her ass in my palms. "You wanted poetry, yes? Can you think of anything more profound than my tongue on this sweet little pussy, while the man you've been promised to listens outside?"

"But I'm... I need to clean myself before you do that."

“You will do no such thing.”

“*Kallum.*” The way she exhales my name feels like a prayer. An admission. And I realize how badly I want to hear it over and over, as if her voice has the power to save my wretched soul.

Even as I bend, touching my lips to the crescent shape of her stained flesh, I know that isn’t possible.

I’m not damned to suffer in Hell.

I’m the ruler of it. The king of its fiery, sinful domain.

Elena Ricci, my little Persephone, is simply collateral.

Nonetheless, for tonight, I’m willing to pretend otherwise.

A tiny moan vibrates up her spine as I dive in, giving several long, languid strokes along her seam. The bitter tang of copper explodes in my mouth, soaking into my taste buds as I erase her innocence for good.

From this angle, she’s completely bared to me, and there’s an edge of wickedness at the vulnerability in her position.

Dipping down, I use one hand to anchor her hips against me, bringing the pads of my fingers up to her clit just as my tongue makes contact. She bucks, grinding into the movement as I suckle at the bundle of nerves, my dick kicking behind my slacks at the feel of her pulse.

Her thighs flex, trying to close as an orgasm tears through her, but I shove my shoulders between them to keep her open.

Another knock on the door temporarily draws me from my ministrations, although it seems to have the opposite effect on Elena; she mewls, arching her back as Mateo calls out her name.

“That’s right, little one,” I coax, pushing two fingers inside as I lap at her slit, massaging her inner walls with renewed fervor. “Let him hear you come for me.”

As if waiting for my command, she convulses, crying out wordlessly. My tongue spears into her, slurping her juices as she trembles violently. Her clit throbs so hard against me that I’m damn near close to blowing in my pants,

and I pinch it to prolong her release.

Dropping to her elbows and pressing her forehead into the mattress, she juts her ass higher into the air, wiggling as if trying to escape me.

After gulping several deep breaths, her iron-clad grip on the comforter loosens. “Holy shit.”

Mateo’s knocking begins again, this time harder and more persistent. “What the hell are you doing in there, Elena?” he calls, and I’m reminded once again that she’s technically supposed to be his.

That after tonight, I’ll leave town and she’ll marry him. Fulfill her duty to her father and family, and be the good little wife she’s been brought up to be.

And it’s fine. I knew going in what this was, that it could only ever be one night.

But still, the idea of him having her in any capacity makes me ill, and I’m reaching into my pocket for the switchblade I carry there. Desperate to claim her, before he can permanently.

I push up on my knees and heave a breath. “Do you trust me?”

Her head turns, hair falling back over her shoulder. Silence passes between us, leaden in the air, and she purses her lips. “Unfortunately.”

Swallowing, I flip open the blade and drag the dull side over the curve of her ass, wishing I could bottle the way her breath hitches and wear it on my skin forever.

“*Elena!* Open the goddamn door!”

She doesn’t make a sound when my hand dips, pressing the tip of the knife into her soft, inflamed skin of her inner thigh.

There’s no coming back from this, my mind screams, begging me not to claim her this way. So fucking decidedly, when I know I shouldn’t have her at all.

Can’t have her.

Elena Ricci isn’t mine.

But her lack of protest spurs me on, and I press inward, salivating when

her flesh gives and breaks open for me.

“Oh, fuck,” she hisses, curling her toes and straining against her bindings. “What are you *doing*?”

“*Owning* you.” A few quick flicks of my wrist and the blade slices nicely, neatly, through her. Blood trickles from the wound, something just deep enough to scar, and a disturbing sense of exhilaration washes through me.

I reach down, untying her ankles as Mateo seems to thrash against the door now, and flip her onto her back.

She’s completely flushed, staring up at me with rounded eyes, and I wait a beat for her to pull away. To stop giving me everything I want, the worst things I crave, as if she gets off on pleasing me.

That notion is fucking dangerous.

When she spreads her legs wider, glancing down at the *K* I’ve etched into her, she smiles.

It’s delirious, something she’ll regret tomorrow I’m sure, but I’ll take it.

Bending down, I swipe two fingers over the wound, coating my fingerprints before laving my tongue over the sight. The fingers come down on her clit, smearing the blood there with a few circular motions, and my mouth follows the path, trailing up to her throat.

When I settle over her, she hooks her calves over my hips, and I work my dick free from my pants. Bloody kisses pepper her skin—around her navel, around both nipples, dotting her collarbone. She’s a fucking work of art, and I’m a greedy collector who doesn’t ever want this night to end.

“I didn’t know you were a vampire,” she whispers, the pounding on the door having ceased for now. Reaching between us, she takes my cock in her hand, shifting her hips so she can drag the crown through her cut.

Fisting the bedspread on either side of her head, I try to stave off the release teasing the base of my spine. “I’m so much worse, little one. You should think about that the next time you make a deal with the man they call Death.”

Positioning me at her entrance, she gives me a tiny shake of her head. “You’re not as bad as you want everyone to think.”

You don’t even know the half of it.

“Maybe you’re not as good as they say,” I challenge, pushing her hand away and shoving myself inside her tight, wet heat. Bottoming out, I take a deep breath, willing control into my veins even as she spasms around me. “Maybe we were made for each other.”

Her eyes glisten as I rock my hips, beginning a slow fuck that has both of us grunting and groaning, as if we have all the time in the world.

“But you can’t keep me,” she says, hands coming up to clutch at my biceps through my jacket.

“Doesn’t matter,” I tell her, my thrusts growing brutal, my pelvis crashing into hers as I chase our collective release. “You’re mine, my little Persephone. If not in this life, then at least right here and right now.”

“I’m not—”

“Don’t you dare deny me, you little slut.”

My hand snakes up, groping her breast as it ascends, wrapping around her throat. I squeeze lightly, nostrils flaring as her gaze sparkles, and the sounds of our skin slapping together reaches an obscene volume.

Sweat drips from my forehead onto her chest, slipping down to mix with the blood there, and I feel myself unraveling.

White-hot ecstasy pools in my gut, and I redouble my efforts, pressing my cock against that spot that steals the words from her lips.

“Come with me,” I command, fucking her so hard that the mattress squeals in protest. My fingers tighten around her, but somehow it feels as though I’m the one being strangled. “Soak my cock so I can dump my fucking cum in your sweet little pussy.”

And *Jesus Christ*, she does. She clamps down around me so tight that it feels like she’s trying to sever my dick from my body, and I see stars as my orgasm barrels through me, shooting up my spine as she digs her nails into

my arms.

We're a panting, disgusting mess of sweaty limbs when we've come down, and I collapse on top of her for a moment.

My brain seems to short-circuit, and it isn't until I feel myself leak out of her that I roll away, withdrawing from her.

We don't speak, we just stare at the ceiling in silence as the Christmas music from downstairs drifts beneath her locked door. After a few moments, I rake a hand through my hair and get to my feet, walking to the bathroom to clean myself up.

When I return, she's fast asleep, her hair fanning out in a halo shape, her abused body on display for me to catalog and memorize.

I perch on the edge of the bed, dragging a warm washcloth between her thighs and then up over her stomach, erasing the evidence of our night together.

Applying a bit of salve to the letter on her thigh, I smooth a small bandage over the cut and reach for the notebook on her nightstand.

I don't know what the fuck I'm doing when I jot down the poem. Don't know why I feel like I owe her more than I promised, and yet even when the ink hits the page, it still doesn't feel like enough.

Something niggles in the back of my mind as I slip from the room and out a back entrance of the Ricci home, escaping detection as people gather in the courtyard for a toast.

And as I stand out on the curb, blinking up at the balcony where Elena rests inside, a sick feeling takes root in my gut, and then I know.

This won't be the last I see of my little Persephone.

I'll be back for her.

CHAPTER 11

Elena

HE CALLS MY NAME FROM THE OPPOSITE END OF THE FIELD, HIS WARM VOICE carrying through the February air, caressing my skin like the lightest of kisses.

Since that fateful night all those weeks ago, something's changed in him.

Softened him toward me, made him a different person when it comes to my safety and wellbeing. He speaks to me as if I'm fragile and at risk of shattering at any given moment, always tiptoeing around and holding his tongue.

It's given rage a home in my bones, makes me want to lash out and hurt him for changing. For amplifying my guilt and shame.

No one knows what happened on Christmas. They don't know that I was given the greatest gift on my twentieth birthday—a choice. Or, at least, the illusion of one.

For once in my life, my father's rigid rules and the burden of being a mafia *principessa* had no hold on my being.

I was free, for that one night. And when Kal Anderson buried himself inside my pussy and soul, I knew there was nothing more I ever could have asked for.

Nothing as perfect as how it felt for our bodies to mold to one another, how it felt for him to just *take* the only thing that's ever really belonged to me.

It was everything I imagined it would be. More, even, because there's no way to adequately gauge the raw beast that Kal becomes when he lets himself indulge.

When sin takes precedence, and the innate wrongness of a situation ceases to matter to him.

I've been unable to think about anything else since.

It wasn't just poetry that night; it was goddamn magic.

But he was gone when the sun came up, leaving me a hollow husk of a brand-new woman, a black rose, and a scrap of paper that read:

*Touch has a memory.
O say, love, say,
What can I do to kill it and be free?
—John Keats*

And I hated him for leaving me, again, with nothing but the words of another.

I hate him, still, as I sit in this field of dead grass and flowers readying for the spring bloom, wondering how it is they find it in themselves to grow in spite of opposition. How they can continue on, even after they've died for the season.

What makes them want to press forward?

What's so great about the earth that they return?

Smoothing my fingers over the piece of paper, I tuck it safely in the pocket of my jeans as his footsteps approach, his now-familiar scent of cocoa and cedar catching on the breeze.

The newly formed scar above his right eyebrow shimmers in the moonlight; I don't know where he got it, but the gash appeared at Christmas and is only just now healing. Whatever the case, he's unwilling to discuss it with me.

Which is just fine, all things considered. I don't want to talk about the scars on my neck, or the one on the inside of my thigh that looks like a *K* if you angle your head *just* right.

"Everything okay?" Mateo asks, stuffing his hands in his pants pockets.

I nod. "Yeah, I've just been writing."

I'm always writing. Since Kal left, the words just bleed from me.

Mateo rocks on his feet, bobbing his head. "Right. Find any inspiration tonight?"

Sighing, I close my notebook and shrug. "No, I'm still stuck. Something just isn't clicking."

"Well," he says. "Don't stay out here too long. Your dinner will get cold."

As he walks away, I let out a soft sigh of relief. Who'd have thought the unpredictable heir to Bollente Media could be such a concerned fiancé.

Getting to my feet, I dust off the front of my dress, ignoring the pang that tears through my stomach at the movement. It always flares when I sit there for too long.

Taking a deep breath, I close my eyes and pull the black rose from my pocket, sending my greatest wish to the universe on a silent prayer.

I don't hear anyone else approach. Don't feel the hand cloth wrap around my mouth and nose until it's too late, and everything fades to black.

And then, like every other time before, I wake up from the nightmare.

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Untitled (2023)

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Currently, Sav lives in central Kentucky with three pups: Lord Byron, Poe, and Arrow. She loves sitcoms, silence, and sardonic humor.



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