



TATTERED VOWS

TATTERED OBSESSION SERIES
BOOK THREE

LOUISE ROSE

TATTERED VOWS



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Description



I'm one of the Emmerico family by marriage, but I'm choosing my own path now...

Theo, Liam and Tristan. They are my family, and I have to escape my husband to get back to them.

After Lucas nearly killed Tristan in the crash, he takes me back to London and uses my family to take more power.

But this time, I'm not letting him get away with it.

Marrying Lucas Emmerico was the worst mistake of my life. Falling in love with his brother and his best friends saved me.

This is an arranged marriage, mafia, steamy romance with possessive males who won't give up their girl. Recommended for mature readers only. This is a trilogy and Book Three.

Chapter One



Pain is the first thing I feel, and it consumes everything else. My whole body burns with it, my head pounds with it, and even though darkness surrounds me, despite my best efforts to open my eyes, the pain overshadows even that.

After the pain, relief is the next thing I feel. Yes, relief—and if you're wondering why, the reason is simple: the pain means I'm still alive.

Slowly, even as the sensation intensifies from a dull roar to a blinding, searing light, I begin to become aware of wetness on the skin of my temple—blood—and soon other things encroach on the darkness, too. My head is a throbbing, bleeding mess, my chest and shoulder are on fire in the place where I was shot, not so long ago, and my body feels like it weighs about a million pounds.

But I'm still alive.

That thought runs through my head, drowning out the pain, and it's the last thing I remember before the relief vanishes and the darkness closes in on me once more.

I dip in and out of consciousness more times than I can count, sometimes in darkness, sometimes in light, and it's hard to tell which is worse. With my eyelids feeling heavier than anvils, I can almost pretend this is just a bad dream, a nightmare like so many of the nightmares I've had over the past months. It could almost pass for one, too, like a movie sequel that's just a ripoff of the original: Lucas, my psychotic husband, trying to kill me and

almost succeeding. Theo, his brother, my first love, willing to fight for me—and for the criminal empire that's rightfully his. My parents, so loved but so incredibly naive, thinking Lucas is the key to uniting our families and cementing our hold on London's underworld, so blind to the truth that they don't even see it when it's right in front of them.

And me, the wife of a criminal kingpin, left with only one choice: do whatever it takes to survive.

The big difference? Now I have more to fight for than just Theo. Now I have two other reasons to keep going, and their names are Liam and Tristan. That's why, despite the raging aches and pains, despite the stomach-churning movement that jostles me and brings fresh tears to my eyes each time, I refuse to let the darkness pull me back into its clutches. I have to stay awake. I have to live, so that the ones I love can live, too.

By the time I crack my heavy eyelids, I've identified the source of the motion around me: I'm in a car—and it's not the car I fled Theo's safe house in with Tristan when the compound was attacked. I'm not sure how long I've been out, but sunlight is already starting to peek through the window next to my head, and the stretch of open highway speeding along outside is completely unfamiliar. So I've been out for a few hours. Maybe more.

I don't need to look to the right to know who's in the driver's seat, but I do anyway, my dry mouth going drier and my heartbeat speeding up when my suspicions are confirmed. It's amazing how, even after all these months, all the atrocities he's committed, Lucas Emmerico still manages to make a cold sweat break out across my skin. He's lost the pretentious suit and tie I'm used to seeing him wear in his attempts to prove himself a worthy successor to his father. Instead, he's dressed in a plain white T-shirt and a pair of dark jeans. His dark hair is mussed up, and his black eyes are pinned to the road. The hands that shot me months ago are clenched around the steering wheel, his entire body tense and rigid.

Surreptitiously, I glance out the front window, desperate to get my bearings, but the world outside is unfamiliar, and all I know for sure is it's not where Tristan and I were headed when we made our escape. Even the act of turning my head is enough to make my entire body throb with pain, so I stop and close my eyes, sweat beading at my temples and upper lip, my whole body aching like I've been hit by a car. Which is, coincidentally, exactly what happened.

A groan escapes my throat, and next to me, Lucas hums out a smug little

laugh. "Look who's waking up," he says conversationally, his tone so light that it almost sounds practiced. "How are you feeling?"

"Where am I?" I croak out, afraid of the answer.

"With me," he answers simply.

I swallow and lick my lips, my eyes returning to the road. A fresh trickle of blood makes its way down the side of my head, but I can barely muster the strength to wipe it away.

I can feel Lucas's gaze on me, and it makes my skin crawl. "You're a persistent little thing, aren't you?" he asks.

I don't make a sound, refusing to give him the satisfaction of a response.

Lucas snorts. "Now isn't the time to clam up, sweetheart," he says, and I can tell he's smiling. "We need to have a little talk, you and I."

"I'd rather not," I tell him, and he laughs.

"Then it's a good thing I'm not asking for your permission," he replies, and his tone makes it clear that any protest on my part is pointless. "How about this: you can keep quiet, all right? You can keep your mouth shut and not say a word. In fact, I think it's better that way. You'll just sit there and look pretty and let me do the talking. How does that sound, *darling*?" The word is laced with venom, grating on my ears, and I hate him in that moment more than I ever thought I could.

"You've been a fucking pain in my ass ever since I met you, Vivian," Lucas goes on, his voice flat and calm, almost bored. It sends a shiver down my spine and a fresh wave of pain through my body. "You have no idea how much trouble you've caused me."

I don't respond, my eyes trained on the unfamiliar stretch of pavement ahead of us.

"I should have just been done with it after the wedding," he continues, a hint of disgust creeping into his tone. He glances at me and rolls his eyes. "Don't be so fucking dramatic," he says, as if in response to a question I haven't asked. "I wouldn't have iced you. I mean, I *thought* about it, but I decided to be nice, you know? I decided to give you a chance, see where this whole ball-and-chain thing took me. And look how that turned out." He gestures across the dashboard, towards the front of the car. Even slumped in my seat like this, I can see how messed up it is, complete with shattered glass and steam hissing out from busted pipes. "I mean, just look at this shit. The things I do to keep you safe."

I wipe my mouth with my sleeve, realize I'm bleeding, and wince, but I

don't flinch as I force myself to turn to him through my pain. "This isn't about your damned car," I spit. "You've got enough money for a million of these things. This is about your obsession with becoming your dad's precious little golden boy."

"That's *not* what it's about," Lucas snaps, slamming his hand against the dashboard hard enough to make me jump. He rounds on me, the wheel jerking dangerously in his hands, and my stomach lurches as the car swerves over the double yellow and back again. Lucas glares at me, a look burning on his face that's almost deranged, and points at me for emphasis. "It's about the *principle*, Vivian." He snorts. "You just don't understand anything, do you? You have no idea what it's like to have power."

"Power?" I echo incredulously. "You think this is about *power*? Not your own fragile little ego?"

"Of course it's about power," he snaps. "Do you think I'm crazy?"

"Yes," I reply without hesitation. "You're fucking insane, Lucas, and I should've seen it the day I married you."

He chuckles to himself, shaking his head like he's trying to explain something to a small child. "I tried to get you to behave. I put a roof over your head, I gave you protection from the other gangs, I sent my own fucking brother to look out for you. I gave you a chance to do things my way, and you couldn't do it. You're too stupid to see what's good for you, Vivian. You're too stupid to see that my way is the only way things ever work. And so is Theo. And the son of a bitch went and messed around with my *wife*." His eyes dart over to me again, burning in the darkness. "So yes, Vivian, it's about the *principle*—something I'm sure you don't understand."

"No, Lucas, you're right," I tell him, swallowing hard as the car jerks again. The discomfort of my injuries is fading in the face of my rising panic, and I begin to feel sick. "I don't know what the principle is. I don't get what your damn obsession with your dad has to do with you trying to kill your own brother, or with you leaving me to fend for myself. I just know that I, and everyone else around me, is expendable according to you. So wherever it is you're taking me, let's not pretend any of this is about keeping me 'safe.'"

"You've got a smart mouth, Vivian," Lucas says, "but we can do this your way. I think we're past bullshitting each other, don't you?" He smiles at me, a broad, sinister grin that shows all his teeth. "We *are* married, after all." He reaches across the console to pat my thigh, and I flinch away instinctively. The pain that shoots through my neck and head is enough to make me want to

be sick, but not as much as the thought of Lucas Emmerico touching me. Swallowing, adrenaline making my heart race, I pry my eyes away from my maniac husband and look around at the road ahead. The highway is empty save for a few other vehicles, mostly older trucks and cars, but a passing sign tells me we're on the M3. He's taking me back to London.

Closing my eyes, my mind still clouded from the crash, I fight to imagine what Theo, the charismatic shot-caller, Liam, the combat specialist, or Tristan, the savvy businessman, would do... but I've got nothing. I'm running on next to no sleep, I probably have a concussion, and I have no weapon or way to call for help.

But if he's taking me to London...

I consider the idea, battling the brain fog. All it would take is one passing motorist to see the blood on me and get me away from him. And when the speed limits go down in the metropolitan area... Licking my lips, I allow my hand to creep towards the door handle. The door locks are engaged, but if I can pull mine free, get out quickly enough while the car is still moving...

A sound from the seat next to me shatters my train of thought, sending a surge of terror through me. It's the distinct click of the safety being taken off a gun. I look back at Lucas, half-bracing myself for the deafening bang of the gunshot, knowing that I won't be so lucky this time. Lucas doesn't shoot—hell, he's not even looking at me. His pistol is in his lap, though, and it's trained on me.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," he says. "You're going to get hurt, and I can't promise I'll come to your rescue this time."

"Lucas..." I croak, fumbling for an argument.

Whatever I was going to say, though, he cuts me off with a jerk of the gun. "Don't, Vivian," he says. "Just don't."

Slowly, I lower my hand, and as I do, I feel my chances of escape melt away. My throat thickens, but I don't dare let him see me cry, so instead I drop my eyes to my lap and ask the question that scares me the most.

"Where are you taking me?"

"Home, Vivian," Lucas replies. "You and I are going home."

Chapter Two

The guys



S omewhere not far from the coast, a car that was, just hours ago, being used to get Vivian Emmerico away from Bath now speeds westward. Behind the wheel, his face drawn and his eyes bloodshot from too little sleep, driving faster than anyone would consider safe, Liam Walker sits with his foot on the accelerator. In the passenger's seat, his brown hair tousled from running his hands through it, is Theo Emmerico, older son of Victor Emmerico and recent exile from London. Neither man speaks, but the growing tension in the car is almost palpable. They don't need to say anything; their worry for Vivian is all the communication they need.

It's late into the night by now--soon the sun will be coming up--and they haven't heard a peep from Tristan Archer since he switched cars with them before they parted ways. He was supposed to check in periodically, but his first report to Liam after leaving Bath was the last that they've heard from him.

Theo thumbs through his phone for the hundredth time without seeing a response. He puts it aside, crosses his arms, and although his expression is unreadable, Liam can tell from his friend's body language that he's agitated. "You think something's happened," he says.

"It's been radio silence since we left Bath," Theo replies. "I don't like it."

"Tristan knows better than to keep us waiting," Liam points out, not mentioning the fact that he doesn't like it either—or that Tristan has always been the most punctual person he knows. His grip on the steering wheel tightens a little.

"So why hasn't he contacted us?" Theo asks. His tone is short, and he knows it, but he can't help it; the woman he loves—the woman they *all* love

—has dropped off the radar, and he's worried out of his mind. He can't sit still; if the car weren't hurtling down the highway, he would get out and start pacing. He glances once more at the clock on the dashboard. "It's almost morning."

"Maybe..." Liam hesitates, hardly daring to say what's on his mind, like just speaking the words will make it real. "Maybe they ran into trouble."

Theo's expression darkens, but he doesn't disagree. "Maybe," he says noncommittally.

Liam sets his jaw. "If that son of a bitch managed to get the drop on them —"

"We'd be hearing about it," Theo interrupts. "A roadside shooting isn't exactly an everyday thing in these parts. Collin would've filled us in."

"Yeah?" Liam glances at him. "Last we heard from him, he was on his way to the shootout at Tristan's safe house. For all we know, Lucas' men could've gotten him."

"Maybe," Theo repeats quietly.

Liam doesn't like the look on his friend's face. "Don't," he says. "Don't even think it."

"I'm not."

"I know you, man." Liam glances his way. "I know what you're thinking. Don't fucking say it. She's fine." But even as he says it, he catches himself wondering who he's trying to convince... Theo, or himself.

Theo drums his fingers on the dashboard, trying to heed his friend's advice and failing. If anything happens to Vivian, he'll never forgive himself. He glances at Liam, who's following the road ahead with a set jaw, his eyes narrowed. The sky's just starting to lighten, and it's a beautiful sight as the sun gets ready to creep over the horizon. "I'm calling ahead," he says finally. "They may have beaten us there and forgotten to check in."

Liam glances at him. "You sure? We still don't know who sold us out. If they've got eyes on the place—"

"I know," Theo replies, looking at him, and then adds, "I'm sure." Setting his jaw, he dials the number to the safe house they're barreling towards. It rings and rings, the tension in his body increasing, and when his man at the safe house, Mark, picks up, he closes his eyes in relief.

"Mark," he says, running a hand through his hair.

"Boss," comes the voice on the other end. "What do you need?"

"We're almost to the rendezvous point," Theo replies. "I need a report on

Tristan and Vivian.”

There's a long moment of silence, and Theo's heart begins to pound. He looks at Liam, who's keeping his eyes on the road but listening intently, and then says, "You there?"

"I'm here, boss. It's just..."

"What?" Theo leans forward in his seat. "What is it?"

"We're still waiting on Tristan and Mrs. Emmerico," Mark replies. "We haven't heard a thing. We were starting to think they'd met up with you two already.”

And just like that, Theo's blood runs cold. Liam, perhaps sensing the tension, glances at him and says, "What? What is it?"

Theo doesn't respond immediately. "You're saying they never arrived?"

“Never.” his agent's reply is tinged with growing worry. "Is... Are you saying they're not with you?"

"No," Theo replies. "No, they're not. *Fuck.*" He glances out the window, fear and anger rising within him as he struggles to piece together what happened. He looks at Liam, who's still waiting for him to explain, covers the mouthpiece, and says, "Pull over.”

“Here?"

"Now, Liam.”

Liam stares at him for a moment longer before putting on his hazards and slowing down to park along the side of the road.

“Boss?"

"Get to a computer," Theo instructs his underling, switching into a state of cold calculation. It's either that or let his worry consume him. "I want someone on the police scanner, and I want eyes on the safe house. Do you have a way to check the car's GPS?"

"I think so," Mark replies, sounding worried, but to his credit, he doesn't balk at the instruction. "Give me a minute.”

Liam watches from the driver's seat as Theo undoes his seat belt, climbs out, and begins to pace alongside the car. Swearing under his breath, the blond kills the engine and follows him out, holding up his arms. "What the fuck is going on?" he demands.

"If they never checked in with the safe house, that means something happened," Theo says, not looking at him as he stalks back and forth with the phone to his ear. "*Damn it.*"

A jolt of fear goes through Liam at that, but he clamps down on it, telling

himself to be cool. Hard to do, when the woman he's falling hard and fast for has suddenly gone MIA. "What do we do?" he asks.

That gets Theo's attention, and he looks at Liam, his silver eyes flashing in the low light. "We find them," he says. "That's what." He looks like he's about to say something else, but then he turns his attention back to the phone as the voice on the other end says something. Liam sees his friends' jaw twitch, and then Theo says, "All right. Thank you. Keep me posted." Hanging up the phone, the older Emmerico brother taps the roof of the car and pulls open the door. "Flip a u-turn," he says. "We're heading back."

"You gonna tell me *why* any time soon?" Liam asks as he gets in, defaulting to glibness like he always does when the going gets tough.

"Mark just pulled the coordinates from the SUV," Theo says. "It's off the highway about an hour east of our meeting point." There's a pause, before he adds in a low voice, "And it's not moving."

Liam doesn't need to ask what that means; they both already know.

They sit in tense silence as Liam wheels the car around and races back down the highway, pushing the speed limit, his knuckles turning white from gripping the steering wheel. Theo wordlessly plugs the coordinates of his SUV into their GPS, seeing with a twinge of panic that the car is stalled not far from where the group met up. He tells himself to keep a cool head, but otherwise he stays quiet, jaw clenched, knowing that if he speaks at all he's likely to lose it. Liam doesn't fare much better, his mind on the tenuous attachment he's formed to Vivian, a few short weeks of knowing her that already feel like a lifetime. They race to find their lost lover, each of them afraid in their own way.

What's most surprising to them when they reach the scene of the wreck is not that no one has shown up to help—in an area this remote, that's to be expected so late at night—but that a crash happened at all. Tristan has always been the best driver of the three of them, and Liam has joked more than once that he ought to give up crime and join Formula 1. But as they pull to the side of the road where the totaled vehicle is still smoking, it becomes clear that this is worse than the average wreck.

"Holy shit." Liam rakes a hand through his sandy locks as he stops the car and scrambles out. Theo's already out the door, and they both half-sprint to the smoldering wreck, frantically looking for signs of life. The fear for Vivian's safety and the desperate urge to protect her consume them both, and as they descend on the wreck, for a moment they're not sure what they're

seeing.

At first, it doesn't look like anyone is inside, and with the whole front end of the car smashed to hell, it's hard to get a good look through the windshield.

"Where the hell is she?" Theo asks as he skirts around the vehicle, kicking aside bits of debris.

"Look at that," Liam says, pointing to the shape of the distorted fender. "You know what that looks like, don't you?"

Theo swears and nods. "Lucas."

"He must have driven into them head-on," Liam says. "If that bastard was really trying to—"

But he doesn't finish, because that's the moment he spots movement on the driver's side.

"It's Tristan," Theo says, yanking the door open with enough force to make it slam into the side of the car. Fresh fear wells up in both of them, for their best friend now as well as their shared girlfriend, and Liam claps his hand over his mouth as he takes in the sight.

Tristan Archer is slumped over the steering wheel, motionless, his back rising and falling so shallowly that for a moment they can't even be sure he's breathing. A river of blood is running from a wound on his scalp, and bruises are already forming all over his face and neck. Although the airbag went off, he's unconscious, and no one needs to ask to know just how serious it is.

"Help me pull him out," Theo instructs, and Liam wordlessly does as he's told. Together they manage to disentangle Tristan from his seat belt and haul him out onto the side of the road, and as Theo checks him over, Liam grabs his phone to call for an ambulance. As he puts it to his ear, his expression grave, he looks at Theo and says, "Lucas must have gotten Vivian."

"I know," Theo replies, not looking at him.

"What do we do?"

The older Emmerico brother turns to face Liam, his gray eyes blazing with the kind of rage that could strike terror into anyone. "We get her back," he says. "That's what."

Chapter Three



By the time we reach the outskirts of London, the sun is beating down on us and the traffic on the feeder streets is picking up. We get more than our fair share of looks from the drivers around us, who are no doubt wondering what the fuck we're doing in a car that looks like it was just run over by a bulldozer.

More than once I consider signaling to one of them, coming within inches of risking it, but Lucas presses the muzzle of his handgun to my side and hisses, "Don't even think about it." His last shot, the one that was meant for Theo, echoes in my mind, and I give a single nod, but he doesn't pull his gun away. Part of me hopes someone will see the blood on my face and intervene anyway, but the other part—the part that knows what Lucas is capable of—prays they mind their own business, for their sake. As an enforcer, he has plenty of blood on his hands already, and he won't hesitate to shoot some good Samaritan.

For better or worse, no one tries anything, and that's how we manage to make it all the way back to Lucas's apartment without being stopped. He pulls into a parking spot outside as if there were absolutely nothing wrong with the car, turns to face me, and says, "You know the drill, sweetheart. No sudden moves, no pitching fits. Try anything and I'll kill you right here. Just see if I don't."

I swallow, giving him a defiant stare. "You need me," I say, calling his bluff.

"Damn right, I do," Lucas agrees, "but I also need the cops to stay off my back, and if you make me pick between those options, it's not going to end well for you. Understand?"

My heart sinks, but I nod. "Yeah," I say through gritted teeth. "I understand."

Lucas gets out, tugs me from the passenger seat, and slides an arm around my waist like we're long-standing lovers. His hand creeps under my shirt, making me shudder in disgust, and I feel the barrel of his gun press against my side.

"Smile," Lucas growls in my ear as we make our way through the revolving doors, and damn it, I do, giving the doorman the broadest grin I can manage while bleeding profusely.

Lucas doesn't let me go until he's ushered me into his apartment, and once he does, I can't get away from him quickly enough. Just the feeling of his hands on me makes me sick to my stomach, and it occurs to me just how much of a bullet I dodged when he was called away on business on our wedding night.

Now, though, there's nothing to call him away.

I eye him warily as I back into the foyer, which simultaneously feels both familiar and new after everything that's happened. Lucas spares me the briefest of glances as he shrugs out of his jacket, keeping his gun trained on me as he speaks rapidly into his cell phone. When he hangs up, he finally meets my gaze, and the expression in his eyes makes my stomach drop... but then he just laughs. "Relax, darling," he says disdainfully. "You have bigger things to be afraid of from me, I can promise you."

"Is that a threat?" I ask, my eyes not leaving his gun. "Because if so, you can lose the innuendo. You're a gangster, not a supervillain." And then, just because I can, I add, "And not even a good gangster, now that I think about it."

Lucas snorts. "That's rich coming from the woman who fucked my brother. Or did you forget what he did to you?"

That sets me off. "You think you can gaslight me the way you did my parents, after everything you've done?" I lean forward, rage making my hands shake. "You were the one who attacked us, Lucas. I was never in any danger from Theo. You, on the other hand—"

Lucas rushes forward, cutting me off, and slams me into the wall hard enough to make my teeth rattle. The motion makes my injured head throb

badly enough to bring tears to my eyes, but I stare defiantly up at him all the same. For a second, I'm sure I've pushed him too far—I can see the bloodlust in his eyes, and his gun is inches from my throat—but then he seems to come to his senses, barking out a sinister laugh.

"I see what you're doing," he says. "You're trying to provoke me. Get me to rough you up so your dad can get all pissed about damaged goods. Well, it's not going to work, Vivian." He lets go of me and takes a step back. "Better get used to this place, by the way," he adds, gesturing around the all-too-familiar living room with his pistol. "You're not setting foot outside until I say so."

"And when will that be?" I demand.

Lucas narrows his eyes at me. "We'll see," he responds cryptically, turning and heading back towards the front door. "But for your sake, Vivian," he adds, pausing to glance back over his shoulder, "you'd best hope it's not for a while."

Without another word, he walks out of the apartment and closes the door behind him, leaving me alone in the living room. Instinctively, I make a move for the door, but then a lock clicks into place on the other side. I continue anyway, only to slow my steps when I lay eyes on the knob.

The bastard removed the locks. And judging by the way the door sticks when I try to open it, he's also installed some new ones on the outside.

Adrenaline rushes through me as I back away from the door, turning to run to the kitchen before I can think about it. I grab the window over the sink, ready to risk climbing out, and to hell with the consequences, but it's been bolted shut. A trip to the bedroom yields the same result: he's turned his apartment into a prison.

As the reality of my predicament sets in, despair and defeat overwhelm me—but so does the realization that Tristan is still out there, and so are Liam and Theo. That's why, instead of sinking to the floor, tears streaming down my cheeks, I square my aching shoulders, brush the blood and hair from my face, and collect myself. Taking a deep breath, I plod to the bathroom, where I once slipped in the bathtub before being patched up by Theo. I turn on the shower and wait for the water to get hot, allowing the steam to soothe my aching muscles. I brush my teeth, splash my face with water, and brush my hair. The first aid supplies Theo used to tend to my wound—which I in turn used to tend to *his* wound after he was shot—are still in the cabinet. After popping more painkillers than I should and applying a bag of ice to the

swelling on my forehead, I pull an alcohol wipe out with clumsy fingers and start to dab at the cuts littering my face and scalp. Miraculously, none of them are dangerously deep, but a few will need stitches, so I settle down on the floor and set to work mending them as best I can. Between my exhaustion) and likely concussion), it's a struggle to remember Theo's instructions for sewing up a wound. That said, I manage to stitch the slices in my scalp, close the cuts over my left eyebrow and cheek, and bandage some smaller ones on my right ear. One laceration on my right cheekbone refuses to stop bleeding, though, so I end up slapping on a bandage to stanch the flow and then collapsing on the floor to rest.

As I sit there, staring up at the ceiling, I dig deep, clinging to the thought of the guys, and somehow, I find the strength to drag myself to the bedroom. I've got to keep it together if I'm going to survive.

And I'm *going* to survive.

* * *

I FEEL LIKE SHIT WHEN I FINALLY WAKE UP, BUT I'M STILL ALIVE, SO I GUESS that's good news. The pounding in my head has subsided to a dull ache, but it's still enough to make me want to heave, and as I swing my legs out of bed and haul myself upright, I'm not surprised to discover that my hands are shaking. I have to figure out what the hell I'm going to do now. I need to think, and I can't do that lying in bed.

With a groan, I straighten up, my eyes finding the Robert Schaeffer painting Theo bought for me all those months ago. Lucas has taken it down, leaving it propped up against the wall beside the window, and a pang of nostalgia goes through me at the sight. I thought my life was complicated then, trying to juggle an arranged marriage with a new job at Craig Sterling's prestigious downtown art gallery and my new husband's mob connections. Little did I know just how complicated things had yet to get.

I pad out of the room, rubbing my aching neck and running my fingers briefly over the painting on my way to the kitchen. It's strange being back here now; this place always felt a little like a jail, and now the feeling is literal... but at least someone had the courtesy to stock the kitchen.

I'm still queasy, so I settle on toast, desperate to keep my hands busy. It's either that or think about the guys and the danger they're in—or about the

apparent hopelessness of my current situation.

"Stop it," I tell myself, speaking to the empty room as I pull the bread out of the toaster and spread some butter over it. Now's not the time to lose my head.

The sound of a key rattling in the front door makes me jump, and I whirl around, my heart jumping into my throat. Mind racing, I drop the toast and seize the knife I was using to butter it—pretty pathetic, all things considered, but it's sharp, and if there's one thing all my lessons with Liam taught me, it's that you don't need much of a weapon if you know how to use it properly.

Reaching the blade behind my hip, I step forward, my senses on high alert through the fog of my injuries. I watch as the door handle turns, the sound of footsteps making my heart hammer in my chest.

"...I'm aware of that, yes." Lucas' voice reaches my ears before I see him, sounding astonishingly cordial after yesterday. A moment later, he strides into the kitchen, dropping a briefcase on the table and breezing past me like I'm nothing more than furniture. He's talking to someone on the phone, and the predatory expression on his face strikes a sharp contrast to his saccharine tone. "I know you do," he continues indulgently. "Believe me, if she wanted to, she'd be on right now." He pauses, his dark eyes moving over to me and narrowing slightly.

A pang of curiosity goes through me, but I don't have time to pursue it; he's closing the distance, and if I time it right, I think I can get him. I rise onto my toes, tightening my grip on the knife, preparing to go for his throat... But then the front door opens again, and in strides a pair of mean-looking men, both of them wearing suits and looking like they know how to use the guns at their hips.

Fuck.

I take a step back and let the knife clatter to the counter as Lucas approaches, still on the phone. "I'm sorry," he continues, "but there's nothing I can do. You know how Vivian is..." He smiles at me. "She has her own ideas about things. I'm sure she'll call you back when it suits her. Have a good day." He hangs up and takes a deep breath, turning his gaze to me.

I stare back, keeping my hips against the wall and reminding myself that I'm not dead yet. "Who was that?" I ask.

"Oh, you know," Lucas says with a dismissive hand wave, "just your parents."

"My parents?" My eyes widen and I step closer. "You talked to them?"

Where are they? What are they saying?"

"Don't worry your little head about that," Lucas replies condescendingly. "They're just happy you're back home, safe and sound. Nice to have this whole kidnapping business over with, wouldn't you say?"

"I wasn't *kidnapped*, I was being rescued from your fucking—"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Six of one, half dozen of another. What matters is that good old Mummy and Daddy don't have to worry about you anymore."

"I want to talk to them."

"No can do, Vivian. You're just going to confuse them."

"*Confuse...?* They're my parents! They need to know what the hell is going on."

"They already do," Lucas replies, his eyes darting over to the two men. "They already know you're back home, safe and sound but traumatized from your experience. They already know how you resent them for putting you in this situation, how you think this business with Theo was their fault."

I can feel the color drain from my face. "What did you say to them?" I hiss, my voice dropping an octave.

"I told them the truth: that you neither want nor need to talk to them."

"You're a fucking liar." My fists are clenched at my sides, my jaw tense. "You know they'll learn the truth eventually, right? You can't keep me here forever."

"And I don't need to," Lucas replies. "If my bastard father weren't still busy clinging to his former glory, none of this shit would be necessary. But..." He throws his arms out. "You know what they say. You can't always get what you want."

"And what then?" I hear myself ask, afraid of the answer even as the question leaves my mouth. "What happens after you take over the syndicate?"

"I said not to worry about it," Lucas replies, patting me on the shoulder and turning away. "It's just like I told your parents, Vivian: you're in good hands."

Chapter Four

The guys



"I have to be honest with you, sir: you have no idea how lucky you are."

The doctor, a stern-looking, gray-haired woman, rolls her chair away from the exam room table, where Tristan is sitting, still half-doubled over, one hand on his side. His torso hurts like a son of a bitch, and the lights of the urgent care clinic are excruciating to his battered head, but he gives no indication of the pain he's in. They have enough problems between the three of them already; the last thing they need is for him to add one more.

"Will he live?" Liam quips, casting a glance at his friend. It's either try to lighten the mood or give himself over to his fear for Vivian's safety.

"Now isn't the time for glibness, Mr. Walker," the doctor chastises. "Your friend is lucky to still be breathing. He's got two cracked ribs, a fractured orbital bone, and one hell of a concussion, but it could have been much worse."

"She's right," Tristan says, his eyes fixed forward. "At the speed he was going, he could've killed me. He..." He catches himself before he can finish, because the words on his tongue—*he could've killed Vivian, too*—are too horrible to say out loud. That hurts more to think about than all his injuries combined.

He should have been more careful. He should have been more alert. And now the woman he loves is in danger.

"Take it easy, man," Liam tells him, his expression going serious. "Don't put that on yourself."

The doctor glances from him to Tristan to Theo, who's leaning against the far wall and listening silently. "You'll need rest," she continues, her expression suspicious as she addresses Tristan. "No strenuous activity until

those ribs are healed. A couple weeks for the head, too, or you're putting yourself at risk of another injury. Understood?"

Tristan nods but doesn't say anything. The woman might as well be speaking another language—his mind is on how quickly things went to shit at his late parents' safe house. As if his ex reappearing weren't bad enough... *and that was before Lucas's men stormed the compound.*

"He understands," Theo answers for him. "We'll make sure he rests."

"See to it that he does," the doctor instructs. "A lot of bad things happening in the city these days. Bad actors all around. Stay safe out there."

Liam clears his throat. "We'll try." He doesn't bother to add what they're all thinking: *but no promises.*

"I'm going to kill him," Tristan says as they stalk out of the hospital, making a beeline for the Range Rover that's waiting for them in the lot. "I'm going to put a bullet in that bastard's head."

"You're in good company, believe me," Liam replies, "but you're missing a few steps between now and then."

"He's right," Theo says as he approaches the driver's side door. Tristan makes a move for it, but Theo shoots him a warning look—he's in no state to be driving anywhere right now—and the blue-eyed businessman retreats to the back seat. "Our priority is Vivian. If something happens to her, none of this other shit matters."

Tristan's tone is cold and listless. "It already has, Theo. He's got her, and it's my fucking fault."

"I'm telling you, you can't take that on," Liam says as he gets in the car. "It would've happened anyway, no matter who was behind the wheel. He... he outmaneuvered us, that's all."

"Maybe," Tristan replies. "And maybe I shouldn't have been such a stubborn asshole. Maybe I shouldn't have let things with Vivian go down the way they did. All the time I spent dancing around my feelings for her... I wasted it. And now she's..."

"Don't say it," Theo tells him. "She's *alive*. We'll see her again." He looks between his friends, his resolve obvious. "But I'll need you to help me. Both of you. I can't do this alone, and if the two of you feel the same way about Vivian as I do, then you're the only ones who *can*. That's why I need you to keep your heads. Are we clear?"

"Of course," Tristan says, and when he meets his boss' eyes, he doesn't look away.

"You know I am," Liam adds. "What do you need us to do?"

A grim smile appears on Theo's face. "For starters," he says, "I need you two to pay a visit to Mr. and Mrs. Dalton."

* * *

YEARS AGO, LONG BEFORE VIVIAN DALTON BECAME VIVIAN EMMERICO IN AN effort to unite London's two biggest crime families, there was nothing to distinguish the sprawling estate outside the city center from any other mansion. Now, though, with their daughter ostensibly kidnapped by her husband's "maniac brother" and all of the city on high alert—made men or not—her parents have dialed their security measures up to a hundred. Snipers pace back and forth on the outside balconies, the gate at the base of the drive has been reinforced, and a cranky-looking guard is waiting in the security booth when Liam and Tristan approach. Theo isn't with them.

"How do you want to do this?" Tristan asks.

"I just figured we could say please," Liam says. "Maybe *pretty* please, if that doesn't work."

"Be serious," Tristan gripes. "We can't just waltz in there and demand to talk to them."

"Why not?" Liam asks. "Theo's the persona non grata here, not us."

"Everyone on the scene has been shitting bricks after what happened to Vivian," Tristan retorts. "They're going to be on high alert."

"Look," Liam says, turning to him, "I say we tell them the truth."

"Are you fucking—"

"Not the *whole* truth, obviously," Liam interrupts. "But... enough of the truth to get them invested. You catch more flies with honey, and all that."

"I don't think that's what that saying's about, man."

"You say that like you've got a better idea," Liam quips, and Tristan concedes his point. They're flying blind, and if there's one thing Tristan Archer doesn't like, it's flying blind.

Together they clamber out of the car, Tristan gritting his teeth as he does his best to favor his injured side. They make their way up to the guard station, where the angry-looking man demands to know what their business is on Dalton property. Liam glances at Tristan and says, "My name's Liam Walker. This is Tristan Archer. We're here as representatives of Theo Emmerico."

The guard stiffens, and Tristan interjects, "This is strictly diplomatic. We..."

"We want to keep this clusterfuck from getting any bigger," Liam supplies, glancing at his friend. "To put it delicately." He gestures down at himself. "We're unarmed. Frisk us, if you want. Not my favorite way to start a business relationship, but—"

Tristan elbows him and Liam quiets, half-expecting the Daltons to bring the hammer down on principle alone. But to both their surprise, the guard just grunts, presses a button on his console, and the gate rattles open.

"That's it?" Tristan asks.

"Someone will check you at the door," the guard replies. "We were told to expect you."

The guys turn to each other, eyebrows raised. It occurs to them as they're heading up the walkway that this could be a trap, but they're in too deep to back out now. After a rough pat-down to check for any holdout weapons, they're ushered into the estate by a pair of burly security guards and promptly directed to the dining room. It's strange to see the place where Vivian spent so many of her formative years, and despite the circumstances, they still notice bits of her everywhere: the framed pictures on the shelves, her school certificate, the old family photo albums... So much sentiment surrounding someone they've known for such a short time.

Andrew and Melissa Dalton are seated near the head of the dining room table, flanked by security on both sides. Melissa is the spitting image of her daughter, with a head of chestnut curls and bright, inquisitive eyes. Andrew, meanwhile, is a solidly-built, gray-haired man whose face shows signs of all the shit he's done to get to where he is. Next to them is a slim young blonde woman who can only be Vivian's older sister, Violet.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd think you had been expecting us," Liam says, crossing his arms.

"You would think right," Andrew says, gesturing to the other end of the table. "Sit down, both of you. We need to talk."

The guys settle in a little uncomfortably, each grappling with their reception. For a moment, neither of them speaks, but then Tristan takes the lead, launching into the same spiel he gave the guard. "This is Liam Walker. My name is Tristan Archer. We—"

"We know who you are," Andrew Dalton says, looking at Liam. "You think I wouldn't recognize the Emmerico family's personal grim reaper? And

you," he adds, glancing at Tristan, "Tristan Archer... I remember the McManus business from a while back. My condolences about your parents."

"I... thank you," Tristan says, his script momentarily forgotten.

"You seem surprised," Andrew ventures, his eyes narrowing as he takes in the bruises on Tristan's face.

"We are," Tristan replies, refusing to balk under his stare. "We're aware that our... employer isn't welcome in London. We're also aware of why. That's why we haven't brought him with us today—he's hoping to extend an olive branch, for lack of a better term. Barring that, the least we can do is keep from inflaming the situation further."

"By 'employer', don't you mean, 'the man who kidnapped our daughter'?" Melissa demands, her expression cold.

"Honey." Andrew shoots her a look. "We've talked about this."

"About what?" Melissa retorts. "About letting the most dangerous man in the country send people to our home? The man who turned our own daughter against us?"

That raises eyebrows, and Liam and Tristan exchange a look. "It looks like we're a bit out of the loop," Tristan ventures. "Why don't we start from the beginning? We're not here to make trouble. We're just here to talk."

"We're not here to talk," Melissa retorts. "We're here to get our daughter back."

"Mel, let me handle this," Andrew says, raising a hand to stem off the forthcoming attack. Sighing, he glances at Liam before his eyes settle on Tristan. "You come from good stock, Mr. Archer," he says finally. "I can't say the same for your friend here, but that's not what this is about. This isn't about family business. It's about *family*—period. And I presume that's why you two are here."

Violet, who has up until this point been quiet, suddenly leans forward. "You're here about Vivian," she says, and it's a statement, not a question. "Right?" She glances at her parents. "You're trying to get her back."

The guys hesitate; they're in tricky territory now, and they both know it. "Our priority," Liam says diplomatically, "is making sure she's safe. That's all we want."

"Lucas said..." Melissa begins.

Tristan holds up a hand. "We know she's with him," he says. "That's not up for debate. Our concern is that she may not be there of her own free will."

It's a stretch, but it's close enough to the truth for their purposes, and that

must be clear from his expression, because a crack appears in Andrew Dalton's resolve. It's a small one, but it's there.

"You think he's forcing her to be there?" he says, and as subtle as it is, there's real worry in his voice.

"He's not," Melissa interjects, although even she can't muster up much conviction in her voice.

"We spoke to him."

"Is that right?" Tristan asks, hope and anger raging in him all over again. He manages to keep his cold exterior, though, and follows this with, "Did you talk to her?"

There's a long moment of silence, and something unspoken seems to pass between Vivian's parents. Melissa swallows, and Andrew presses his lips together, but neither of them says anything. Under the table, Liam is clenching his fists so hard his knuckles are turning white. His jaw is set and tense, but his face is blank.

"For fuck's sake," Violet suddenly interjects, sounding agitated and weary. "If you two aren't going to say it, I will."

"Honey—" Melissa says.

But Violet ignores her. She turns to the guys, and the worry on her face tells them everything they need to know. "We don't know where she is," Vivian's sister says. "And no, he didn't let us talk to her. He wouldn't tell us anything—just that she's safe, and that she's traumatized from... From..." She swallows, distrust creeping into her voice as she seems to come back to her senses.

Tristan eyes her, the gears in his head turning. They're faltering, sensing holes in their in-law's story, but they aren't quite there yet—maybe because admitting it will mean admitting they were wrong about sending their daughter to him. He opens his mouth to speak, but Liam beats him to it. "And do you believe him?" the ex-enforcer asks, looking from one Dalton to the next.

It's Andrew who responds. "I don't know what to believe anymore." For a moment, it seems like he's on the verge of letting the wall down, but he doesn't. Instead, he just sits there at the head of the table, lost in his own thoughts.

"Would you consider working with us?" Tristan asks. "To find Vivian, if nothing else? Make sure she's safe?"

"You can't be serious," Melissa exclaims. "You want us to throw our hat

in the ring with Theo Emmerico? After everything he's done?"

"You said yourself you don't know what to believe," Liam points out. "Is it so impossible that you've got the story wrong here?"

"We're asking for your help," Tristan adds. "If not an alliance, then at least an end to the contract on Theo's head. Beyond that, it's hard to say how it would play out, but I think we all want the same thing here."

"We do," Andrew concedes, his voice hardening, "but Theo Emmerico is not a man I can trust."

The guys nod, their hearts sinking, but they don't dare push it further. It wasn't the answer they wanted, but they can't afford to take this farther. Not yet.

"Should I be the one to say it?" Liam asks as they climb back into the car and start off in the direction of the motel where Theo has chosen to lie low.

"Say what?" Tristan asks, wincing as the stitches in his scalp smart painfully.

"That was a waste of time." Liam cranks the wheel and they're off, his green eyes smoldering in the growing darkness.

"Not necessarily true," Tristan replies. "They talked to us, didn't they?"

"Yeah, then told us to get lost," Liam retorts. "Lucas has got them all wrapped around his damn finger."

"I don't think so," Tristan replies. "They're coming around; you heard what Dalton said. He hasn't made his mind up yet, and that means we've got leverage. And more importantly, he was willing to entertain talks with us, which means the alliance isn't completely off the table."

"And what about Vivian, damn it?" Liam asks. "Every second that passes is another chance for him to hurt her. You realize that, don't you?"

"More than you can believe," Tristan replies, his tone serious.

Liam sighs, letting his anger dissipate. If it were going to be easy, anyone could do it. But still... "So what do we do now?" he asks, turning to his friend.

"We take this back to Theo," Tristan replies. "We've still got a play here; we just need to figure out what it is."

Chapter Five



I could chalk it up to my injuries, but the dream I have my second night back at the apartment is no fever dream.

I'm standing in front of a window that overlooks the entirety of London. Spread out in front of me is our kingdom: the city Theo has tapped me, Liam, and Tristan to lead, in all of its nighttime glory. They wanted me to be their mafia queen, the glue holding the alliance together, and that's exactly why they risked their lives and safety to train me. Business, leadership, combat... and using what they taught me is exactly how I clawed my way to the top.

A hand wraps around my torso, pulling me flush against a hard, muscular body. A pair of lips finds my neck, and in the reflection of the glass, I make out a familiar pair of emerald green eyes.

"Liam..." I murmur, letting my eyelids flutter closed.

He hums into my neck, and I can feel his arousal pressing against my hips through his jeans. I reach back to pull him closer when another mouth finds mine, a hand tangling in my hair as someone draws me into a passionate kiss. I let my eyes open and meet a silver gaze: Theo's. His hands—or are they Liam's?—are at my hips, sliding up my sides and down again, teasing me through the thin fabric of my tank top in a silent declaration that I'm theirs, and theirs only. I stretch up and wrap my arms around his neck, arching my back in pleasure as his mouth works against mine. I'm lost in the three-way kiss for what seems like an eternity, getting more and more tangled up in

their limbs, losing myself in them, until I feel someone touching the small of my back, and I know without looking that it's Tristan. The third set of hands find their way under the hem of my shirt, fingers trailing over the sensitive skin of my lower back, and I moan into the mouth against mine, clinging to the bodies around me like they're my last lifeline.

I know what's about to happen, and as the newcomer pulls my shirt over my head, I can't wait any longer. I reach behind myself to find Tristan's wrist, gripping it tightly and pulling him around front. I need to look at him, to meet those sapphire eyes and know that I'm his...

Except when I break the kiss with Theo, my eyes opening once more, terror ices my blood and I find that I can't move. Tristan is there, but he's covered in blood, so battered and bruised that I can barely recognize him. My eyes travel over the black eye, the split lip, the bleeding wounds on his face and his hands...

My fault, I think, stepping back in a panic. *My fault. Callie. Sienna. The car crash.*

Liam lets out a cry of pain, and I whirl around to see he's bleeding now, too, his body broken and battered from the shootout with the first pair of hitmen who were sent after us. I thought we shot our way out of there, but I was wrong, so wrong...

Theo's hand comes to my shoulder, turning me around to face him, and a cry falls from my lips when I see blood pouring from a gunshot wound in his chest. I don't need to ask who pulled the trigger.

"Kid," Theo says, using the nickname he gave me that very first night at the bar all those months ago. "We would have fought for you."

"Theo..." My voice catches in my throat.

"This was your fault, Vivi," Liam rasps. "None of this would have happened if it weren't for you."

"You did this," Tristan agrees, his face streaked with blood.

"We would have fought for you," Theo repeats, and I watch as the light begins to fade from their eyes, their voices joining together in a haunting chorus.

"How could you?"

I sit bolt upright in bed, gasping for breath and covered in sweat. My heart is racing in my chest, and my injuries are throbbing in time to the beats, pulsing pain through my neck and into my head.

Another nightmare. If I thought things were bad after Lucas shot me, I

had no idea what I was in for. I fling the covers off and scramble out of bed, rushing to the painting Theo gave me without consciously thinking about it. I touch the canvas, my fingertips tracing over the layers of thick silver paint, and slowly the images from the dream fade from my mind... although the guilt remains, and so does the fear.

I worried before that I wasn't cut out for this. Even before I dragged my best friend into this life and got her attacked by Lucas's men, I worried I wouldn't be the person the guys wanted me to be. But the only thing worse than the thought of disappointing them is the thought of getting them hurt, the same way I got Callie hurt.

And I *will* get them hurt. I know it. I can feel it deep down in my bones, whether it's because Lucas is finally going to make his move on me or because I'm never going to be what they want me to be... but if I stay here, I'm making that easier for him, and I'll be damned if I'm going to give the bastard an easy victory.

My stomach is still in knots from the dream, so I forego breakfast, instead heading into the kitchen so I can think. Short of learning to pick locks, I can't get out of here the normal way. I hesitate by the kitchen counter, assessing the window over the sink. Smashing the glass wouldn't be a problem, but then I would have to find a way to scale down to the ground, and there's no balcony in the courtyard. If I slipped, the fall would kill me.

So what does that leave? Call for help? From whom? And how can I, without a phone? I could try to fight my way out, I suppose, wait for an opening the next time someone shows up. The problem? There's no knowing when that will be, and for all Liam's training, there's no way I could take on Lucas's goons, injured or not.

"Shit," I mutter, running my hands through my hair.

I'm still trying to figure out what to do when voices outside the front door startle me. I move to the living room, pausing a moment to stare at the front door before forcing myself to move towards it. I'm fully expecting a replay of last night—complete with the taunting and getting smashed into a wall. I'm more than a little surprised, then, when it flies open inches from my face, and I'm greeted by a full face of makeup and enough perfume to make my eyes water.

"If it isn't Theo Emmerico's little plaything," Sienna DiMarco says, her perfectly-plucked eyebrows shooting up and a smile creeping onto her lipstick-covered mouth.

Yeah, shit is right. Questions race through my mind: what the hell is she doing here? Is it possible that Tristan sent her here? Why would he? And how?

And, more to the point, *how does she know who I am?*

I take a step back, my mouth falling open. Sierra, to her credit—if there's credit to be had—doesn't seem the least bit surprised to see me. If anything, she looks downright smug, and as she pushes past me into the foyer, teetering on her six-inch stilettos, she spares me little more than a glance. "I suppose I should be honored, getting to meet London's own mafia princess in the flesh," she says.

My eyes narrow as I watch her pull the door shut behind her. I've run into Sienna DiMarco a grand total of one time in my life, when she barged into Tristan's safe house in an attempt to... What? Throw herself at him in a last-ditch effort to rekindle their relationship? I never really got to the bottom of it, beyond her strange interest in meeting me, but nothing Tristan told me about their relationship painted a pretty picture. Even now, as she fingers the pearl-handled pistol she's just dug out of her designer purse, she's giving me major "psycho ex" vibes.

Sienna rounds on me, looking at me the way a shark would look at a baby seal.

Thinking fast, I scramble to remember whether she saw me that time at Tristan's family's house. *No*, I realize, *she didn't—Liam pulled me into the other room before she could see me.*

So then how does she know who I am?

Sensing there's something here I can leverage, I take the gamble and say, "I think you've got me mixed up with someone else."

Sienna just chuckles. "I'm afraid not, Mrs. Emmerico—although I can understand your confusion. I don't believe we've ever been properly introduced." She extends a manicured hand to me. "Sienna DiMarco. Tristan Archer's girlfriend. I doubt he'll have told you about me, but..." She chuckles, as if at an inside joke, and then shrugs. "One never knows."

Maybe it's the concussion making me loopy, or maybe it's the haughty self-assuredness with which she says the word, but I can't completely stifle the snort that escapes me when she calls herself Tristan's girlfriend.

Sienna frowns. "Is something funny?"

I disguise my snort as a cough and square my shoulders. "Nope, nothing. I just, ah, wasn't aware Tristan was dating again."

She sniffs. "Well, luckily for you, that's not really your concern, is it?" She looks me up and down, her expression turning sour. "You looked better in your pictures, Vivian, I have to say."

"Yeah, well..." I throw my arms out to my sides. "I'm kind of a hostage. Turns out kidnapping mixed with high-speed car crashes doesn't do good things for your complexion."

"Apparently not." Sienna sits down on the couch like she owns the place, smoothing out her business skirt. She taps the spot next to her in invitation, but I stay where I am, my hackles going up. Nothing about this passes muster.

"Is there a reason you're here, then?" I ask. "I suppose rescue is too much to hope for?"

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news, Mrs. Emmerico," Sienna replies, "but I'm afraid that's not something I do." Her eyes narrow. "Especially not for interlopers like you."

I grit my teeth. "Interloper...?"

"Don't play coy," Sienna tells me, her pleasant demeanor melting away in an instant. "I know exactly what you're doing, Vivian."

I cross my arms. "Feel free to enlighten me any time."

Her lips pull back in a sneer. "Tristan's different now," she snaps. "He's changed. I know *you* wouldn't be able to pick up on that, but it's true. We were on our way to mending things before that son of a bitch Theo dragged him into his mess. Now he's all wrapped around the axle, and I'll give you three guesses who's to blame."

I'm clenching my fists so hard, my nails dig into my palms. "I don't know what you mean."

"Bullshit." Sienna leans forward, staring me down. "You want me to spell it out for you? *You've gotten in my boyfriend's head. You've fucked things up, and all because Lucas doesn't know how to keep you on a short leash.*"

That pisses me off, and not just because she's clearly got no idea what she's talking about. This is the woman who closed Tristan off to the possibility of love, and after taking the slow boat to romance with him, I'll be damned if I'm going to let her pin any of this on me. "So let me guess," I retort, "you're in this now, too? Some kind of ploy to get me out of the way so you can move in on your ex?"

Sienna applauds slowly. "Figure that out on your own?" she asks, her voice cold with condescension. "You're smarter than you look, Vivian, I have

to give you that.”

I can't resist any longer; I make a break for the door. I'm not as fast as I was before the accident, and Lucas's gunshot wound still smarts. Sienna's on me before I can even consider the lack of lock, shoving me away from the door as she whips her pistol around at me. I grab hold of the barrel with one hand and the handle of the gun with the other—just like Liam showed me—but disarming someone is easier than it looks... especially someone in high heels. Sienna slams her stiletto down on my instep just as I raise my knee to strike her in the stomach. Pain ricochets all the way up my leg, and I drop to my knees, eyes watering.

"You smart-mouthed little bitch," Sienna spits, her eyes flashing. "You just ruined a perfectly good pair of Louboutins.”

"Fuck your shoes," I fire back. "If you're going to shoot me, you should just get it over with.”

"I would if I could, Vivian, believe me." Sienna sits back down, keeping her gun trained on me this time. "Unfortunately for both of us, Lucas doesn't want his little wife getting killed.”

"So you *are* working with him." I stagger to my feet, relief washing over me when I'm able to put weight on my foot. Not broken, at least. "Why the hell are you here, Sienna?”

Sienna opens her mouth to reply, only to snap it shut again when the front door flies open. "Now it's a party," I mutter through gritted teeth as Lucas strides into the room. His right-hand man is at his side, and he pulls his gun the moment he sees Sienna.

Lucas glances from me to her and frowns. "What the fuck are you doing here, Sienna?" he demands. "I told you to meet me at my office—“

"Yes, well, considering what you still owe me," Sienna replies, "I decided to pay you a visit somewhere you can't keep blowing me off.”

"I *told* you," Lucas says, his jaw clenching, "we'll discuss your boy toy after my father—“

"*That wasn't our deal!*" Sienna explodes, loudly enough to make us all jump. "You told me your men could get me in touch with Tristan. In your own words!" Her eyes snap over to me as she gestures with her gun. "If this whore and her bodyguard hadn't taken out the men I sent, this wouldn't even be necessary!”

"And since when is that my problem?" Lucas demands, his hand moving toward his own pistol.

"Oh, *please*," Sienna snaps. "You know exactly why I decided to offer you my help. This isn't over until I can sit Tristan down and have an adult conversation—without this bitch interfering," she adds, nodding at me.

Holy shit, I think, my eyes not leaving her pistol, which she's now waving around like it's a baton. *This woman is not all there*.

"Put that down, damn it," Lucas barks, clearly thinking the same thing as I am.

"Not until you get me in contact with him!" Sienna roars. "Where is he?"

In response, Lucas draws his gun and levels it at her. His bodyguard takes a warning step toward Sienna, who whirls around to brandish her pistol at him, outnumbered but seemingly beyond caring. How long has this been going on, I wonder? There's no time to contemplate it; things are escalating faster than I can keep up. My first instinct is to take cover, but I can almost hear Theo's voice in my ear—level, calm, and cunning—urging me to take advantage of the opportunity in front of me.

So instead of running, I straighten up. "You want to know where Tristan is, Sienna?" I demand, struggling to make myself heard over the sounds of the others shouting over one another. "You want to know why Lucas won't tell you?" I round on my husband, pointing. "It's because he left him for dead when he kidnapped me."

"Liar!" Lucas roars, pointing his gun my way.

But I don't dare back down now. "He rammed into us on the highway, Sienna," I continue, talking quickly now, my heart racing. "He couldn't give less of a shit about Tristan. He dragged me out of there and abandoned him in the middle of the freeway. He could..." My voice cracks, but I force myself to say it anyway. "He could already be dead by now, for all you know."

"What's she talking about?" Sienna demands, her eyes narrowing at Lucas.

"How the hell should I know?" he shoots back, gesturing in my direction. "She lost the plot a long time ago."

Sienna's finger twitches toward the trigger, but I don't miss the way her eyebrows furrow. The gears are turning in her head, and for someone with this short of a fuse, this might be the only chance I have.

"Think about it, Sienna," I urge. "Why would he care what happens to Tristan now? He's got his. Do you really think he'll do anything but turn on you once he takes over for his f—"

"Shut the fuck up, Vivian!" Lucas bellows. "Cut the bullshit, DiMarco,"

he adds, glancing at Sienna. "You're hysterical."

"Where's Tristan, then? Huh?" Sienna advances on him, her tone going ice cold. "Where the hell is he, Emmerico? Where's my boyfriend?"

"Fuck you! Did you not just hear me?!"

"Sienna—" I begin.

"I'm not talking to you!" she shouts, swinging her gun in a wide arc.

It's the straw that breaks the camel's back. Lucas's bodyguard, either startled by the sudden movement or just done listening to her shouting, fires a wild shot with a bang loud enough to make my ears ring. It punches a hole in the ceiling, and I hear the faint sounds of screams coming from the apartment above us. Lucas swears, Sienna shrieks, and dust rains down on us, but I couldn't care less.

By the time I hear Lucas shout my name, his voice burning with rage, I'm already halfway down the hall.

Chapter Six



I run faster than I've ever run before, injured or not, and I don't dare look back. Adrenaline floods me, my heart pounds in my ears, and it's all I can do not to lose my footing as I go skidding around the corner toward the elevators.

"Stop her!" Lucas's voice echoes in the confined space, and the thundering of footsteps follows moments later.

"What the fuck do you think you're...!" That's Sienna, who lapses into a string of furious Italian as another gunshot, and then a heavy thud, fill the air behind me. I glance over my shoulder to see Lucas's bodyguard on the floor, clutching his thigh, which is already spilling blood.

"Crazy *bitch!*" Lucas shouts as he barrels out the door and down the hall behind me. Terror fills my chest, and I stumble just as my husband skirts around his fallen crony, grasping at me. His fingers find the hem of my shirt, nearly pulling me over, but Liam's training comes to me again just as my legs go out from under me. I allow the motion to carry me backward, rolling over my shoulder with a jolt of pain as I jostle my wounded head... but it works. Lucas's grip loosens, and I tear free just as his bodyguard starts to get to his feet, blocking his path for precious seconds.

It's all the time I need.

With a last burst of stamina, I throw myself into the elevator, smashing the garage button just as Lucas disentangles himself from his henchman. Bullets fly a split second later, denting the metal doors just as they slide

closed.

Breathing hard, I sag against the railing as the elevator descends. They'll be on the stairs already, making a beeline for wherever they think I'm getting out. Gambling on being unpredictable, I hold down the door-closed button as we sink past the lobby. I don't let it go until I slow to a stop below the ground floor, where the parking garage is. Then I'm creeping out into the chilly air, scrambling past rows of cars as I search for a way out. There: a ramp leading out to the street on the other side of the room. I aim for it, glancing over my shoulder, only to suck in a breath when the door to the stairwell swings open.

"...have gotten far." Lucas's voice bounces off the concrete walls as he storms through the doorway, his phone pressed to his ear. Panicking, I drop down behind the nearest car, praying I won't trigger the alarm as my husband stalks through the garage, his gun at the ready.

"I told you, he's down!" Lucas yells into the phone. "That psycho bitch DiMarco shot him! Where the fuck *is* everyone? Vivian is loose!"

I sneak a glance around the side of the car and my stomach drops; Lucas is within feet of me, his phone against his shoulder as he systematically sweeps the rows of cars. My alarm turns to panic when I realize he would have never headed for the lobby in the first place; thanks to Lucas, there are more made men working at this apartment complex than actual employees. The bastard is smarter than I gave him credit for. Within seconds, this place will be crawling with goons, and I'll have lost my shot.

"*Damn* it." Lucas hangs up his call and stops one row in front of me, looking around like a predator on the hunt. Which is, coincidentally, exactly what he is.

I clap a hand over my mouth to muffle my breathing. Everything hurts, but my fear dulls the pain enough for me to get to my feet, stooping over behind the cover of the car.

The sound of me standing reaches Lucas, who whirls around to face in my direction, and it takes everything I have not to cry out in terror. "Is that you, Vivian?" he asks, a malicious grin creeping onto his face. "Some stunt you pulled back there, let me tell you."

I take a step back, glancing toward the exit. There's no way I'll outrun his gun, but at least I can make him work for it if he doesn't want to kill me by accident.

And if he does? I guess I'll make him work for that, too.

Just as I'm getting ready to make a break for it, Lucas's cell phone emits a

sound from his pocket, and he swears as he answers it. "What?" he snaps into the mouthpiece. "No, I'm watching the garage. Hold on." He puts the phone back to his ear, lowering his gun for an instant. "Yeah? What the fuck's taking so long?"

That's all the warning I'm going to get. I sprint out from behind the car and make a run for the exit, but my legs feel like they're filled with lead, and Lucas's gun comes up at the same time. Gritting my teeth, I fling myself up the ramp and out of the garage just as a bullet whines past me. Lucas roars my name from inside, but if I glance over my shoulder, it might be the last thing I ever do.

I'm only a few dozen feet from the street, but it might as well be a mile. I feel like I'm moving through molasses as I sprint over the asphalt and onto the sidewalk, slamming into a duo of passing joggers as I struggle to get my bearings. They shoot me a look as I sprint past, but even among civilians, I'm not out of the woods yet. The commotion from the garage is starting to leak out onto the street, and the old bullet wound in my chest seems to throb as if to remind me of what's around the corner.

I can hear the sirens of police cars drawing near, likely in response to the shooting, and I slow down, but only for a moment. In a city like London, there's no knowing which cops are bought and paid for.

I choke back a cry of pain as I stumble over the curb and into a nearby alleyway. A few people glance back in surprise, no doubt wondering why a girl who looks like she's about to keel over and die is running like she's been injected with pure adrenaline.

I only slow to a stop once I'm in the safety of the shadows, stealing a nervous glance back at the hotel as I lean against the wall next to an old dumpster. From just beyond the mouth of the alley, I can see the flashing lights of police cars. I can't stay here, or I'll just end up back in the hospital again, listening to Lucas gaslight everyone into thinking I'm crazy, just like he did with Theo. No, I have to keep moving. I shove myself away from the wall and continue my trek down the alleyway, at a slower pace this time. My muscles are already starting to burn from the run, and I can feel a cramp coming on in my side. There's a rumble of thunder, and I glance up just in time to see the first raindrops begin to splatter down onto the asphalt. Shit. I have to find somewhere else to hide until I can come up with a plan.

But where? I glance doubtfully down at my outfit: a loose-fitting t-shirt and jeans with nothing in the pockets except for a few crumpled notes and

some loose change. I realize too late that my phone is still plugged in at the apartment, and there's no way in hell I'm going back there.

I don't even have a jacket to keep me warm.

I wrap my arms around my body in a futile attempt to keep warm as the rain begins to pelt down harder around me. As I wander, my mind drifts to the guys with a pang of longing: did Tristan make it out of the car crash? What happened when Theo and Liam got to the safe house and realized we weren't there? Are they still planning to overtake London? God, it feels like a lifetime since I've seen them. I would give anything for the feeling of their arms around me again.

Ruminating won't get me somewhere safe for the night, so I shake myself and press onward. But as I wander south towards the river, I'm coming up empty. I can't go back to my parents place', not now that Lucas has poisoned them against me. My sister, Violet, might be willing to help, but there will be no getting her alone as long as she's living with my folks. Callie? Forget about it. I'm not putting her in any more danger, not when mere days ago she was beaten on the job at the art gallery where we used to work together—

I stop dead in my tracks, straining to see through the torrential downpour. *That's it*, I think. There's only one person in this city who might be able to help me, and whose address I actually know, because I've seen it a million times on a million forms and invoices.

It might be a long shot, but it's one I've got to take.

The house is a Victorian-style manor along the banks of the Thames, north of the bridge. The neighborhood is old and posh, and even from down by the river, I can make out the front entrance above me on the hillside, with its brightly-lit doorway and columns lining either side of the walkway. I steel myself and start up the sidewalk, aware of the security cameras that follow my every move from the porch. I look a mess, my clothes rumpled to hell and smeared with dirt. I'm still covered in bruises from the crash, there's fresh blood trickling out of a cut on my face that I didn't notice before... and by the time I get to the front door, I'm soaking wet from the rain.

There's no doing anything about it, though, so I ring the bell, square my shoulders, and pray. There's a long moment of silence, and then the door swings open to reveal a face I never thought I'd be this happy to see.

"Holy shit." Craig Sterling stands in the doorway: stout and broad-shouldered, with graying hair and a look on his face that says, *I thought I'd seen it all*. "Vivian Emmerico. You look like you've been dragged through a

bush.”

“That’s not a far cry from what happened,” I manage, wincing.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

Sometimes I forget how little my former boss minces words. “I need help,” I tell him flatly. “I have nowhere else to go.”

Craig’s eyes narrow, and I can tell he’s sizing me up—the same way he sized me up at that job interview all those months ago. “You’d better get inside,” he says finally.

Chapter Seven



“Keep your feet off the rugs,” Craig says as he leads me through his sprawling foyer. “I just had them cleaned. A royal pain in the ass, let me tell you.” He switches on a light and points me toward the kitchen area, where I take an awkward seat at the table. Craig doesn't look at me, instead heading straight for the sink to fill his tea kettle.

“I can't thank you enough for this,” I venture.

“Don't thank me yet.” Craig puts the tea water on and turns to face me, crossing his bulky arms. “Give me one good reason I shouldn't throw you out,” he says. “Because right now, my gut's telling me to kick you to the curb, call your father, and beg him not to deal with me the way he usually deals with people. I'm sure you understand.” He gives me a thin smile.

I swallow hard. “I don't suppose our unbreakable professional bond is enough of a reason?”

Craig snorts. “I forgot how much of a smart-ass you can be, Emmerico.” He shakes his head slowly. “Do you have any idea what kind of shit-show you've come back to here?”

“I can take a guess,” I reply. “When Theo broke off from his family, he took a bunch of his father's men with him.”

“More than just that,” Craig says. “Things are falling apart here. None of the local gangs trust Victor Emmerico's leadership after the little stunt your brother-in-law pulled, and that's not even saying shit about Lucas. The man's got some screws loose, and I'm sick of pretending otherwise. He's getting

reckless, and Victor's getting desperate. It won't be long before someone fucks up so badly even the police won't be able to turn a blind eye. And you know what happens then, don't you?"

"They start digging into the family business," I answer. "And that means taking a long, hard look at the gallery where so many made men have been dumping millions of pounds."

"You're sharper than you look, Emmerico." Craig sighs, running a hand through his hair. I'm surprised; this is the most vulnerable he's ever looked. "Then there's what happened to Callie."

I close my eyes for a long moment, praying more tears don't come. "Any idea who did it?"

Craig shakes his head. "She's still in the hospital. I don't know how much she really knows about what we do, so it's not like I can send one of my guys up there." He sighs as the kettle whistles and gets up to pour the tea. "Either way, I'm willing to put money on it being someone from one of the families. The fact they didn't take anything just confirms it, in my eyes: this was a threat. Things are getting hairy for us, Emmerico," he says, glancing over his shoulder at me. "I don't like it."

"Yeah," I agree. "Me neither. And speaking of which..." My mind drifts back to an exchange I had with Callie, when I was still hiding out. "Does the name Patrick ring any bells? I..." I stumble over the words. "I, uh, heard he's been on a buying spree."

Craig sniffs. "And just how did you hear about him?"

I grit my teeth and stay silent. I've screwed over my best friend more than enough for one lifetime.

"You know what? Forget I asked." Craig unceremoniously sets my tea down in front of me and pops into the other chair. "Yeah, it rings bells, all right. He bought the Hirst, and believe me when I say that's the last painting I'm ever selling the guy."

I raise my eyebrows as I drink my tea. "What did he do?"

"It's not what he did, it's who he's doing it for." Sterling sips at his own mug. "I did some digging. He's one of your husband's, and if he's buying under a phony name, it means he's doing it without old Victor's go-ahead."

A chill of fear runs down my spine. "You think Lucas is getting ready to seize power?"

"Either that," Craig replies ominously, "or he thinks he already has. Either way, I'm done upsetting the apple cart. Which leads us to this

whole..." He gestures at me. "Situation."

"I'm not trying to cause more problems for you, Mr. Sterling," I tell him. "I wouldn't be here if I had anywhere else to go."

"Yeah?" he snorts. "And why is that?"

"For one thing, my parents think I'm crazy," I reply. "And my husband is crazy. Do you see how fucked up I am?" I gesture at my face. "He hit me with his car. Shot at me. Tried to keep me prisoner. If I go to the police, they'll ask questions that I don't know how to answer. If I go to my parents, Lucas will blame it on Theo. He's already convinced them he's gone insane." I shake my head. "I need to get back to Theo. Figure out my next move. But I've got no way of contacting him."

Craig massages his temples as if he's fighting a massive headache. "You're not making my life easier, Emmerico," he says. Then he stands up, sighs, and points to the hallway. "There are towels in the upstairs bathroom. Get yourself cleaned up. I'm going to make a few phone calls and see if I can't track down this brother-in-law of yours."

Relief washes over me. "You're a life-saver, Mr. Sterling."

He just shoots me a look. "We'll see," is all he says.

A shower has never felt so good, and as I let the water run over me, I allow myself to hope.

Downstairs, I can hear the muffled sounds of Craig pacing back and forth, his voice drifting up from the kitchen. It's a shot in the dark, but he's laundered more money for the London families than anyone else in the city. If there's someone out there who can get me in touch with Theo, it's Craig.

I finish my shower and reluctantly step out, drying myself off with a fluffy towel before pulling my grubby clothes back on. By the time I get downstairs, Craig is off the phone, standing with his arms crossed where I left him in the kitchen.

"He's on his way," is all he says.

A surge of adrenaline floods me. "Theo's coming here? Now?"

Craig nods. "Said he'd be bringing a couple friends with him."

My heart soars. *The guys*. It has to be.

I knew they'd come for me.

Somehow, despite it having only been days since I last saw them, the longing to see them again is overwhelming.

Craig sees my expression and snorts. "You look like a kid who just found out Christmas is coming early."

"Believe me," I reply, "if you'd been through what I've just been through, you'd be giddy too."

Craig actually chuckles at that and walks over to the counter to fish out a bottle of whiskey. His tea is sitting by the sink, now cold, but the look on his face tells me he's much more interested in the bottle. He pours himself a generous glass and takes a long swallow. "I don't doubt it," he says at last. Whatever brief humor had crept into his eyes melts away. "But you still need to be careful, Emmerico—and I'm saying this not as your boss, but as someone who knows the lay of the land around here. This is the only favor I can do for you. I have business interests to protect, and they're in enough danger as it is. I can't guarantee your safety. If your husband turns up and sees you've been here..."

"I know," I cut him off. "But I don't have any other options, do I?"

Craig takes another swig from the bottle, screws the cap back on, and tosses it to me. "You really don't."

"I guess I'll drink to that," I quip without humor, taking a swig of the booze. I never had "standing in my abrasive boss's kitchen and sharing a bottle of rotgut" on my crazy bingo card of crazy shit for this week, but I guess I'm in the thick of it now.

We stand there in silence for what feels like forever, my mind swimming, and when the knock at the door finally comes, I jolt and nearly spill my drink. Craig sighs, taking the bottle from me as we head for the door. "Don't look so bloody happy about this, Emmerico," he warns. "Things are going to get worse around here before they get better."

"They already have," I reply.

Then Craig is pushing the door open, and there they are: Liam Walker, Tristan Archer, and Theo Emmerico. The men I love, who have put themselves in more danger for me than I can even comprehend.

The men who will probably get killed for their association with me, if I'm not careful.

There's a long moment of silence as I look from one to the next, shock and infatuation colliding within me and taking away my ability to speak. Finally I manage a weak, "Long time no see."

"Vivian," Tristan says. He's battered and bruised, his injuries from the car accident a painful reminder of what I've done to fuck things up for him. But even through the pain, his voice is smooth and strong. "You're okay."

"Yeah," I say quietly, hardly daring to believe it myself. "I'm okay."

"You gave us a good scare back there, Vivi," Liam adds, giving me an uncharacteristically cautious crooked smile.

"That's me," I reply weakly, spreading out my arms. "Getting into shit since 2001."

Theo is the last to speak, his silver eyes smoldering in the evening light. "It's good to see you alive, kid," he says. Then he pulls me into his arms, pressing a kiss to my lips in full view of Craig, and I all but melt into his embrace. Before I know what's happening, Liam and Tristan are following suit, one on either side of me, kissing me with the same fierce possessiveness as Theo. Their arms encircle me, scrambling for purchase as if they can't believe I'm here in front of them, and I feel the same. I'm overwhelmed by the reality of them standing here, by my own attraction to them despite my better judgment. These men make no apologies for who they are, what they want, or what they need, and I'll never be able to let them go.

Those three little words are on my lips, but before I can say them, Craig clears his throat behind us, still standing in the doorway. Just like that, the moment of euphoria is gone. Reluctantly, Theo, Liam, and Tristan back up and let me slip free of their embrace. "Sorry to break up... whatever this is," Craig says, gesturing at the four of us, "but if you don't mind, I've got some other things to attend to."

Now it's Tristan's turn to clear his throat. It's hard to tell in the darkness, but I could almost swear there's color creeping into his cheeks. "Apologies, Mr. Sterling. We were—"

Craig raises a hand. "I don't want to know," he says. "I'm just glad someone's arrived to collect Mrs. Emmerico here before she brings all of the families straight to my doorstep."

"That's not going to happen, Craig, I can assure you," Theo says. "I—we—tell you how much this means to us."

Craig sniffs. "Yeah, well, don't start now. I'm still not convinced you aren't insane." The faintest hint of a smile returns to his face. "But for what it's worth, not everyone in London buys what your brother's selling."

"Let's just hope that's enough," Liam says as the guys slide their arms around my waist and herd me off the porch.

"Thank you, Mr. Sterling," I reiterate, extending a hand to my boss.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," he gripes, but he shakes my hand anyway. "Keep an eye on this one," he advises the guys. "Your girl's had a rough go of it, by the sounds of it. Something about a shootout in a parking garage."

The guys all turn to stare at me, astonishment, concern, and annoyance all etched on their faces. "Excuse me?" Theo says finally.

I duck my head. "Uh, long story?"

Tristan chuckles, then grabs at his side with a wince. "Lucky we've got a long ride ahead of us," he says. "It sounds like we've got some catching up to do."

Chapter Eight



"So where are we going?" I ask, perched in the back seat of the Range Rover between Liam and Tristan. Theo is behind the wheel this time as we head back over the river, giving downtown London a wide berth.

"It's still open season on Theo around here—along with anyone who associates with him," Liam explains, running his thumb absently along the flesh of my thigh. "We're getting somewhere safe."

"We're heading north, toward Enfield," Tristan elaborates. "Any closer to the city center and we risk drawing the kind of attention none of us wants."

"Got enough of that already," I say, wincing as I touch the cut on my head. My stitches are holding, if barely.

Theo notices the gesture in the rear view mirror, and I see the way his brows furrow. "What happened?" he asks, and I suddenly realize all the guys are looking at me.

"That?" I wince as I drop my hand. "That was from the car crash. I'm surprised the stitches didn't split when I ran. Not exactly ideal for rest and recovery."

"Anything else?" Theo presses, and I can hear the worry in his voice. "There's a hospital a few miles west of—"

"No," I reply immediately. "No more hospitals. Please."

"Kid..." Theo says, clearly ready to argue.

"The last time I was in the hospital, they were ready to send me back to Lucas," I reply. "I'll be fine. If it were anything serious, I wouldn't have made

it out. I'm not about to risk tipping anyone off to you guys being here."

The guys all tense visibly at the sound of Lucas's name, and I swear I can see murder in their eyes. Sometimes I forget that, at the end of the day, they're mobsters. The protectiveness in each of their expressions is so intense it's almost scary, and although I know I have nothing to fear from them, I can't say the same for anyone who tries to hurt me. And there's something else in the way they're looking at me, too: desire, strong enough to make me squirm in my seat. Despite my injuries and exhaustion, my heart flutters at the thought that we've been reunited. That I'm theirs.

I spend the rest of the drive listening to their accounts of the past few days, all the while trying to contain my rapidly-growing need to have their arms around me again. And judging by the way the guys keep glancing at me, their eyes sparkling in the darkness, they feel the same way. By the time we're outside the city center, I can hardly stand it.

Night has fallen over the city, and the town of Enfield is quiet as can be when we slow to a stop alongside the river. Theo parks the car, and the guys descend on me to help me out, checking me over as if the car ride alone might have exacerbated my injuries. The dynamic is different than it's been with any of them alone, and it occurs to me as we head down the sidewalk that we haven't actually had a chance to be *together* yet—all of us, romantically, the way Theo and I discussed so long ago. The idea is nerve-racking—will this change things for the worse?—but it's also exhilarating, and I can only hope they're not having second thoughts as we approach a picturesque little cottage with a light on inside.

"Whose safe house is this?" I ask as Tristan knocks on the door.

"This isn't a safe house, kid," Theo replies, shooting me his characteristic smirk. "This is a bed and breakfast."

My eyebrows shoot up. "Seriously?"

"Anything this close to the Emmerico and Dalton estates is going to be under surveillance," Tristan explains as footsteps shuffle behind the door. "Even our own properties may be compromised, and we can't afford to take risks. Not with you."

A moment later, the door opens to reveal a tired-looking man in a bathrobe. "Mr. Archer," he says, nodding to Tristan. "It's nice to see you again."

"You as well," Tristan replies. "We have a room for three."

"You do indeed," the man replies. "Right this way." He ushers us into the

bed and breakfast, which looks like something straight out of a magazine: pine floors, homey furniture, thick quilts, an old mantle with a clock above it. It's exactly the kind of inn you'd expect to see in a romance novel, and my cheeks start to warm as I bite my lip and look around. If the guys notice, they don't show it, each of them keeping a hand on me as we're led upstairs to a beautiful bedroom with a four-poster bed and its own fireplace.

"Anything you need, just call," the man says, nodding politely to Tristan. "Any Archer is a friend of ours." With that, he smiles, nods, and pads away down the hall, closing the door behind him.

The guys and I are left there in silence, and for the life of me, I can't think of anything to say. Luckily, I don't have to, because the next moment, they're on me, and there's no more need for talking.

Liam gets to me first, his strong arms wrapping around me and pulling me into him as his mouth covers mine. His tongue pushes against my lips, and I gladly let it in, my body immediately melting into his. I can tell he's been waiting for this for a long time, and the passion in his kiss is almost frightening. My head is spinning as his hands run down my back and over my ass, pulling me towards him so that my thighs are flush with his. I wrap my arms around his broad shoulders just as Theo comes up behind me, pressing his lips to my neck and kissing down my throat. I tilt my head, offering up more of myself to him, welcoming him into my embrace as he sucks my skin hard enough to leave marks.

"Fuck, kid," he murmurs against my neck, "you have no idea how long we've been waiting for this."

The thought makes me shiver as I pull away from Liam's mouth to reply, "I'm just glad I'm not the only one."

Tristan growls in response as his lips descend on mine, one hand tangling in my hair as the others explore my body. As soon as his kiss starts to deepen, I moan against his mouth, his tongue battling mine, my body on fire as I reach behind me and slide my hand into Theo's hair.

"Missed you, Vivi," Liam mutters, and out of the corner of my eye I see him stripping his shirt off to reveal the contoured muscles of his chest. The image sends a wave of heat rushing down between my legs, and Theo must pick up on it, because then he's pulling his own shirt off as well. He reaches down and slides his hands under the hem of my shirt, his fingers grazing the sensitive skin of my lower back... but he doesn't strip it off. They're going to make me work for it.

Liam pulls me flush against his side, his mouth finding the other side of my neck so he can mark me there as well. There will be no hiding the hickeys they're going to give me, that's for sure. I can feel Tristan's breath on my neck as his lips play along my jaw line, his hands snaking up under my shirt to caress my stomach and ribs. The sensation makes me want to purr, and I let out a little moan as I feel his fingertips brush against the undersides of my breasts. Behind me, Theo chuckles, and the sound seems to vibrate straight through me. I don't even have time to feel self-conscious; I'm so caught up in the feeling of them around me, just like in my dream... Except this time there's no nightmare waiting for me at the end.

Theo's fingers finally slide up the hem of my shirt, and I gasp as they gently glide over my trembling skin, leaving goosebumps in their wake. He gently pulls my shirt over my head as Liam's lips find mine once again, Tristan's hands working the clasp of my bra as Liam's hand makes its way down between my legs. I gasp at the sensation as he cups my pussy, his fingers promising pleasure as he rubs against the fabric of my jeans.

Tristan finally gets my bra off, and it falls to the floor as he pulls me back against his chest. I can feel his arousal pressing into my back as he bends his head to kiss the soft skin between my shoulder blades. Behind me, I feel Theo stepping closer, his fingers tracing the curve of my waist and finding their way down to the zipper of my jeans. I fumble with it, my hands trembling to undo the button.

Theo and Liam take the opportunity to strip off their pants as well, and they step out of them as Tristan pulls down my jeans and panties in one fluid motion. Soon I'm as naked as the day I was born, and the cool air of the room makes me shiver as my cheeks flush with heat. Between that and the way my pulse pounds in my sex, I'm practically panting. The room spins around me, everything softening and going out of focus as I'm caught up in the feeling of the guys' hands on my bare skin. My body is screaming for them to touch it, for them to claim it, and I want nothing more than to give them what they want, to lose myself in them.

"Where?" Liam asks breathlessly as he runs his hands up my sides to settle on my breasts. The warmth of them makes me writhe against him, and as his fingers find my nipples, my back arches against Theo, who's moved behind me so Tristan can strip off his clothes.

To my surprise, Theo chuckles as he gestures to the bed. "Right here."

I glance at the bed, and then back at him, but the lust I feel overwhelms

my ability to think, and so I just nod.

Theo's smile is knowing as he lays me out on the bed. My legs fall open automatically as I bare myself to the three of them. I'm so far gone by this point that all I can think about is the desire I feel for all three of them.

I feel the guys' hands on me at the same time, their fingers tracing the curves of my body and bringing fire to my veins. Every part of me is burning, and my heart is racing in my chest as I feel their lips and hands moving over me. Tristan settles between my legs first, and I squirm when I feel his mouth on my sex. To my surprise, Theo lies down next to me, and I cry out in pleasure as his lips find one of my nipples. I arch my back towards him as he licks and kisses my right breast, his fingers teasing my nipple and making it pulse with pleasure. Liam, meanwhile, finds a place on my other side and follows Theo's lead, his lips closing around my left nipple. I moan at the sensation of their mouths on such sensitive spots, hot and wet and wonderful. I'm sure I'm blushing as my heart swells in my chest and my body tingles with arousal.

It's not long before I'm crying out, Tristan's lips and tongue sending me over the edge into a quivering orgasm. When I come down, panting and gasping, I feel completely relaxed, and my body is buzzing with pleasure. Tristan hums with satisfaction as he settles his hips against mine, and I know what's about to happen even before I feel him pressing against my opening. I reach up to wrap my arms around Theo and Liam, who are both now kissing my neck.

I glance up at them before my eyes fall closed with pleasure. "I love you guys," I whisper. The words feel so right, so perfect.

"We love you too," Liam whispers back, his breath warm against my skin, and then Tristan is pushing into me.

I groan and close my eyes, my arms and legs going limp as his body slides over mine. The others continue to run their hands over my skin as he begins to move, rocking back and forth in a steady rhythm. My pleasure builds once more, every part of me melting as Tristan presses deep into me. I bite my lip and moan as I feel him throbbing inside me, and I gently move my hips to meet his. I'm still wet from before. His cock slides deliciously against my walls, filling me and bringing me even closer to the brink, and by the time Tristan stills inside me, I'm crying out again, my whole body quivering as another orgasm rolls over me.

Liam is next, taking Tristan's place, and as he settles inside me, I cry out

with pleasure and gaze up into his eyes. I'm breathing hard, and my body is heavy with pleasure, but I can feel new desire building again as Liam begins to thrust into me. Theo presses a kiss to my lips and another to my neck, and I reach up to lace my fingers in his hair. Tristan settles down beside me, running his hands over my breasts and stomach as Liam sets a steady pace. I open my eyes to watch him as he moves inside me, his eyes glazed over with desire and his brow furrowed in concentration. I glance over to see Theo leaning back, his cock in his hand as he strokes it, his lips not leaving my body even as he groans in pleasure.

When I feel another orgasm beginning to take hold, I gasp, and Theo's free arm wraps around my waist, pulling me close as Liam presses deep into me. I can feel him throbbing, and when he stills with a groan, I pull him down to press my lips to his.

Finally, Theo takes Liam's place, and I cry out as he slides into me with a jerk of his hips, sending wave after wave of pleasure through my body. I'm trembling, and my legs are weak, but he keeps a steady pace, sliding in and out of me and bringing me closer to the edge of yet another precipice. I've never felt so exposed before, so vulnerable, but even as each of them claims me, the others are there with me, too. They don't let their hands leave me as Theo fills me up, their lips soft on my skin as they murmur in my ear how much they want me, how much they love me.

Suddenly, my body begins to clench and spasm around Theo, sending a rush of heat through me, and Theo groans, his lips finding mine as we cling to each other and ride the waves of pleasure crashing through us. I feel my body tense and know that the orgasm is coming, and when I open my eyes and meet Theo's, I gasp as I fall over the edge. I'm crying out, my voice hoarse from all my pleading. As I feel Theo shudder against me, I hold onto to him even more tightly, wrapping my arms around him and breathing him in.

When we've all collapsed, Theo is the first to move, sliding out of me and rolling me gently to my side. I'm still panting, trying to catch my breath, and the ache in my body is a strange reminder that, in spite of how good I feel, my injuries haven't forgotten about me.

I feel a gentle kiss on my lips and open my eyes to see Tristan smiling down at me. "You look how I feel," he remarks.

"Exhausted and a little sore?" I joke breathlessly.

The others chuckle. "Can't say I've done that before," Liam says,

propping himself up on his elbow with one hand and reaching out to touch my ankle with his other. "We're gonna have to do it more often."

I grin. "You'll get no complaints from me."

Theo hums in contentment as he brushes some hair out of my face. "There's no getting rid of us now, kid," he says, his gray eyes dancing.

Slowly, I struggle into a sitting position. When I lean against the headboard, an aftershock ripples through me, making me shudder with pleasure. "Good," I say, still breathing hard, "because I don't think I can go back."

"None of us can," Tristan murmurs, his expression going thoughtful. We lapse into silence for a moment, each of us thinking the same thing: we're in it deep now, but until Lucas is out of my life, moments like this may be few and far between.

My throat thickens, but I turn my mind away from the thought. I'm not ready to think about Lucas yet. We have a few more hours of bliss to enjoy first.

Liam must be thinking the same thing, because he sits up, rolls his shoulders back, and says, "I don't know about you guys, but I'm starving. Do you think this place has room service?"

I burst out laughing, thoughts of Lucas drifting out of my mind, and I couldn't be happier about it. "You know, Liam," I reply, "I like the way you think."

Chapter Nine



We spend the rest of the night in a blissful utopia of sex and food and wine, lying together on the big bed, talking and laughing and kissing, ordering in more food and more wine, until the entire night feels like one long, incredible dream. When it's over and we're cuddled together in the darkness, still half-naked, I'm almost able to forget the danger I'm in.

But I can't say the same for the following morning, and neither can the guys.

"So what's our move?" Tristan asks as we sit in the kitchen downstairs, sipping tea and stealing the occasional glance out the window. So far, no one's come for me yet, but that doesn't mean no one will... and if they do, the guys will be at risk as well.

"We have to move on Lucas," Liam replies. "Cut the head off the snake, so to speak."

But Theo's shaking his head. "We can't, not yet," he says. "We still don't know who sold us out at the Bath safe house. Until we figure out who the rat is, we can't afford to make plans for Lucas. They'll end up tipping him off, and we can't let him near Vivian again."

Liam sighs but nods. "Agreed," he says.

"Agreed," Tristan echoes, glancing at me. "So... the question now becomes, how do we find the mole?"

"I've got guys on it, but they're turning up empty," Theo says grimly. "All of their leads have led to dead-ends. Even the guys you took out on the road,

Liam. Whoever it was, they've covered their tracks well. Either that, or they never left tracks in the first place.”

"Everyone leaves tracks," I say, staring into my tea mug and thinking back to my conversation with Craig last night. That's when an idea comes to me, so suddenly that it makes my head snap up.

Theo raises his eyebrows at me. "Something on your mind, kid?"

"Yeah, actually," I reply, looking from him to the others.

“Don't leave us in suspense, Vivi," Liam teases.

"I think I may have a lead we can follow," I say slowly, "but you're not going to like it."

St. Thomas hospital might as well be at Ground Zero for London's mob scene, which is the first of several reasons why I'm shitting bricks when we arrive. The second reason is that it's the same hospital where I was sent after Lucas shot me. The third reason is that coming back here means facing the damage I've done to the people I care about, and I'm never, ever going to be ready for that.

"Are you sure about this?" Tristan asks as we enter the intensive care unit waiting room.

"Not at all," I reply, turning from him to Liam. Theo, for obvious reasons, can't be here, although he put up a hell of a fight about it, and I doubt he would have allowed me to go at all if I weren't with the others. "But it's a thread we can pull.”

"We still don't know the attack was related," Tristan points out.

"It was, I'm certain of it," I reply, glancing toward the nurse's station. "Craig Sterling said he thinks it was targeted. And the fact that it happened after I was in contact with her is a hell of a coincidence.”

"She's got a point," Liam says. "It's worth crossing off the list, if nothing else.”

Tristan sighs, crossing his arms. "I don't like it," he says. "We're too exposed here.”

"We were exposed the night we busted Vivi out, too," Liam points out. "We're just a smidge *more* exposed now.”

Tristan rolls his eyes, turning to me. "How do you know she'll want to talk to us?" he asks.

"I don't," I admit, my shoulders slumping. That's the most painful part of this whole thing. "I wouldn't be surprised if she doesn't, after the shit I've put her through.”

"It wasn't your fault, Vivian," Tristan says, putting a hand on the back of my neck, his sapphire eyes meeting mine.

"Thank you," I tell him somberly, "but it was." Sighing, I square my shoulders and turn to face the nurse's station. "Wish me luck."

I'm bracing myself for the worst—to hear that she's in a medical coma, for instance, or that she's not accepting visitors—and the relief I feel when they tell me she's up and talking is beyond description.

"Can I see her?" I ask, hardly daring to hope.

The nurse glances at the visitor log, and then back up at me. "I can see if she's awake," she says. "What's your name?"

"Hazel," I reply abruptly, offering the nickname she used to use for me when we were kids, after the color of my eyes. "Hazel Dalton."

I could swear the nurse's eyebrows go up a little, but she doesn't complain, dialing a number on her phone and speaking rapidly into it. I swallow, praying my friend will understand the reference. That she'll at least hear me out.

Finally, the nurse nods, satisfied, and hangs up the phone. "Room 1005," she says. "Down the hall and to your left. She just finished dinner."

"Thank you," I say, backing off and nodding discretely to Liam and Tristan, who are watching from the back of the room with trepidation. Understandable, considering they broke me out of this very hospital less than a month ago... but Theo has always been the one with the target on his head, and the staff likely hasn't been told to watch out for distant contacts from other families. Still, I catch myself holding my breath as we make our way down the hall, praying no one from Lucas's side is here. The idea of them coming to finish the job has crossed my mind more than once, but to my relief, the hallway is empty.

I hesitate outside the door, taking my time to collect myself. Liam snakes an arm around my waist and gives me a reassuring squeeze, while Tristan presses a quick but tender kiss to the top of my head. I shoot them each a look of gratitude, take a breath, and push open the door.

Callie Burns is sitting up in her hospital bed, hooked up to the same sorts of machines I've seen my fair share of in the past months. She's covered in bruises, her arm is in a sling, and one of her eyes is completely swollen shut. Her expression is inscrutable as we enter, mottled with blotches and cuts, but she doesn't yell at us to leave, which I guess is a good sign.

"Hey," I say after a long moment of debate, knowing anything else will

be inadequate.

Callie scrutinizes me for a moment longer. "'Hazel,' eh?" she asks finally as I take a tentative step into the room.

"I'm glad you remembered." I give her a small smile that falters instantly. "I couldn't use my real name. It's too dangerous. And I..." I hesitate, my voice breaking as guilt overwhelms me. "I can't let anything else happen to you, Callie. It would kill me."

Callie stares at me, her expression still unreadable, and my heart sinks. What the hell was I thinking, coming here to ask for her help after everything that's happened? By rights, she should be yelling for security right now, and I wouldn't blame her for it.

Tentatively, I approach her bedside, unable to stop the tears that well up in my eyes at the side of her injuries. "God, Callie, I'm..." I shake my head, my lip trembling as I drop to my knees beside her. "I'm so, so sorry. I never meant for any of this to happen." I shake my head, a tear escaping and running down my cheek. Callie's always been there for me, through thick and thin, even though I've done nothing to deserve it. Even before she knew about my family, she would have given me the shirt off her back. She was my only friend, and this was how I repaid her.

"I had no right to involve you in this," I say, hardly daring to look up at her. "I should never have asked you to feed me information on the gallery. I should never have called you in the first place. You..." I take a shaky breath. "You deserved so much better."

Callie is still silent, staring down at me like she's never seen me before in her life. Finally she meets my gaze, and I see tears swimming in her eyes. That breaks me, and whatever reasoning I might have had for this—for any of it—goes out the window. I lower my head, unable to meet her eyes and see the hurt in them any longer.

"I should never have gotten you involved in this," I say. "I wasn't thinking about your safety. *Fuck*, I wasn't thinking at all. I can't even ask you to forgive me."

That's when, finally, my friend speaks, and despite the pain written on her face, Callie's voice is astonishingly calm. "Tell me something, Vivian," she says.

I snap my head up. "What is it?"

She swallows and then takes an unsteady breath. "When Lucas attacked me, he got this... look in his eyes," she says. "Like he wanted to hurt me."

Like he was *enjoying* it, like getting information was just a convenient excuse to torture me.”

I can feel my throat getting thick again as images of the nightmare he must have inflicted on Callie flood my mind. I don't dare to reply—I can't bear the thought of her shutting down on me now—so I only nod.

Callie's voice is still unnervingly level. "Was that the look he gave you?" she asks. "When he shot you, was that the way he looked at you?"

"Vivian—" Tristan begins, taking a protective step forward.

But I hold up a hand. "Yes," I reply in a whisper. "That was exactly the look.”

Callie nods slowly, a few tears running down her face. "I thought so," she says, meeting my gaze again. "Promise me we'll make him pay, Vivian.”

"Callie, I swear to you, we will," I reply.

My best friend looks at me long and hard, and then, slowly, she nods. "In that case," she says, "consider yourself forgiven.”

My breath comes out in such a strong rush that it makes me lightheaded, but the tears that fill my eyes this time are tears of relief.

Callie watches me for a moment longer before, miraculously, a twinkle returns to her eyes that reminds me of the best friend I used to know. "You were forgiven already, by the way," she adds, giving me one of her characteristic smirks. "Part of me just wanted to see if I could make you grovel.”

"I guess I had that coming," I reply, rubbing the back of my neck. "Are you sure you're okay, though, Callie? Really?"

Her smile fades. "I'm very much *not* okay, Vivian, but not because I'm mad at you; because I'm mad at your psycho fucking husband." A fire appears in her eyes. "We have to stop him. I just wish I knew how.”

I glance back at the guys, who have been watching the exchange with rapt anticipation. "I think we're in luck, then," I reply, nodding to them, "because I might have an idea.”

"I don't understand," Callie says, half an hour later, as we finish recounting the previous days' events. "I thought Lucas was the one behind all this. Why would it matter who was doing his dirty work?"

"Because whoever it was, they were on our side once," Liam replies. We've all dragged chairs up to Callie's bedside so we can discuss the situation away from prying ears, though it still pains me to see her lying there like that. "Someone has been feeding information on us to Lucas—information they

wouldn't have access to without being in our inner circle.”

"Or at least connected to it," Tristan adds, glancing at me.

I nod. "If someone happened to find out that you and I were talking—say, because they were flying under the radar at the safe house—then it would have been easy to point Lucas to you as a way of getting to me." My throat thickens with fresh guilt, and I quickly look away. "To make a statement.”

"And that's why we need to know who it was that was with him when he attacked you," Tristan adds, glancing at Liam.

"Is there anything you can tell us about them?" I ask, putting my hand on Callie's. "Anything you remember?”

"I..." She swallows, her brow furrowing in concentration. "It's still a blur. The doctors said the concussion will take another week to heal, at least. I just wish I..." She trails off and frowns.

Heart sinking, I glance at Tristan and Liam, who slides a comforting arm around my waist. We knew it was a long shot, but—

"Wait a sec," Callie says suddenly, sitting bolt upright in bed.

"What is it?" I ask, sucking in a breath.

"There is one thing," she replies, her face lined with shock. "I think... I think it was a woman."

"A woman?" Liam leans forward. "Are you sure?”

Callie closes her eyes, as if by focusing hard enough, she can pull the memory from the darkness. "Yeah," she says after a moment, opening them and looking back at us. "Positive. I remember thinking there was something off about her, but I didn't know what. Until it was too late.”

"Is there anything else you can tell us?" I ask, searching her face. "Distinctive features? Tattoos? Hair color?”

"There is one other thing," Callie replies, turning to look at me, and the next words out of her mouth make my heart stop in my chest. "She had an accent. An Italian one.”

My blood freezes in my veins, and I don't *see* Tristan tense as much as I *feel* him tense, his mind following the clue to its obvious conclusion at the same time as mine. "Tristan..." I begin, but he doesn't let me finish. The next thing I know, he's getting silently up from his seat and stalking out of the room, leaving me, Liam, and Callie to stare after him.

We find him standing in the main hallway, his eyes fixed straight ahead and burning with an unreadable emotion. He doesn't say a word, and he doesn't have to; he's thinking the same thing we are.

"Sienna," I say. "It has to be."

"Does it?" Liam asks, glancing at me as he places a protective hand on my lower back. "It could be someone else from the Italian families."

But Tristan's already shaking his head. "She went radio silent after she showed up at the safe house," he says in a low voice, not looking at either of us. "I thought she'd finally gotten the message." He snorts and shakes his head. "Turns out she was just biding her time." With a growl of frustration, he slams his hand into the wall, making me jump.

"We don't know it was her," Liam insists.

"Who else would it be?" Tristan retorts, rounding on him. "She's had it out for Vivian since day one. I should've figured she'd be gunning for her since the minute she found out we were hiding her." He turns to me. "You said she showed up at Lucas's apartment, didn't you?"

"That doesn't necessarily make her the one from the gallery," Liam says, his tone carefully neutral. "Say whatever else you want about her; Sienna's always been cagey about sticking her nose where it doesn't belong. It's possible her old man is behind it, and she's acting as his proxy. With everyone starting to question Victor's leadership, it was only a matter of time before the rats started to jump ship."

"No," I say, shaking my head. "That's not it." I swallow, glancing at each of them in turn, and it dawns on me that I've been leaving out a crucial piece of information this whole time. Chalk it up to shock, exhaustion, the need to protect the people I care about, or simple stupidity—I'm not sure, myself.

"Before the shootout at the apartment," I say, "Sienna and Lucas started arguing. She was going on about how he 'owed her' for something, and how she'd been the one to offer him her help—not the other way around. And..." I take a shaky breath. "She was doing it to get to you, Tristan."

"*Fuck.*" He runs a hand through his dark hair.

"You're saying you think Sienna cut some kind of deal with him?" Liam asks. "Like she offered to help him beat up Callie as... what, revenge against you, Vivi? For getting between her and Tristan?"

"She's too calculating for that," Tristan says, his words short and clipped. "She's more than just some spoiled rich girl, Liam. She's been playing the game since before she could walk. There has to be some angle. There always is, with her." The pain in his voice is undeniable, and it makes my heart wrench in my chest.

"There is," I say quietly, the pieces falling into place even as I speak. "It

wasn't about hurting me; that was just a means to an end. It was about getting me back to Lucas. So I would be out of her way. So she could shoot her shot with you again, Tristan."

I look at Tristan, who looks like he's ready to spit fire. "It doesn't matter," he says through gritted teeth, meeting my gaze. "She hurt your friend, Vivian. And that means she hurt *you*. That's all I need to know."

"Hey, take it easy," Liam cautions, putting a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Let's just step back for a second. We have to keep our priorities straight."

I nod. "He's right," I say, trying to push it all to the back of my mind. I don't want to think about it—not yet. "So what does all this tell us?"

"It tells us that Lucas now has the Italian mafia behind him," Tristan says, and I can see the difficulty he's having maintaining his professionalism. "It won't be long before the other families start to catch on, and then they're going to want in. Whoever gets in on the ground floor is going to stand to benefit immensely. They're already stepping on each other's toes."

"You really think they would leave Victor for Lucas?" I ask. "Before he's even taken over for him?"

"They already are," Liam replies. "The only question is, how do we stop it before it turns into an all-out war?"

Tristan's expression is somber, and as I watch him, I can sense the wheels turning in his head. "It's already an all-out war," he says finally, his hands balling into fists at his sides. "And it's going to take a lot more than just the four of us to swing this in our favor."

"What do you have in mind?" I ask, putting a hand on his arm.

Tristan relaxes under my touch, and he turns to look at me again. The clouds have left his eyes, and I can see the characteristic, determined sparkle of his blue irises.

Liam, as if reading his friend's mind, starts shaking his head. "No," he says. "Huh-uh. No way, man. You've had some batshit ideas before, but this takes the fucking cake."

"We're running out of options," Tristan says, turning to him. "If we want to get ahead of this, we need to do something drastic."

Liam crosses his arms. "Theo will lose his shit."

"Not if he understands what's at stake here," Tristan insists. His blue eyes find mine, his expression immediately softening. "We're not talking about power anymore, Liam. We're talking about *Vivian*, and Theo knows it. As

long as this son of a bitch is running loose in London, she's never going to be safe. He's already done enough damage, and I won't stand by while Sienna makes her a target.”

I glance between the two of them in confusion. "Sorry to interrupt," I quip, "but if you could enlighten me as to what I'm exactly missing here...?"

The guys turn to me, their expressions alight with determination and love. "We have to take this to the top," Tristan says.

"The top?" I shake my head.

"The top of everything," Liam supplies. "Your parents, Vivi.”

Chapter Ten



If you told me three months ago that I would be showing up at a *very* public downtown French bistro to talk to my parents after everything that's happened, with three boyfriends in tow and absolutely no plan to speak of, I would have called you crazy. Hell, I feel crazy *now*. The only reason I even dare to approach the front door of the chic, upscale restaurant is because the guys are all here with me, and I know they won't let me get sent back to Lucas. Even still, my heart picks up its pace as we mount the steps leading to the front door: Theo behind me, with Liam and Tristan on either side, each of them keeping me well within their reach, their eyes gleaming with possessiveness as their bodyguards bring up the rear.

"It's all right, Kid," Theo murmurs as he holds the door open for me. "We're here. We're not going to let anything happen to you."

"He's right, Vivi," Liam affirms. "We're here to talk. That's it. Anyone tries anything and they get to deal with us."

Tristan steps up beside him. "Same goes for your parents," he warns.

I glance at each of them in turn, my breath coming in quick little spurts as I step through the door and into the restaurant. The soft din of voices and the clatter of silverware on fine china masks the noise from the bustling street just a few feet beyond the building. It's not a particularly big place, but it manages to project the feeling of intimacy and exclusivity at the same time.

The perfect place for a mob meetup, I think as we file inside. It might as well have been ripped straight out of *The Godfather*. There's a small, round

table tucked in an alcove in the back, with a single candle standing in the middle alongside a bottle of wine. Wordlessly, Theo, Tristan, Liam, and I are escorted to it, leaving the bodyguards to stand in an inconspicuous spot near the doorway, scoping out the crowd.

Once we're seated, a waiter approaches and takes our drink orders. Tristan orders the wine, and Liam and Theo follow suit with whiskey. I don't even know if I should drink or not, so I stick to water. I'm entirely too nervous for alcohol; besides, I need my wits about me right now. We're here to gain ground, and if this goes badly, we'll have blown our only shot.

It's not long before they arrive: the parents I left behind when I escaped the hospital, the faces of one of the most powerful families in London. To my astonishment, however, they don't move with the authority and command that I'm used to, and their faces are lined, like they haven't been sleeping.

But is it because I've been gone... or just because their hold on the city is at risk?

Violet trails along behind them as they approach our table, her eyes wide with what might be fear and might be indecision. She's the first one to break the silence. "Hey, sis."

"Hey," I echo. "It's, uh, been a minute." I turn to my parents, making a point to keep my voice steady. "Mum. Dad."

When they reach me, the guys rise to their feet, taking their positions and surrounding me in a protective bubble. "Thank you for agreeing to meet us," Theo says stiffly, nodding at the empty chairs on the far side of the table. "Please, sit down."

I can see the suspicion and anger on my father's face. "Is that an order?" he asks.

Theo gives him a smile that could charm the hell out of anyone. "Not at all. Just a suggestion. We're all civilized people here, no?"

My father glares at him for a moment, but then he relents, taking his seat with a nod. Violet sits down beside him, and I slip in across from them, with the guys on both sides.

"You'd better have a damn good reason why I shouldn't have you taken out right now, Emmerico," my father says, his voice low and dangerous. He glances at Liam and Tristan, and his expression softens a little... but not much. "It's bad enough you two reached out again after we turned you down once already. But *you*..." He rounds on Theo. "You've got some nerve showing your face around here."

"And if that doesn't tell you how serious this situation is, nothing will," Theo replies without missing a beat. "This thing with Lucas is becoming untenable. But before we get into that..." He holds up a hand to stop any potential objections. "I think it's about time we give the floor to your daughter, wouldn't you say? She's the one in the middle of this, after all."

My mother looks ready to pull her hair out. *She still thinks Theo's crazy*, I realize, and that hurts more than I thought it would. Somehow Lucas managed to turn them all against me, despite the lack of evidence. Now I'm sitting here in the middle of what feels like a war zone, on the opposite side of the table from my parents, my supposed allies. And it's all his fault.

I turn to my father. "Dad, I know what you think about him. But you have to trust me on this, and listen well, because I'm only going to say this once." I lean forward, holding their gazes with mine, and that's when I notice the uncertainty that's weighing on all of them, the dawning realization that there may be more to the story than they thought. I seize on that doubt, conjuring up the most persuasive tone I can muster. "Lucas is the one who attacked me. It wasn't Theo. It wasn't anybody else. He shot me, and then he tried to do it again." My voice catches in my chest; Tristan takes my hand and gives it a reassuring squeeze, while Liam puts a hand on my hip to steady me. Across the table, my mother sucks in a breath.

"You want to know the real reason Theo is back in London?" I persist. "It's because Lucas ran me and Tristan down on the highway, dragged me into his car, and *forced* me back to his apartment." My voice is getting louder, more forceful, as the memories come flooding back to me. "He removed the lock from the door. He sealed off the windows. He was planning to keep me there until he could take over from Victor Emmerico, and after that..." I shrug, shaking my head. "I guess it didn't matter what he was planning to do to me after that. He lit up the apartment when I ran. I barely made it out of there alive."

Slowly, I raise my eyes to look at each of them again, and there's so much guilt and horror in my mother's eyes I think I might break down into tears. She and my father sit in stunned silence, no longer sure what to say. "It's true," I add softly. "I know how it sounds, and believe me, I wish it weren't. But I'm telling you: Theo is innocent in this. And if Lucas was willing to keep his own *wife* prisoner to solidify his hold on the city..." I lean forward, my shoulders tense. "Then think what he'll do once he's in full control. The man has no limits. He's a ruthless, psychotic, amoral monster. And he's

seizing power right out from under us.”

I sit back and lapse into silence, forcing myself not to fidget as the tension at the table builds. Even Theo is staring at me as if he can't quite believe what he just heard. It's Tristan who breaks the silence. "It's true," he says. "Every word." He lifts his shirt enough to expose the dark bruises that cover his side. "This? This was from the car crash. Lucas was ready to kill us.”

Liam nods. "And he has more than just his own men at his disposal. We have reason to believe he has the DiMarco family in his pocket. A few of their men ambushed me and your daughter in Bath, and you'd better believe they're not going to stop there.”

The silence returns, and I can see the gears turning in my parents' heads. I'm pressed to keep myself from gripping the table in anticipation. Just when I can't bear it any longer, Violet speaks up, her eyes on the table in front of her. "The last time I saw you, sis," she says, slowly and deliberately, "I told you I didn't know what to believe anymore." She lifts her head, locking eyes with me. "But I was wrong. I do know what to believe. You may be a pain in the ass sometimes, Vivian, but you're not crazy. And if Lucas really kidnapped you, kept you from talking to us... then I'm done buying into any more of his lies.”

"Violet..." My mother starts.

My sister turns to her. "What reason could she possibly have to lie, Mum? Huh? Vivian has never wanted to run this city. She's been clear on that for years. She's innocent in this, and, if she tells us Theo is, too, then we have to believe her." She turns back to me and nods.

I bite my lip and look away, blinking back the tears that threaten to spill over. I'm not used to seeing my big sister so protective, not of me. But then, I've never been in this kind of trouble before.

"You've got a good head on your shoulders," Tristan tells her.

Violet examines her fingernails. "That makes one of us," she says, but when she glances at me, I see the teasing gleam in her eyes.

Dad, who's been silent this whole time, finally speaks, his attention all on Theo. "What about you, Emmerico?" he asks. "You've been awfully quiet. Don't you want to make your case?"

Theo's smile is calm and composed. "There's no case to make, Mr. Dalton. Vivian has told you everything. If you don't believe her, I have no reason to think you would believe me." He leans forward, steepling his fingers. "The only question is... who *do* you believe?"

My father pinches the bridge of his nose, then sighs. "I... believe my daughter when she tells me someone took her against her will," he says at last. "And I already have reason to suspect the alliance is on the verge of falling apart. Do I believe *Lucas* is the one behind it...?" He narrows his eyes, once more every inch the calculating businessman I remember from my childhood. "Yes," he says finally. "I think I do. If I wanted the city in shambles so I could pick up the pieces, this is exactly how I would do it: solidify my claim and then take a wrecking ball to the alliance the second Victor steps down." He nods slowly. "There's a war coming."

"The war is here," Theo says. "All we can do now is decide our next move."

"Our'?" Mum asks, still clearly incredulous.

"We're stronger together than we are working on our own," Liam points out. "Wasn't that kind of the whole point of the Dalton-Emmerico alliance?"

"I'm all for working together," Tristan says. "I just don't want to be part of a suicide pact."

"No one said anything about running into the fire," my father says, puffing up a bit.

"But if Lucas is really dismantling our hold on the city, we need to circle the wagons," I finish for him, glancing at the guys. "And that means getting in touch with Victor."

"What?" Violet stares at me, flabbergasted. "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"No, she's right," Liam says. "If he finds out his precious successor is responsible for this, he'll be pissed. Rightfully so. Maybe even enough to depose Lucas before he can do any more damage."

Theo nods, a low hum coming from deep in his chest. "He won't be happy to see me," he says, "but then again, neither will Lucas. We'll need to find neutral ground, somewhere he can't send his men after us."

"I know a place," I say, crossing my arms.

Liam raises his eyebrows at me. "You been holding out on us, Vivi?"

I just smirk. "Let's just say, I was right when I thought this gallery job would come in handy."

"You're talking about Craig Sterling," Tristan says, his eyes widening. "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"His place is as neutral as we'll find in London," I reply. "Nobody worth their salt would fuck with him, especially not on his own turf."

"Lucas and Sienna—"

"Rogue operators," I reply. "They may have attacked Callie at his gallery, but his property is a different story. Not even they would be reckless enough to push for a confrontation, *especially* if Lucas has new alliances to tend to. You don't last long in this city fucking with men like Craig."

"So it's settled, then," Theo says. "We arrange a meeting with my father and brother to discuss a stalemate. Someone will need to get in touch with Sterling."

"On it," my father says, already pulling out his phone. "Violet, Melissa, if you'd come with me for a minute..." They retreat to make nice with Craig (not a task I envy), leaving me alone with the guys once more.

"That just leaves you, Kid," Theo says, turning to face me, and that's when I realize both Liam and Tristan are watching me, too, their expressions warm with affection and concern.

"If you all think you can tell me to stay away," I reply, crossing my arms, "I'm going to have to tell you that you're out of your fucking minds."

Liam chuckles. "Nothing of the sort, Vivi," he says, reaching a hand out to place it on my arm.

"We just want to make sure you're safe," Tristan adds.

"I won't be able to protect you if I'm dealing with my brother," explains Theo. "He's unpredictable. We can't guarantee anything."

"If this thing with Lucas is finally ending," I reply, "then I have a right to see it."

Theo nods, a hint of his characteristic half-smile returning to his face. "All right," he says, running a hand through his hair, "then we're all agreed. You're as much a part of this as anyone else. You're going to help us put this shit to rest, once and for all."

"Damn right," I agree, trying not to let my nerves show. "Until then, what's our move?"

"We hit Lucas where it hurts," Tristan replies, the love in his voice giving way to cold determination. "His alliance with Sienna."

My heart stops. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," he says, his expression darkening. "We're pulling her out from under him. This ends, one way or another."

Chapter Eleven



We sit around the kitchen table at the bed and breakfast, all our eyes on Tristan as he takes out his phone and dials Sienna's number. Funny how I'm more nervous for this than I was to talk to my parents.

We'll see if you still feel that way once Dad sets up the meeting, a voice in my head quips, and my stomach drops a little.

"You don't have to do this, you know," Liam reminds Tristan. "We can put her out of commission some other way."

"She wants to talk to me," Tristan replies, analytical as always. "We can't afford to lose a potential asset, and Sienna's not incapable of reason. If I can just bring her around..."

Theo presses his lips together, arms crossed. "Let's hope you're right," is all he says.

Tristan puts the phone on speaker and lets us listen as it rings, each of us waiting with bated breath for the voice of his psycho ex-girlfriend to come through. It's getting into the evening by now, and just when I think it's going to go through to voicemail, Sienna's distinctive Italian accent projects over the line. "Hello?"

"Sienna," begins Tristan, and I can hear the strain in his voice. "It's me."

There's a beat of silence, then... "Tristan?" I can practically hear the smile in her voice, but it's guarded, like she's scared to get her hopes up. "How... how are you?"

"I've been better," he acknowledges, and I see him glance at me. He

seems to be looking for reassurance, so I put a hand on his arm. "But I don't want to get into that right now. I've got something I need to talk to you about."

There's another moment of silence. "That's it?" she asks, and I catch a hint of disdain. "Shouldn't you be asking me if I've missed you? Because believe me, I have."

"Don't," Tristan growls. "I'm not here to play games with you."

"About what?" she asks playfully.

"I'll explain when I see you," Tristan insists. The strain in his voice betrays how uncomfortable this is making him, and I have to grit my teeth to keep from making a snarky comment.

"I'm afraid that's not good enough," Sienna croons. "You know how things are out there these days. If I'm going to stick my neck out, I hope you can give me a... *captivating* reason."

Tristan turns to Theo, who thinks for a moment and then gives a brusque nod. "You're working with Lucas Emmerico," he says into the phone.

There's another pause, this one so long that I start to worry she's hung up on us. "And just where did you hear this?"

"That's not important," Tristan replies. "I just need to know if it's true."

"What would you say if I didn't tell you?"

"Sienna," Tristan growls, "this isn't a fucking joke. Lucas is turning the city upside down looking for Vivian, and—"

"Oh, for the love of god, not *her* again," Sienna interrupts. "Honestly, Tristan, I don't see why everyone in this town is so wrapped around that little girl's finger. What is she to you, anyway? She's beautiful, yes, but she's so... bland."

Tristan grits his teeth, gripping the phone so hard it looks like he might crush it. "It's a yes or a no, Sienna."

She gives a put-upon sigh. "Fine, fine. I've done some business with Lucas. Strictly professional, believe me. Now why don't you tell me what this is about?"

"An alliance," Tristan says. "I want you to cut ties with him and come work for us and Theo."

"Is that so?" Sienna purrs. "And what would I gain from this?"

"Money, security, power," Tristan says.

"Come on, Tristan," his ex-girlfriend replies. "Enough with the table stakes. You know what I really want."

I feel myself bristle with jealousy, and I have to force myself to relax. That's nothing compared to the way Tristan is reacting, though. He's glaring at the phone, his nails digging into his palms. "Will you or won't you?" he spits.

"I guess that will depend on how this little 'meeting' of ours plays out, doesn't it?" Sienna replies.

Tristan closes his eyes for a moment, drawing a breath. "Where can we meet?" he asks finally.

His ex-girlfriend clicks her tongue, clearly unaware that there are other people listening in. "What's the rush, darling? We've got all the time in the world, and all this talk of the future is making me feel... well, nostalgic. Care to reminisce with me?"

"Don't make me do this over the phone," Tristan threatens, and there's a tremor in his voice. "You've been hassling me to talk every day since I ended things. Now I'm giving you the chance. Where can we meet?"

There's another pause, and then all the coquettishness is gone from her voice. "I always forget how direct you are, darling," Sienna purrs. How about you come down to the Diamond Lounge? That was where we first met, if memory serves..."

"Give me an hour to get there," Tristan says. "I'll be bringing my people. This isn't a social call."

"Shame," Sienna replies, unbothered. "I'll just have to take what I can get."

"One hour," Tristan reiterates. "And I'm not your darling."

Sienna chuckles indulgently and hangs up the phone, as I'm brought immediately back to the way she went at me back at Lucas's place. Something verging on rage builds in my chest at the thought of that, but I force myself to take a few deep breaths.

"Guess that went as well as could be expected," Liam quips.

Tristan exhales, running a hand through his jet black hair. "I sure as hell hope so."

"You think the Diamond Lounge is a good idea?" I ask, thinking back to my first encounter with Theo there, all those months ago. It's a place for made men, heavy hitters, and friends of the families, and right now it's bound to be crawling with enemies.

"It has to be," Theo replies, crossing his arms. "Everyone's armed to the teeth there. Bodyguards are common. We'll blend in."

"Sienna's going to be pissed when she see us with you," Liam points out, glancing at me. "She probably still thinks this is a chance at reconciliation."

"She can think whatever the hell she wants," Tristan replies. "Nobody will come at us in there, not if they don't want to risk a public shootout. Guys, we all know what we're going up against, right?" His eyes linger on me, dark and intense.

"Of course," I whisper, holding his gaze.

Tristan nods, satisfied. "Alright. We'll see how this thing goes, then. If this works, we'll have gained an ally."

"And if it doesn't?" I ask as we start getting up from the table.

Theo's the one who answers for him, his silver eyes gleaming. "Then we'll have put another target on our backs."

The Diamond Lounge is hopping by the time we walk through the doors, and, as always, I'm taken aback by how swanky the place is. Everything gleams beautifully, the lights on the chandeliers sending off sparkles that glance off the polished hardwood floor. The sign above the door says that it's been around longer than I've been alive, and I can tell just by the look of it. The interior is jammed with opulent decor: red velvet on the walls and mirrors, chandeliers hanging from a high ceiling, and enough private rooms and alcoves that I bet nothing happens here that management doesn't know about. This was the place I snuck off to after I turned eighteen; as naive as I was, I thought it was the kind of place a normal rebellious debutante should have gone. It turns out, I was right—except I ended up becoming a debutante in the worst way imaginable. I'm hoping that at the very least I can still blend in.

Tristan called ahead, and the hostess quickly escorts us to a private alcove at the back that's separated from the rest of the room by a velvet drape. Theo and I sit side by side on a leather sofa, with Liam and Tristan across from us in armchairs. The hostess is gone a moment later, drawing the curtain and leaving us in privacy. I ignore the tightness in my chest, even as my hand finds the spot where I was concussed. I have to stay cool and composed, but the thought that Sienna somehow figured out our game, that she's going to walk in, guns blazing, with Lucas at her side, is enough to keep me sharp.

Like clockwork, the curtain is pulled back and a stunning woman in a slinky black dress glides into the room. She's not dressed for a business meeting, but I guess I shouldn't be surprised; she wears her obsession with Lucas on her sleeve, and likely sees this as her chance to reel him in under

the pretense of making a deal. It makes me nervous, and not just because she's brought two heavyweight bodyguards with her. She's likely carrying, just like everyone else here.

"Hello, boys," she says as the curtain drops closed behind her. Her eyes light up with cunning as they drift from Tristan to the guys. "Theo. Liam. I would say this is a pleasant surprise, but..." She shrugs her shoulders. "Well, you know how it is. At any rate, long time no see. "

"Not long enough," I reply before I can stop myself, crossing my arms over my chest.

Sienna's eyes drift to me, and in that instant, all the air seems to go out of the room. Gone is the sultry tone that flowed from her lips like honey, replaced by a hard, dour glare. My eyes drift down to the hand at her side and the gun I know is concealed there. This was a bad idea. "What the fuck are you doing here?" she demands, taking a step towards me. "What the *fuck* are you doing here?"

Tristan springs to his feet, anger flashing across his face. "Don't you dare speak to her that way," he snaps.

"Tristan..." I begin.

Ignoring me, Sienna sets her sights on him. "Babe," she says, "you didn't tell me she would be here."

Tristan's expression ices over, his simmering anger threatening to reach a boiling point. "How do you know what she looks like, Sienna?" he asks, his voice low and menacing. "As I recall, you've never seen her face. So how do you know?"

Realizing her mistake, Sienna fumbles for a moment, only to level me with a hard glare. "All right," she says, "you got me. Red-handed." She laughs, that same condescending chuckle I've quickly come to loathe—except there's something underneath it that makes me nervous: the same half-mad intonation that broke through when she was arguing with Lucas.

Fuck, I think, my breath catching in my chest. I shouldn't have come with them. If just *seeing* me is enough to set her off, then having me involved in the negotiations is a recipe for disaster.

I'm getting ready to excuse myself, but it's too late. "I suppose she's told you everything, yes?" Sienna goes on, taking a step toward Tristan. "Filling your head up with stories of how I tried to kill her? How she only made it out of her apartment by the skin of her teeth?"

Tristan's jaw visibly tenses. "You're not going to bait us, Sienna," he says.

"You've pulled this shit a million times with me, and it's not going to work now."

"Bait you?" Sienna asks, anger flashing across her pristine features. "*Bait you?* I'll tell you what, Tristan: I don't know what kind of lies she's been telling you, but I never tried to kill her. I know exactly what she's doing."

"Is that right?" I demand, struggling to keep my temper in check. "What exactly do you think I'm doing?"

"She's trying to confuse you, Tristan." Sienna slinks forward another step. "She's trying to steal you away from me."

"No," Tristan says, shaking his head. "No, that's not it."

"You're not listening to me!" Sienna explodes, her eyes shooting daggers in my direction. At the edge of the nook, one of her bodyguards puts his hand on his sidearm; Liam puts a protective arm in front of me, and Theo looks ready to spring to his feet. "It was never supposed to be you and her, Tristan! It was supposed to be you and *me!*"

"Sienna, please." I get up, holding my hands up placatingly as I realize how close we are to a confrontation. "There are bigger things at stake here. Lucas—"

"I don't give a *fuck* about Lucas!" Sienna snarls, rounding on me, her eyes blazing. "How dare you tell me what the stakes are, you conniving little—"

"That's enough," Theo snaps, getting to his feet and whipping his gun from its holster. "Everyone take it easy before someone gets hurt."

Sienna barks out a laugh. "You think you get to throw orders around, Emmerico? Last time I checked, you aren't even supposed to be back in London!"

"Guys," Liam says, exchanging a look with me. Things are rapidly getting out of hand. "We're here to talk about an alliance."

"To hell with that," Sienna snaps, all her attention returning to Tristan. "You lured me here under false pretenses. I've lost enough time with you to this little bitch; I'm not going to lose any more!"

Slowly, I put my hand on Tristan's shoulder. His muscles are as tense as iron, and I can practically see the anger radiating off him in waves. I can also see that Sienna's men are preparing to draw their weapons; my eyes dart over to Liam, and who's inches from pulling his own.

"Sienna, you need to listen to me," Tristan says, finally picking up on the imminent danger.

"No, *you* need to listen to *me*," Sienna rages, undeterred. "You and me,

Tristan. Everything I've done, I did it for you and me.”

"I never asked for that!" Tristan fires back. "I never asked for any of this! I never wanted any of this! I just wanted a normal fucking life, Sienna!”

A strange, desperate look comes over her face. "But you can't have that anymore, can you?" she says. "None of us can." Her expression growing distant, she draws her gun from a thigh holster just above the slit of her cocktail dress. "Just tell me one thing, Tristan," she commands in a voice that's eerily calm. "Do you love her?”

Tristan stares her down for a long moment, placing a protective hand on my waist, seemingly without even realizing he's doing it. "Yes," he replies without hesitation. "We all do.”

"I see," Sienna replies, and that's when she opens fire.

Chapter Twelve



In hindsight, it *really* would have been better if I'd stayed home.

That's the last thought I have a chance to think before the entire alcove lights up in an explosion of gunfire. Tristan and I hit the deck, and Liam and Sienna charge for each other, guns blazing. I scramble to my feet, vaguely aware of the sounds of shouting in the dining room. Tristan shields me with his body as he begins to return fire, all of our bodyguards—as well as some of the guards employed by the club—descending on the alcove en masse.

Bodies begin to drop with sickening thuds; I feel something smack into my shoulder, and the taste of copper fills my mouth as I bite my tongue.

Tristan, his face drawn and pale with concern, shouts something at me that I don't quite catch. I struggle to focus, fighting my way to a seated position behind the table, which someone—Theo, maybe—overturned to act as a barrier. Liam is skirting around the back edge of the alcove as bodyguards volley shots back and forth, but in the low light, I can't even tell who's shooting at whom.

"Hey," Theo shouts, reaching for me. "Hey, kid, are you okay? Did she get you?"

"I'm fine," I shout back, just as someone from Sienna's side crashes through the table in front of us, blood gushing from a wound in his shoulder.

"Theo, watch out!" I cry.

Theo pushes me back behind him as the wounded bodyguard collapses to

the floor. To my left, another bodyguard goes down in a hail of bullets. I scramble back to my feet and duck down behind one of the couches, smacking my head on the way as several of Sienna's guards continue to close in on us.

"The exit's that way," Tristan shouts, and I realize that everyone's converging on the back of the alcove, toward Liam. We're in the very middle; if we try to push through toward the front, we'll get caught in the crossfire.

Liam, who is already crouched low, rounds the side of the alcove and disappears from my sight, and I strain to hear any signs of him above the shots, shouts, and screams around me. I don't know where Sienna is, but if we can just make it to the main room...

Tristan gets to his feet and shoves me behind him, shielding me, just as she comes barreling toward us, her face contorted in a snarl. Her eyes are wild, her face turning red with rage, and I think for a moment that she's finally going to shoot me. But instead of pulling the trigger, Sienna lunges, knocking Tristan and me to the floor. A grunt of pain escapes him as he hits his injured ribs, and that makes me see red.

My training kicking in, I push up onto my knees and slam my elbow down into Sienna's head. She tumbles backward, and I hear her gun clatter to the floor, even as I pivot and slam my foot into her ribs. I sense her thinking the same thing I am, and we both lunge for it, gunfire erupting dangerously close to our heads as the guys yell in the background.

Sienna grabs my ankle, dragging me back to the floor, and I buck against her, trying to shake her hand off. But, like Tristan, my injuries aren't healed yet, and I'm flagging; I kick at her again, but she's just too strong.

"I'm going to kill you," Sienna hisses, her hand closing around the grip of her pistol, and for a moment I'm back in Lucas's apartment, watching my death happen in slow motion right before my eyes.

I flinch back, ready for the darkness to consume me, but that's when a deafening crack pierces the air. I watch, my eyes wide and my breath stolen, as Sienna slumps onto her side, blood blooming across her shoulder and chest in an obscene blossom. One of her men shouts something, and another makes a beeline for his employer, but the fight comes to a sudden stop when a swarm of club security guards—along with several other "unofficial" employees—comes pouring into the alcove.

I drop to my hands and knees at the realization that I'm covered in Sienna's blood, and one look at her lying motionless on the floor tells me

what I already know: she's dead.

My stomach drops.

A dark figure comes into view above me, and I try to sit up, blinking, desperate not to pass out from the shock. "All right, Vivi?" Liam asks, holstering his gun.

"You..." I manage, swallowing. "You shot her."

"She was going to kill you," Theo says, approaching from the side of the nook. "Didn't you hear us shouting?"

I nod, and Liam crouches down in front of me. "I'm glad you're okay, Vivi."

I nod, slowly, the fight catching up to me. My head is spinning. "I'm going to pass out," I murmur, and then I do.

I don't remember getting up, but when I come to, I find myself lying across Tristan's lap in the back seat of the Range Rover, his arms wrapped tightly around me and his face pressed against my hair. His breath is warm against my neck, and I can feel the rapid beat of his heart against my skin. Outside the window, the city lights race by as Liam drives us back in the direction of the bed and breakfast.

"Tristan," I murmur.

"You're okay," he says. "You're okay, Vivian. God, I'm so sorry."

I struggle to sit up, the back seat spinning a little, but the steady weight of his hands on my body helps ground me. "It's okay," I assure him, reaching around and pressing a hand to his cheek. "I'm all right. I think."

"You fainted dead away back there," Theo says from the front seat.

"It was Sienna," I reply, doing my best not to look at the blood on my dress. "I... I didn't think we would..."

"We had to, Kid," Theo replies, reaching back to put a hand on my knee. "It was her or us. No need to apologize, Tristan," he adds, shooting a glance at his friend.

"I should've seen it coming," Tristan says, stroking my hair. "I didn't realize she was so far gone."

"None of us did, man," Liam replies, glancing at me in the rear view mirror and throwing me a heart-melting wink. "But we're all okay, so let's just count ourselves lucky."

"Yeah," I murmur, closing my eyes and leaning against Tristan. "Let's do that."

"We can't," Tristan replies. "Everyone in the city will be talking about

this come tomorrow morning. They'll all know you're back in town, Theo, and who knows how the DiMarco family will spin this?" He groans in frustration, slamming his head against the back of the seat. "*Fuck*, this is all my fault."

"Hey." I reach up to make him look at me, running my fingers over his chiseled jaw. "You guys are okay. I'm okay. That's all that matters right now. I promise."

This seems to placate him, and he takes my hand in his, our fingers entwining. The rest of the drive is silent, and as Liam steers us into the parking lot of the inn, it occurs to me that this is exactly what the guys have been preparing me for. They may not have anticipated falling for me, but that doesn't change the fact that returning to London was always going to end in bloodshed.

And if I don't have the stomach to fight off Sienna DiMarco without fainting, how am I supposed to go up against my own husband?

As I'm getting out of the car, ready to take the world's longest shower, Theo's cell phone starts to ring. "Hang on, guys," he says. "I need to take this." He walks a few feet away, eyeing his phone.

"Who was it?" I ask when he ends the call, noticing a strange look on his face.

"It was your father," Theo replies, his expression unreadable. "He's gotten us a meeting with Lucas and my old man."

Chapter Thirteen



The trip back to Sterling's suburban estate the following night feels like the longest drive of my life. I'm exhausted, but filled with a mounting sense of dread at the same time, and as I sit between the guys in the back of the limo, it's all I can do to keep quiet and try to make sense of the whirlwind of thoughts running through my head.

"You okay, Vivi?" Liam asks, touching my shoulder.

I take a deep breath, trying to push the anxiety back down. "Yeah, I'm okay. I just..." I swallow. "I have a bad feeling about this."

"So do I," Theo replies, "but this is the closest we'll ever get to a peace talk. We have to take advantage of the opportunity. We'll take care of Lucas once he's no longer a threat."

His voice is hard and cold, and I can't help but remember the time he pulled a gun on the man who tried to attack me when I was out partying with Callie, the look of ruthless calculation on his face. That look is back now, and as I look from Liam to Tristan, I notice that each of them is wearing a similar expression. I don't know how to go cold like that. I don't know how to raise myself to the occasion, to be ready to fight, to kill, to die for the men I love. I just don't know how... and I wish I had the courage to tell them.

But there's no way I can say that out loud, not when I'm staring down the possibility of *negotiating* with the man who's made my life a living hell ever since I walked down the aisle.

Craig Sterling opens the front door before we can knock, looks me over,

and says, "Well, at least you're not filthy this time. That's a step in the right direction."

"Nice to see you too," I quip, unable to help myself even in the throes of my nerves.

"Best watch the attitude, Emmerico," my former boss tells me. "You owe me. I'm still trying to get the mud out of the upstairs carpets."

"Is my father already here?" Theo asks, his tone businesslike.

"In the library, along with Andrew Dalton," Sterling replies. "Your brother hasn't shown his face yet. I've got to give the bastard credit for audacity."

"Right." Theo squares his shoulders, straightening his tie. "No use dawdling. Let's get this over with."

"Couldn't have said it better myself," Sterling gripes, waving us in and turning towards the reading room without another word.

Liam and Tristan start to follow him, but I catch hold of Liam's sleeve and pull him back, nodding to Theo, who touches Tristan's shoulder. The guys all turn around, nodding brusquely as I jerk my head to the side. As Sterling's pleasantries to Victor and my father waft in from the other room, we step out of the line of view and gather close.

"Are we ready?" I ask.

Liam smirks. "Look how far you've come, Vivi. Calling huddles and everything." He straightens up. "Luckily for you, I'm ready as I'll ever be." His expression darkens. "Only shame is I don't get to put a bullet in the bastard myself."

"Don't speak too soon," Tristan cautions. "If this goes down badly, you may have that opportunity."

"So what's our move?" Theo asks.

"I was thinking—" Tristan begins, but my brother-in-law holds up a hand.

"I think we should hear from Vivian," Theo says, his expression serious. "This is what we've been preparing you for, kid. What's our move?"

I look from one boyfriend to the next, flabbergasted. "Are you seriously asking me to plan our escape?"

"More or less," Liam nods. "No pressure, right?" He grins.

"Yeah, uh..." I gesture uselessly at myself, looking down at my heels. "I'm not exactly James Bond over here."

"We're not asking you to be," Theo replies. "Think about what you've learned, kid."

"What is this, some kind of test?" I ask, panic starting to rise in me.

"Hardly," Theo replies. "When the shit hits the fan, kid, we need to be decisive—and that includes you. This is our chance to show the rest of London that we're not just going to roll over and die. No matter what, we need to demonstrate that we're not to be fucked with. The sooner you show that kind of power, Kid, the sooner the rest of this city will see you for what you are."

"And what exactly *am* I?" I ask, crossing my arms.

"A fucking badass," Liam replies.

Tristan nods. "You're more than a mafia princess, Vivian. You always have been. You were born to be a leader; now's your chance to become one."

I swallow, nod, and peer around the corner into the sitting room. *Focus*, I tell myself. *What would the guys do?* "There are guards at every entrance," I assess finally, turning back to them. "But they're Sterling's. They won't have orders to shoot unless he tells them otherwise."

"So we're clear," Tristan nods, his blue eyes glittering.

"That's not all," I continue. "He's got guards on the roof, too. And the windows will be locked—but that doesn't mean they won't break, especially if we shoot from the inside. Getting out isn't the issue; it's getting out without getting our heads blown off."

"Exactly," Theo replies approvingly.

"So what's the game plan?" Liam asks me. "Theo and I take out the guards while you and Tristan make a break for it?"

"Lucas will be expecting that," I reply. "After last time, we have to assume he's planned for this." I think for another moment and then say, "That means we need to do the opposite. But Liam is our combatant, and if things go south, we'll need you to suppress fire."

"Nicely done, Vivi," Liam pronounces.

"That just leaves you, Theo," I finish, crossing my arms and turning to him. "The last person Lucas will expect to run away from a showdown with him. If things go south, we rendezvous at the B&B and regroup once we're all back."

Theo nods, a slow smile spreading across his face. "That's our girl," he says, and he and the guys pull me into a tight embrace. "Now let's put an end to this."

Head held high, I lead the group into the reading room: a circular chamber looking out over the lush garden at the center of Craig's property.

It's furnished with long, low couches and tall glass cabinets filled with Sterling's prized personal art collection. Most of the guards are gathered at the base of the stairs, laughing and chatting, their attention far removed from their surroundings. Maybe this will be easier than I thought.

Victor Emmerico is seated in the center of the room, saying something to a pair of his men as he puffs from a cigar. My father sits on the couch opposite him, surrounded by his men, and when his eyes meet mine, his expression is almost deliberately neutral.

Spotting me, Victor's face goes stony and he signals to his men—half a dozen of them, all of them packing heat. They stand to attention as he gets up, letting his cigar drop into an ashtray on the table. "Well, well, well," he says, his eyes on Theo, "the prodigal son returns. And what's all this?" He glances at Liam and Theo, who have taken their positions on either side of me, their hands on their sidearms. "Raising an army of misfits, are we? Let me guess: traitors from the old org? Defectors from the alliance? Am I getting warmer?"

"You're getting warm," I confirm, "but that's not why they're here."

"And if it isn't my darling daughter-in-law," Victor says, crossing his arms as he starts toward me. The guys immediately tense up, and he raises a hand to calm them. "Relax. I'm not here to touch your little toy. I'm just... impressed, is all. You've certainly grown into more of a spitfire than when I last saw you, Vivian."

"Watch your mouth," Theo hisses, stepping in front of me, but Victor merely smirks.

"What? Did I hit a nerve?" he asks, his voice hardening. "A touch too personal? Well, for what it's worth, *Mrs. Emmerico*, your marriage to my son was the worst business decision I've ever made... second only to your decision to get cozy with Theo and his friends here."

He scoffs, and I grit my teeth. "We're not here to talk about me," I retort, struggling to keep my voice level. "We're here to talk about Lucas, and the damage he's causing to this city."

"Vivian..." My father cautions, getting up from his seat. I can see the warning in his eyes, and I know what he's trying to say: I have to be diplomatic.

But to my surprise, Victor's expression hardens, and for the briefest of moments, something like regret swims in his eyes. But it's gone almost as soon as it appears, and I'm left wondering whether I'm just projecting.

"Damage?" he asks, his voice growing distant. "Yes, you would know all about damage, wouldn't you?"

"What the hell is that supposed to—" Liam starts, but Tristan puts a hand on his arm and shakes his head no.

"Victor," my father says, taking charge, "you and I both know how much... *friction* has existed between our families over the years. I don't think it's unfair to say it's clouded our judgement." He takes a breath. "But my daughter is right. Lucas isn't a strategist. He shoots first and asks questions later. That might have been fine back in the days when every family was vying for their piece of the pie and it was every man for himself around here, but it's not a strategy that's conducive to the kind of lasting peace we need today."

"Please," Victor says, shaking his head as his lip curls up into a sneer. "You're not fooling anyone with this talk of peace. What do you know about peace? You're going to stand here and talk about the peace that the Emmericos and the Daltons made when our kids got married? The peace that's lasted for how long now?" He glances at me, his eyes burning. "Six months? Some golden age this has been."

My cheeks burn, but I don't look away, and Tristan puts a reassuring hand on my arm.

Victor continues, undeterred. "Our so-called 'peace' was fucked from the second you two walked down the aisle. The other families were never just going to fall in line. Consolidating power only works when it's being used as a carrot to dangle in front of the other families. But running a city like London was always going to call for the stick." He makes a vague gesture around the room. "Where do you think all this came from, huh? Because it certainly wasn't playing nice."

"You've sure changed your tune," Theo remarks coolly. "Has Lucas really gotten that deep into your head, Dad?"

"That's a question I can answer for myself," comes a new voice, and the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I turn just in time to see Lucas sauntering in from the entryway, half a dozen of his men in tow... and they're all armed to the teeth. "Hello, darling," he says, shooting me a predatory grin. "Glad I didn't miss the party."

"Son," Victor says flatly, unimpressed. "You're late."

"Am I?" my husband asks idly, his eyes still boring into me. Theo extends a protective hand out in front of me, and Liam and Tristan draw closer to my

right and left. "My bad. I had a couple urgent messes to clean up. I'm sure you understand. You've got some nerve, Vivian," he adds, his eyes never leaving mine. Tristan's body is practically humming with tension beside me, but I don't even spare him a glance. I'm too focused on the man who's now tried to kill me more than once.

"You'd think after all this time, you'd have learned your place," Lucas continues, "but I guess some people never do." He turns to my father. "Tell you what, Andrew," he says, waltzing into our midst like he owns the place. "I'll let you off the hook for pawning your daughter off on me."

Liam stiffens, and out of the corner of my eye I see his hand creeping toward his gun.

"Hell, I'll even let this little 'alliance' of yours keep puttering along when I take the city," Lucas continues, neither noticing nor caring. "*If you fall in line.*"

My dad chuckles. "You really think you're in a position to give orders?"

"*I know I am,*" Lucas replies, glancing at his father. "Tell him, Dad. Tell him how you're handing the reins over to me."

Victor narrows his eyes at him. "Mind your tone, Lucas. Last time I checked, I'm still in charge around here. Anything I give, I can take away. You'll take what I offer you, and we'll deal with your little coup later."

"Coup d'etat?" Lucas laughs, clapping his hands together. "That's rich. The only coup I see going on is you trying to withhold what's rightfully mine. All these theatrics, all this playing me off Theo, and for what? So you can hold onto power for another few months? Another year? It's pathetic."

Victor blanches. One of his men has come to stand beside him, his hand on his pistol. "You don't get to speak to me that way."

"Really? You want to throw your weight around now?" Lucas's eyes have gone black, and I'm reminded of what Callie said in the hospital.

When Lucas attacked me, he got this look in his eyes. Like he wanted to hurt me. Like he was enjoying it.

My blood runs cold, the first alarm bells going off in the back of my mind. Lucas's men are moving slowly closer to us, and although they haven't drawn arms, their hands are twitching impatiently at their sides, ready at a moment's notice.

This was a bad idea, I realize. Did we really think he would be willing to negotiate?

But I don't have time to follow that train of thought, because Theo gives a

cool chuckle. "Damn, Lucas. I knew you were short-sighted, but this is on another level." He crosses his arms. "You do realize everything's conditional with our old man, don't you? You realize his promises are only as good as our ability to fall in line?"

"Shut the fuck up, Theo," Lucas spits, rounding on him. "I don't need a brotherly lecture. You're lucky I don't sic my men on you on principle. And as for your so-called 'conditions', *Dad*," he adds, turning back to Victor, "you can shove them up your ass. I'm not here to make nice."

"Then why are you here?" I demand, stepping forward, unable to contain myself any longer. "To posture and make threats? To convince yourself you have some claim to this city? To *me*? You're delusional." I jerk my head back at Theo, Tristan, Liam, and the other assembled men. "And you're outnumbered. So *why are you here, sweetheart?*" My tone oozes derision.

A shark-like grin spreads across Lucas's face, and I realize too late that it's not directed at me. I might as well not even exist, because my husband's attention is all on my father and Victor. "Why am I here?" he asks distantly. "I guess you could say I'm here with a question."

"What question is that?" Victor asks, examining his fingernails as if he's bored by his son's theatrics.

"Whether you'd be willing to go out peacefully," Lucas replies, and the vague alarm in the back of my mind is now ringing at full fucking volume. "And it looks like I have my answer."

My hand flies out to grab Theo's arm, panic surging through me. Something is very, very wrong.

Victor chuckles, not even looking at Lucas. "You really think that, boy? That's how you get yourself killed." He glances up, his eyes flinty. "Now, go on. Raise your arms and fall in line, or I swear, you won't get a single fucking scrap when I—"

Those are the last words Victor Emmerico ever says.

The events unfold in slow motion before me, and I can barely hear my own shout of panic over the thundering of my heartbeat. I watch as Lucas gives a nod to one of Victor's own men—the one who moved to stand closer to him earlier. Without hesitation, the guard draws his pistol in one fluid movement, puts it to Victor's head, and pulls the trigger. Blood flies, and the leader of the Emmerico family drops to the floor, dead.

I stare in horror and shock, my eyes widening. None of the guys says anything, and even Theo, for all his composure, looks completely blindsided

by what's just happened. For a moment, nobody speaks, and then Lucas breaks the silence. "Thanks, Reggie," he says to Victor's bodyguard.

"What the fuck are you doing?" my father demands, drawing his gun and training it on Lucas.

"Taking charge," Lucas replies, not even looking at him. "Boys," he says, turning to the rest of his men, "I happily accept your nomination to lead the Emmerico syndicate. It's a tough job, but somebody has to do it." He chuckles at his own joke. "As for you, Dalton," he adds, glancing at my father, "consider this your final warning. You want peace? You'll give me control."

"Like hell," my father barks, his men drawing their own guns.

"Shame," Lucas says, shrugging his shoulders, "but no surprise, I guess." He signals to his men, then nods to Victor's bodyguards, who are still standing around, completely nonplussed. "Kill them all."

In the space of a few seconds, the reading room erupts into chaos. Lucas's men move first, Victor's men already in action as all of them begin shooting indiscriminately at us and Craig's guys. *They were all on his side*, I realize belatedly. *Victor's men were working for Lucas this whole time.*

That's all I have time to process before a stray bullet whizzes past my ear, coming within centimeters of clipping me. Our men are only moments slower to react, roaring in anger as they draw their weapons. Theo moves to cover me as the first bullets from our side start flying. Tristan yells and begins to fire back from behind us as Liam pushes ahead, drawing his gun. Theo grips my wrist, pulling me down to keep me away from the shots as we rush to escape the line of fire.

Stick to the plan, I remind myself through my panic. *We knew this was a possibility.*

"What's the matter, Theo?" Lucas demands as we duck behind a bookshelf, crouching and trying our very best to keep low. "Afraid to fight your own battles now? Or do you just like the idea of getting away with your little bitch that much?"

He's taunting us, trying to get Theo to move. To his credit, he stays put, eyes narrowed as he glances protectively at me. I shake my head and point at the doorway, where Craig is returning fire, two of his own bodyguards at his sides. They'll let us through... I hope.

Lucas pauses to reload his gun. Stealing a peek around the shelf, I catch sight of Liam and Tristan sheltering behind an overturned table—*like a*

repeat of the scene at the Diamond Lounge, I think bitterly. Both of them have their guns pointed at Lucas's men. They're safe and accounted for as they volley shots back, but my heart still wrenches with worry for them as I duck back behind cover.

"Tell you what, Theo," Lucas taunts as he finishes reloading his magazine, "You fucked my wife, and you tried to steal what's rightfully mine, but I might still be willing to let you live. Take a knee, and I'll throw Vivian in with the deal, too."

He's lying, of course, and we both know it. "Fuck you," Theo growls under his breath.

Lucas cackles. "You never did know when to give up, did you? Well, it was worth a shot." He turns and fires at Liam and Tristan, and my heart stops when a bullet soars over Liam's head.

He's going scorched earth on us, I think. *He'll never stop until everyone we care about is—*

My thoughts skid to a halt when I realize I don't know where my father is. "Dad?" I shout, trying to look around the bookshelf again.

"We have to go, kid," Theo mutters. "Stick to the plan. First opening we get."

As if on cue, Craig jerks his head at the doorway behind him, and I know this might be our only chance. Theo's eyes meet mine again, and he nods, his mouth set in a grim line. With a breath, we step out from behind the shelf... and right into the line of fire. Bullets ping back and forth, shattering glass and tearing through books, but I barely see them. I'm looking over my shoulder, my eyes locked on Tristan and Liam, who are holding their own.

"Go, Vivi!" Liam shouts in response. "We'll handle this son of a bitch!"

"Get somewhere safe!" Tristan adds. "We'll be right behind you!"

"Not likely," Lucas replies, advancing on them, only to be driven back by a near-hit from Liam's gun. "I'll put your little boy-toys down just like I did your father."

I stop dead in my tracks, my blood running cold.

"Don't listen to him, kid," Theo insists, pulling at my hand. "We have to go!"

But I barely hear him, because in that instant, I see what he's talking about: my father is on the ground, blood pooling around his shoulder. "Dad!" I cry out in anguish, and my knees start to buckle until I feel Theo pull me up again.

"There's no time, kid," he growls.

That finally gets me moving again. My ears are ringing as Craig waves us through the doorway and we barrel out into the main hall, the sight of my father's motionless body filling my head. "We can't just leave him there," I manage as Theo rushes me toward the front door. "We can't—"

"We can't help him now, Vivian," Theo says, his voice low and strained. "Not if we're dead, too."

"Liam and Tristan—"

"They'll be fine." His silver eyes meet mine for a moment, and the look of cool composure in them is the only thing that keeps me from losing it completely. We stagger out onto the darkened lawn and make a break for the Range Rover, seemingly untouched by the chaos inside the house.

"I gotta get Dad," I hear myself say as Theo helps me into the shotgun seat, climbing into the driver's seat moments later and starting the engine. "I can't just walk away without—" I break off when I see Lucas charge out of the house, shouting something, a long rifle in his hands. He points it at us and opens fire, shattering the back window just as the car starts to move. I duck and cover, but my whole body is numb.

"Shit," Theo is muttering, ducking his head as he speeds down the driveway. "Shit, shit, shit."

Lucas shot him, I think, feeling like a broken record. He shot Dad. And if he got Dad, then Tristan and Liam...

I damn near have to smack myself to stop the thought from going any further, but as soon as we're down the block and out of Lucas's line of fire, I lose it. Struggling to breathe, I try to stop the sobs that keep clawing their way up my throat.

"It'll be okay, Vivian," Theo promises, but I can hear the hint of doubt in his voice. He's wound so tightly that he's trembling, the color drained from his face.

"How can you say that? He's my father!" I cry, throwing my hands up. "My father! I can't just—"

"We can't just die, either!" Theo says, his voice rising, too—not with anger, but with worry for me. "I'm not going to let you get hurt, Vivian!"

"He might be okay," I whisper as we speed away, as much to convince myself as to convince Theo. "I didn't see where it hit him. Maybe he... he..." But my voice breaks when I think of Tristan and Liam in there, still stuck in a firefight that I helped create, and the fear and grief hit me all over again.

Theo reaches for me from the driver's seat, taking my hand in his, but he doesn't say anything, and judging by the way his jaw is set, I know he's as torn up as I am. I don't know what else he's thinking, but one thing is perfectly clear: any remaining semblance of the alliance just dissolved before our eyes. And no matter what happens next, we're all in for a world of hurt.

Chapter Fourteen



"You should eat something," Theo murmurs, taking my head from across the table in the kitchen of the bed and breakfast.

I just shake my head. I couldn't eat even if I wanted to. My eyes are glued to the clock above the counter, watching the seconds turn to minutes and then hours. I've lost track of time since we got back, worry and grief paralyzing me, and not even Theo's steadying presence is enough to make the lump in my throat go away.

"Have you heard anything?" I ask in a soft voice, my eyes not leaving the clock.

Theo glances at his phone and shakes his head. "It's only been a few hours," he replies. "They knew this was the meeting point. They'll be here."

"How do you know?" I whisper, turning to him as more tears well up in my eyes. "They could still be in Craig's house right now. Dad could still be there. They..." I trail off, unable to let myself finish. I'm ready to jump out of my skin. I can't stand not knowing, and I can't stand being stuck here doing nothing.

"Vivian," Theo says, leaning his head forward and brushing my hair with his lips, "I've known Liam and Tristan for years. They're not going to let a few stray bullets get the better of them."

"My father did," I reply, and now the tears start in earnest, flowing down my cheeks in big, heavy drops.

"This isn't your fault," he says fiercely, wrapping his arms around me.

"None of this is your fault."

"I should have—"

"You couldn't have known," he cuts me off. "They'll be here. They'll be okay."

I allow him to hold me, my mind going to my mother, and Violet, and then, inevitably, back to the guys. How did we not predict this? How did *I* not predict this? I've seen what Lucas is capable of, I've been on the receiving end of it, and that wasn't enough to make me rethink it. Now everyone I love is in danger, and some of them might already be dead.

Eventually, though, it becomes too much to bear, and I try to get up from my seat. "I have to figure out what's happening," I say, half to myself. "I can't just sit here stewing, not with everyone still—"

But Theo's arms tighten around me, keeping me firmly in place. "You're not going anywhere, kid," he tells me, gently but firmly. "It's too dangerous out there."

"I can't just sit around," I protest, fighting against his arms, but he holds fast.

"I spoke to Mark," he says.

That makes me freeze. "When?" I ask, craning my head to look up at him.

"A few minutes ago, when I stepped outside," Theo replies, his tone slow and deliberate. "It's chaos out there. Word's spreading fast about what happened, and there's no getting ahead of it. By morning, every family in the city will know that Lucas has taken over."

"And my family?" I whisper, hardly daring to ask. "My mom and my sister?"

"I've got eyes on the house," Theo replies. "No one's getting in there without my go-ahead. It will do, for now, but our numbers won't last for long."

"What do you mean?"

"Lucas had my father's men in his pocket," Theo replies, his gray eyes steely. "If he can get the other dons to swear fealty to him, he'll have more resources than he knows what to do with. And I think we can both predict he won't take kindly to defectors."

Slowly I raise my gaze to meet his, and I don't like what I see in those silver orbs. "You're saying people will start leaving?"

"Without the syndicate to hold them together, absolutely," Theo replies. "I'd be surprised if they haven't started already."

I sink lower, feeling my composure collapsing. “And they’ll come for my family,” I say.

Theo doesn’t reply, but his silence says more than enough.

“What about Liam and Tristan?”

“They’ll be here,” he reiterates. “We have to stick to the plan.” He doesn’t bother to add that, if something’s happened to them, there *is* no more plan. And if that’s the case, then we’re screwed already.

* * *

THEO KEEPS AN EYE ON ME AS THE HOURS SLIP AWAY, NO DOUBT WONDERING if I’ll try something stupid, and if he weren’t here to stop me, I probably would. Liam and Tristan are on my mind, along with all the things I haven’t had a chance to say to them, things I always thought I would have time for later. It’s funny how it takes your loved ones being in mortal danger to make you realize how much you love them in the first place.

Theo must understand this, because he doesn’t try to make me go to bed; I doubt he’ll be able to sleep much, either. I keep listening for distant gunshots, the screeching of car tires, screams of pain from the fighting, and even though the night is quiet, that somehow only makes it worse.

A text from Craig alerts me that he’s okay as I’m sitting in the fireplace room with a blanket wrapped around me and Theo stroking my hair: *You really do bring trouble wherever you go, Emmerico.*

I can’t even bring myself to laugh at his cantankerousness; I’m too busy firing off a string of frantic texts asking what became of the guys. I clutch my phone to my chest, my throat thick with worry, and when the reply comes—*I don’t have anything on them. That bastard husband of yours ran me out of my own home*—my heart sinks. Lucas really *is* going scorched-earth on the city’s underground, and without Victor to keep him in line, it won’t be long before there’s blood on the streets.

Just then, a pounding on the front door sets us both on our feet. I rush to answer it, but Theo is quicker. He puts his eye to the peephole, his guard clearly up, and then backs away, his eyes wide with shock. “It’s Liam and Tristan,” he says, his voice thick with relief.

“They’re alive?” I cry out. “They’re here?” I rush to the door and throw it open, only to be pulled into the biggest embrace of my life. Liam and Tristan

are bruised, bloody, and ragged, but they're both still standing, and they've never looked happier to see me.

"Hey, Vivi," Liam murmurs as he presses a kiss to the top of my head. "Looks like you missed us."

"I thought you were dead," I whisper against Tristan's chest. "I was starting to think I'd never see you again."

Tristan wraps a protective arm around me and holds me like I'm his last lifeline. "It's okay," he says. "We're okay, Vivian."

"What the hell happened?" I demand, my voice muffled by Liam's muscled shoulder.

"Long story," Liam says. "Let's just say that husband of yours really made us work for it."

It's a joke, but tears well up in my eyes at the thought of how close they must have been to getting killed, and one look at the state of them tells me it was indeed a close shave: Tristan is clutching his wounded ribs, his shirt collar caked in blood from one of the cuts from the crash, which must have come open during their fight. Liam isn't looking much better, and is sporting a nasty-looking black eye, along with a makeshift bandage on his upper arm and an array of other bruises.

I cling to them both for dear life as Theo looks on with a rough smile. "I was just telling her you guys were tougher than anything that bastard can throw at you," he says as he joins the cluster hug, and for the first time since the meeting, surrounded by their sturdy, unyielding forms, I allow myself to relax. I didn't know it was possible to be this exhausted and this relieved at the same time.

"You were out of contact for a while," Theo remarks finally as we break apart. "How'd you manage to get out of there?"

Tristan winces, his blue eyes drifting to me and then back. "Let's get inside first," he says, "and then we'll tell you everything."

"It was a firefight," Liam explains once we're all inside and sitting by the fire. I'm between him and Tristan, each of them seemingly unwilling to let go of me, while Theo stands by the fireplace, his expression grim. "As soon as Lucas saw you guys making a break for it, he tried to give chase. We would have been able to stop him if his men hadn't been in the way. They caught up to us right as we were retreating."

"The numbers weren't in our favor," Tristan, analytical as always, adds. "Even with backup, we wouldn't have been able to shoot our way out."

"Then how did you?" Theo asks.

Tristan glances at him. "We took a hostage."

"Not a smart move," Theo says. I can see his muscles tensing, his fists clenching and unclenching. "Lucas doesn't give a shit."

"No, he doesn't," Tristan agrees, "but his men did."

"Except by the time we were out of the building, Lucas had reinforcements showing up at Sterling's," Liam explains.

"Holy shit," I mutter. "The son of a bitch planned this from the very beginning."

Tristan nods slowly. "He was expecting us to try to make a break for it. We made it halfway down the street and found more of his guys ready and waiting. We had to jump out and walk the rest of the way here. Didn't even have time to grab a phone."

My hand flies to my mouth. "That's why it took you so long to make it back."

"We had to duck into more than a few alleyways along the way," Liam says. "Made men are everywhere, and I can't even fucking tell whose they are anymore."

"Lucas's," Theo replies, without a hint of uncertainty. "He's everywhere you fucking look."

"You've got that right," Tristan agrees.

The silence is palpable as the image of the battle fills my head. The question I'm desperate to ask is on the tip of my tongue, but I can't bring myself to say it.

The others must know what's going through my mind, though. Liam sets aside the half-empty cup of tea he's holding and raises his eyes to meet mine. The sorrow and guilt that fills them are an exact replica of my own, but there's something else there as well, the same rage that I've seen emerge from time to time, clashing with his typically jovial persona. "If we could have taken them all out, we would've," he says. "I hate that we couldn't."

"We didn't have the people for it," Tristan reminds him.

"Which brings us to the issue at hand," Theo says. "How the hell did Lucas manage to convert all of my father's guys so fast? Most of them were loyal for decades."

Tristan shakes his head in disgust. "They were ready for us, Theo, and they were well-armed. They must've been preparing long before we called the meeting. It was a coup, and we didn't see it coming."

Unable to stand it any longer, I raise my gaze and force myself to ask: "And my father? What happened to him? Is he...?"

"One of his guys hauled him out of there as soon as Craig's bodyguards were there to buy them time," Liam replies. "He was hurt, badly, and I didn't get a good look, but..."

"It looked like he was still breathing," Tristan finishes for him.

The breath rushes out of my lungs, but instead of relief that consumes me, it's an overwhelming sense of guilt. Guilt and fear. I cover my mouth with my hand, trying to fight the wave of emotion that crashes over me, and when the tears come again, I can't stop them. Embarrassed, I try to turn away from them, but I'm trapped between Tristan and Liam, whose strong arms wrap around me.

"Shh," he whispers into my ear. "It's all right. He'll be all right. It's not your fault."

Tristan and Theo are there, too, coalescing around me in a protective circle, but it does nothing to quell the sadness that overwhelms me. "I can't do it," I say in a voice that shakes, wiping at my eyes. It's as if all the doubts that have been brewing in the back of my mind are finally finding their voice, and I can't suppress them any longer. The image of my father lying motionless on Craig's floor is too much to bear.

I'm too weak to fight. I'll never have the strength to confront Lucas, face-to-face, about all the things he's done, and if I can't stand up to one sadistic husband, how am I supposed to lead a mafia gang?

I could just leave. The thought comes to me like a cooling breeze on a hot day, and I almost believe it. I could leave it all behind, leave London, leave the criminal underground, and live like I always wanted to growing up as the baby daughter of the Dalton family. I could find myself a new life somewhere else, where I'm not the wife of a mob boss, and forget the pain, the violence, and the loss that I've endured here. The idea is tempting. If I ever thought I would be able to be a leader, I was kidding myself.

"I can't hack it in this world," I say, my gaze dropping to the floor.

"You can," Theo insists. "You are already, kid."

"Am I?" I raise my streaming eyes to him. "You saw what happened to Callie. That happened because of me. Now my father's injured, maybe dying, and that happened because of me, too. I'm scared shitless. I don't have the guts for this." I glance from him to the others. "I know you guys thought I was the one for this job, but I'm not. All I've done since day one is take stupid

risks that the people I love end up paying for. I can't..." I take an unsteady breath. "I can't risk that happening to you guys, too. I'm so fucking... scared."

"We know you are," Tristan says, putting a hand on my shoulder, "and we're scared too. But that doesn't mean we're not going to fight."

"All this crap would have happened with or without you, kid," Theo adds, running his thumb over my cheek to wipe the tears away. "And we're gonna make damned sure that it doesn't happen again. The only person at fault here is Lucas, and we're going to end this thing or go down fighting."

I just shake my head in response. "I can't," I whisper. "I can't do it. I can't fight him."

"You have to fight, Vivi." Liam pulls me into his arms. "You have to fight for yourself, and you have to fight for your family. Your city. And you know what?" He pulls back, his green eyes meeting mine. "You may be afraid, but you're also strong. You're the strongest fucking person we know."

"I don't feel very strong right now," I say.

"I wish you could see what we see," Tristan says, taking my hand in both of his. "You survived how many months of being married to that bastard? You survived getting shot, you survived getting kidnapped, you survived all the shit he's put you through. You've got so much strength, and so much potential. You can go as far as you want."

"He's right," Theo adds, taking my chin in his fingers and turning me to look at him. "You're a survivor, Vivian. And you *are* a fighter, whether you believe it or not. And that guilt you feel?" He drops down so he can look me in the eyes. "That desire to keep the people you love safe? That's not a weakness, kid; it's a superpower. It's something Lucas doesn't—and will never—have. And when this is all behind us, and we rule the city, that's what's going to make you our Queen."

I stare at him, the first man I ever loved, and then turn to Liam and Tristan, the men whom I have grown to love just as strongly, even if I haven't known them as long. The love in their eyes is so strong that it makes me weak in the knees, and they're looking at me with so much, hope, so much faith...

"You guys really think that?" I whisper.

"Damn right, we do," Tristan answers. "And you should, too."

None of their expressions falter. None of their eyes leave mine. And despite everything that's gone wrong, all the danger they've been exposed to since I came into their lives, they still trust me. After everything, they still

love me. And that's enough to make me believe that they see something in me that I myself can't see. Enough to make me believe that maybe, just maybe, they're right.

I nod. "All right," I whisper. "All right. I'll do it."

The guys don't say anything else, and they don't have to; their actions speak more than enough for all four of us as they envelop me in an embrace that's so passionate it makes me dizzy. "We're going to clean this city up," Liam whispers in my ear, his lips brushing against my earlobe and making my knees go weak. "And we're going to do it all with you by our side."

"Damn right," Tristan adds, his mouth pressing against my neck and sending goosebumps down my back. "Because from this moment on, you're one of us."

"I... I want that," I whisper, hardly daring to let myself admit it. "I want that so much."

Theo gives a pleased hum as his lips meet mine. "Then let's make sure it's a happy ending," he murmurs against my mouth. I can feel the others closing in on me, and it's the best feeling in the world. I'm surrounded by love and protection, and I know that no matter what, I'll never be alone again.

I don't know how we make it back to the bedroom, and I don't care. I'm too lost in the feeling of them to bother with anything else. Theo's lips are on mine, and Tristan's fingers are in my hair, and Liam's hands are around my waist, and I know that my heart is whole again.

"I love you all," I whisper, and there's no doubt in my mind that it's true.

"We love you too, Vivi," Liam says.

"So damn much," Tristan adds.

"Always have," Theo finishes. "Always will."

I pull back just long enough to lock the door behind me, and then I allow them to draw me into their arms, my body already burning with desire. "Enough messing around," Liam murmurs. "Let's get you out of that dress."

The others don't say anything. They don't have to. As I start to pull away, their hands move to the zipper at the back of my dress, and in seconds they're stripping it away and dropping it to the floor. I stand there in my bra and panties, my nipples hardening and my pussy growing wetter and wetter in anticipation.

"You're so fucking sexy, Vivian," Tristan growls. My heart skips a beat, but when his hands move to my breasts, I'm pretty sure I pass out for a few seconds from the thrill. I need this. They need it, too. We made it out of there

alive, and whatever comes next, all I want in this moment is to feel their bodies against mine.

Liam's mouth covers mine, and I whimper against his lips as I feel Tristan's fingers moving around me to unfasten my bra. My skin is burning with anticipation, my breath coming in quick little puffs as I practically melt into Theo's arms, feeling his lips on my neck as he presses against me from behind. His hand trails around to my front, running down my stomach to pause for a moment at the waistband of my panties. Then he's pulling them down, sliding them over my thighs and helping Liam and Tristan push them down my legs.

Theo's lips are at my ear again, whispering words of love and desire and passion, and I can't help but feel like this is what I've been missing my entire life—all of them, all three of them.

I can feel Theo's cock pressing against me, hard and throbbing and hot, and I whimper as he takes my arms and helps me turn around. I don't even need to say a word before he's hoisting me up and carrying me over to the bed, the others right behind us. I sit on the edge of the bed as Theo begins to undress, and Liam pushes me gently back onto the mattress, moving my hair away from my neck as he hovers over me. His lips move along my skin, and I gasp at the sensation as his tongue flicks over my nipple, teasing it to a point before he moves over to the other one, taking it into his mouth and sending a shiver of pleasure through me.

Tristan kneels on the floor in front of me, holding my legs as he runs his tongue slowly up my inner thigh. I can feel him teasing me, moving closer to my pussy with every stroke, but he stops right before he gets there. I moan in frustration, but he only chuckles, kissing me gently just above my pussy. Then he lowers his mouth to my clit. I let out another whimper as he slips a finger inside me, sliding in and out as his tongue flicks over my most sensitive spot, sending waves of pleasure coursing through me. My muscles tighten around his finger as he curls it against my inner walls, and for a moment I see stars.

Liam pulls away from my breasts long enough to strip off his own clothes, and Theo takes his place above me, cupping my face in his hands and kissing me hungrily. His tongue sweeps into my mouth, and between that and Tristan's movements between my legs, it's all I can do not to cry out. After a few more seconds, I feel my first orgasm begin to build, and I pull away from Theo long enough to gasp as my pussy tightens around Tristan's finger.

"That's it," Theo murmurs against my lips. "Come for us."

I writhe underneath them, my pleasure overtaking me, but the next thing I know, Tristan is turning me onto my front so he can position himself between my legs. He spreads my thighs wide, his cock throbbing as he lines it up with my entrance. Liam kneels next to me and places his hand on my lower belly, and I gasp as I feel his fingers on my clit, even as Tristan slides inside me and begins to move slowly. I reach for Theo, desperate to have all three of them as close to me as possible, and as my hand finds his arousal, he groans, running his fingers through my hair as their movements continue. I feel like I'm on fire, each of them touching me in his own way and leaving my skin hot as they move, somehow in time with each other as they all bring me pleasure. It's like I'm at the center of an endless storm, the electricity between us crackling as our combined movements bring me closer and closer to my second release.

As I feel myself start to come undone again, I cry out, my limbs shaking as I throw my head back in ecstasy. Just as I do, a hand slips over my mouth, and I look down to see Liam's eyes darken as he leans in to murmur in my ear. "Shhh. Don't wake the innkeeper."

I nod, my body trembling as I try to keep my sounds to a minimum. Theo's hand moves from my hair to my breasts, and his fingers find my nipple as he caresses it in time to Tristan's thrusts. I'm about to bite my lower lip for good measure when Tristan lets out a groan, his hand tightening on my thigh. Theo grunts in pleasure as my hand picks up its pace, and I feel Tristan shudder behind me as he too finds release.

Soon I'm losing control again, and by then I've also lost all sense of time, and I couldn't care less. The danger is at our doorstep, the city's underground is in chaos, and come tomorrow, we may be fighting for our lives... but tonight, this night, is just for us. I'm lost in an ocean of bodies and lovemaking, and as the guys' hands explore my body, their lips leaving marks on my neck as they explore every inch of me, I can't help but wonder whether there's a future for us after all.

Chapter Fifteen



It was going to have to end sooner or later.

As I shower the next morning, deliciously sore from the sex and basking in their love for me, I can't shake a mounting sense of dread. My suspicions are confirmed when there's a knock at the door just as I'm finishing getting dressed, and I open it to see the three of them in the hallway, their expressions somber. "What is it?" I ask, my eyes widening. "What's happening?"

"I just got word on Lucas," Theo says. "He's been operating out of our dad's old office building downtown. It's well-fortified, but I've got people on the inside. People who he hasn't turned yet."

I swallow the lump in my throat, already knowing what's coming. "Are you saying...?"

Tristan nods. "We're taking the fight to him, hitting him where he's vulnerable."

"Won't that get you in trouble?" I ask, glancing from him to Liam. "Storming an office building?"

"Maybe," Theo acknowledges. "But the building is owned by the Emmericos, and there are a few loyalist holdouts there, waiting for this to blow over. They can help us get in, but we have to move now if we want the opportunity. They won't hold out for long if Lucas has anything to say about it; from what I've heard, he's already purging the ranks."

"This might be our only chance to get him without an entire army of men

coming down on us," Liam agrees. "Once he's solidified his hold on the city, he'll be out of our reach, and the first thing on his to-do list will be eliminating any threats to his power—including your family."

"We have to strike while the iron's hot," Tristan affirms. "Every hour that goes by ups the stakes that much more."

My throat has gone dry, and all the ruminating I was doing yesterday comes back in full force. "What..." I manage. "What do you have in mind?"

Theo and Tristan exchange a look. "Lucas will think twice about being in the same room as any of us," Tristan says finally, and the sudden reluctance in his tone is alarming. "If we want to catch him-off guard, we need to send someone he doesn't perceive as a threat. Someone he has a vested interest in finding."

"Me," I whisper. "You're talking about sending me."

Theo's jaw clenches. "We wouldn't do this if there were another way, but we need someone to distract Lucas, and you're the only one who can do it. He's a psycho, but he's a smart psycho."

I wrap my arms around myself. "Won't he get suspicious that I suddenly want to see him again?"

"We have an idea about that, too," Liam interjects. "We'll fill you in if you want, Vivi, but we're not going to push this if you don't—"

But I'm already holding up a hand. "If it means ending this," I say, "then I'm in. I don't care what it takes." I take a shaky breath, pushing back my fear, the guys' words of faith and encouragement from last night ringing in my mind. It might not be enough to make the terror disappear... but it's enough to keep it at bay. "Tell me what you want me to do."

The Emmerico office building overlooks the river, as ominous in broad daylight as I'm sure it is at night. Just stepping through the doors is enough to make me shiver, and as I glance around the nearly deserted lobby, my stomach churns. If Theo's contacts didn't run security, I'd be completely at Lucas's mercy right now.

"You all right, kid?" Theo's voice comes through the earpiece I'm wearing.

"Just peachy," I gripe, nodding wordlessly to the security guard, who buzzes me up with a heavy look. If this goes down badly, he's apt to get killed—along with me, my family, my best friend, and the men I love.

It's all falling on me.

"Just breathe," Tristan advises. "We're right behind you. You'll never be

alone.”

"If you get into any trouble, we'll be there," Liam affirms. "Just stick to the plan, and we'll be fine. We're not going to let anything happen to you.”

Their words give me a flash of confidence, and I hurry across the lobby to the elevators. I check my watch, biting my lip as I wait for the lift to arrive. *I can do this*, I tell myself. All I have to do is get to the penthouse and buy them an opening. They've got eyes on me, and I couldn't be more grateful for that. I just have to hope it's enough.

The ride up to the penthouse floor feels like it takes a hundred years, and as I smooth my skirt and fix my hair, I glance at my reflection in the mirror, trying to calm my heart.

"I love you guys," I whisper into the earpiece. "If this goes badly, I just want you to know that.”

There's a long pause. "We love you too, kid," Theo replies.

"More than anything," Tristan agrees.

"Always," Liam concludes.

I cling to their words with everything I have as the doors slide open. Taking a moment to steady myself, I pinch my cheeks for a burst of color, take a deep breath, and step out of the elevator.

Victor Emmerico's old office is the only one on this floor, just as imposing as the building itself. I'm sure Lucas has already set it up in some ostentatious style as our apartment, but right now, his poor design taste is the least of my worries. I hurry to the frosted glass door, and my heart skips a beat when I see the two guards standing on either side, their eyes entirely too sharp.

"What's your business here?" one of them demands, holding out an arm to block the entrance while his other hand goes to his pistol. "Boss isn't taking visitors.”

"I called ahead," I reply. "I'm his wife.”

"The runaway?" The second guard snorts. "I don't think the boss wants to see you.”

"Let her in," comes a muffled voice from behind the door, a voice that's haunted my nightmares every day since our wedding. "Search her first.”

I swallow hard and extend my arms so the first guard can pat me down, adrenaline making my fingers shake. He hesitates at my shoulders, and for a moment I'm sure he's going to find the earpiece, but then he blows out an unimpressed breath and waves me through the door.

"No funny business," is all I get in the way of a warning, and the next thing I know, I'm stepping into Lucas's office. He's standing with his back to me, gazing out the bank of windows that overlook the city, a glass of scotch in one hand. The revulsion that goes through me at the sight of him can't be overstated.

"So," my husband says, "my disloyal wife decides to come crawling back to me. Funny how this happens the day after I take over for my father."

You didn't take over for him, you murdered him, I want to say, but I bite my tongue. Instead, I lower my gaze and reply, "You've got me there."

Lucas turns around, his black eyes landing on me. A smirk creeps onto his face. "You always did have a mouth on you, Vivian. I'll give you that. We could have been very happy together, in another life."

"Fucking asshole," I hear Liam mutter into the earpiece, only to be quieted by Tristan.

"Guess that's just how the cookie crumbles," I reply, spreading my arms.

Lucas takes a sip of his scotch. "You're lucky I'm even letting you show your face here, you know that? After all the shit you've gotten up to, I'd be well within my rights to have you shot dead here and now."

"But you haven't yet," I point out, my heart racing.

Lucas scowls. "Don't speak too soon. What do you want?"

"To survive," I reply simply, and there's enough truth in it that my voice holds steady. "That's all I've ever wanted, Lucas."

"Don't," he says, raising a bored hand. "Let's skip the theatrics, Vivian. You're never going to make me believe you've suddenly rethought your feelings for me. Not after fucking around with three men and disobeying me every chance you get."

"Good," I reply, "because I haven't rethought my feelings for you." My lips curl back. "You disgust me, Lucas. But that doesn't mean I haven't rethought our... arrangement." The words are horrible even coming out of my mouth.

Lucas snorts. "Our marriage, you mean?"

"Yes," I reply stiffly. "Our marriage."

"And what brought this on?" he demands, taking a step closer to me, and it takes everything I have not to flinch.

Stay calm, I remind myself. Stick to the plan. "Our relationship was always a transaction, Lucas," I tell him, managing to hold his gaze. "It was never about feelings, and we both know it. It was convenient for our families,

and that was it. It could still be convenient now." I swallow as his eyes burn into me, searching for any signs of deception. "That's why I came back," I continue. "I told you that what I want is to survive—and for my family to survive. With you running London, the odds of that happening are slim. I'm doing what I have to do to live another day, and if that means coming back to you, then so be it." I square my shoulders. "Whatever's necessary, right?"

Lucas watches me for a long beat, setting his glass down. Then he snorts. "Damn, my brother really did a number on you, didn't he? I have to say, if he weren't such a son of a bitch, I might even be impressed." He drifts closer, crossing his bulky arms. "And what about me, *darling*?" he asks, staring down at me. "What do I get out of all this?"

"For one thing, my father's men stand down," I reply. "Done. Finished. In your pocket. Sure, you'll be able to make them stand down eventually either way, but why rack up more deaths if you could gain allies instead?"

Lucas snorts. "And you really think they'll listen to *you*?"

From over our heads, there comes a muffled bump. Lucas frowns, his eyes moving toward the ceiling.

Fuck.

"No," I reply quickly, daring to move closer to him, "but they'll listen to my father. He'll fight if he has to, but after that stunt you pulled at Victor's, he's desperate to avoid more bloodshed. As for what else you get out of it?" I make a show of looking down at the ground, as if I'm holding back tears. "I talk Theo into leaving the city, and taking his friends with him. They'll fight to the end if they have to, but if there's one person who can make them leave, it's me. They'll let me go if I ask them to. I don't want to, but I will if I have to." And then, for realism, I add, "If it means saving their lives."

"That's it?" Lucas asks, raising an eyebrow. "That's your proposal?"

"That's it," I reply. "You get to bypass the rest of the resistance and get down to ruling the city like you've always wanted. And I get to keep my loved ones from dying. It's a win-win."

Another sound comes from up above, this one a low scabbling noise. "What the fuck is that?" Lucas asks, craning his neck.

"Almost there, kid," Theo's voice sounds over my earpiece. "Just keep him focused on you."

"Your dad's building's shoddier than I thought," I say, crossing my arms. "Sounds like it's coming apart at the seams."

"My dad was never the hot shit he thought he was," Lucas replies, his

eyes drifting away from the ceiling, and I exhale in relief. "He was an old man who was past his prime, and my brother is a no-good interloper who doesn't know when to call it quits, either."

Another thumping sound comes, sounding closer than the last. "Couldn't you say the same for yourself?" I ask quickly, trying to cover up the noise.

"Careful, wifey," Lucas warns me. "Don't forget who's calling the shots around here."

"Sorry," I reply. "That's gonna be a tough habit to break."

Lucas sniffs, unimpressed. "The back-talk? Damn right. You really think you have it in you?" He grabs his scotch, downs the rest of it, and closes the distance between us. Having him so close makes me want to shiver in revulsion, and with the way his eyes are raking over me, it's all I can do not to move away. "You really think you can make this little 'arrangement' worth my time?"

I'm just opening my mouth to say something else when a crash comes from the ceiling tiles just above our heads, and time slows down. Adrenaline rushes through me, my heart jumps to my throat, and I see Lucas's hand move towards his sidearm as he starts to look up again...

No, it's too soon!

The opening is life-threateningly slim, and there's no time to think. If he figures it out, we're all dead. The world around me moves in slow motion, all sensibility slipping from my mind as I do the only thing I can think of.

I grab Lucas and kiss him.

It's like kissing a monster, but there's no other choice. I can taste the scotch on his breath, feel his repulsive lips on mine as I buy us those few precious seconds, grimacing even as I press my mouth to his.

Lucas reels back for a second, stunned, and I take the opportunity to squeeze out of his grip and dart to the side just as the ceiling above us explodes in a shower of tiles and gunfire. Theo, Liam, and Tristan drop into the room, guns blazing, all wearing bulletproof vests, and Lucas dives for cover under his desk amidst the flying debris. The goons from outside burst into the office, returning fire, and it's all I can do to duck behind the coffee table before the office erupts into an all-out war zone. More security guards storm in from the hallway, and it takes me a moment to realize that I'm not sure whose side any of them are on. Soon shots are flying back and forth between the remaining Emmerico loyalists, Lucas's defectors, the guys, and Lucas himself... and I'm trapped in the middle of it all.

One of the men barrels towards Lucas, shouting something I can't quite make out over the din of the gunfire, only for a bullet to pierce his chest and send him sprawling to the floor. Liam, his combat expertise kicking in, kicks over a bookshelf to use as a makeshift cover, pulling me out from under the coffee table and behind his body just as one of Lucas's guards comes running toward me, his gun raised.

Theo and Tristan are firing just as I hear his shot, which ricochets off the ceiling as Tristan pulls me swiftly to the side. The man slams into the bookcase and then collapses to the ground, blood pooling around his body. As it sinks in that they just saved my life, a hail of gunfire tears into the bookcase, and Liam grunts in pain.

"Liam!" I cry, panicking, as I haul him behind the barrier.

He coughs, sucks in a breath, and shoots me a crooked grin, pointing to the bullet, which is now stuck in his vest. "I'm okay, Vivi."

I drop my head in relief and peer out just in time to see Theo and Tristan standing back to back, picking off two guards who were trying to flank their position. When they see me, they trade a look and dive behind a desk to reload their guns.

I catch a glimpse of Lucas crawling towards a door near the back, which must be Victor's panic room. "He's getting away!" I shout, and Tristan pops up from behind cover to fire a string of bullets at the door.

Swearing, Lucas hesitates just as two more of the guards, these ones fighting each other, crash into him and send him sprawling to the floor, too busy trying to kill each other to notice him there. Theo charges out of cover, but I can see his confusion. He's not sure which of them is his guy and which is his brother's... and they're both providing cover for Lucas. Tristan, meanwhile, closes the distance to the bookshelf, ducking down next to me as Theo stands there, trying to get a clean shot.

"Traitorous *bitch*," Lucas growls, scrambling out from under the guards and shooting each of them without a second thought. He sees Theo and fires another bullet, forcing him to throw himself out of the way.

Out in the hallway, I can hear the thundering of more footsteps, and fear washes over me. Our window is closing, Lucas's guys outnumber Victor's two to one...

And he's making a break for the panic room again.

My eyes go wide. He's about to lock himself in there and wait for us to slaughter each other, and then that will be it. No justice. No peace.

"No fucking way," I growl under my breath, crawling out from behind the bookshelf.

"Vivian, stop...!" Tristan shouts after me, but I'm not listening. My adrenaline is rushing, my heartbeat roaring in my ears, and there's no stopping to think. I'm seeing this through, one way or another—for my family, for the guys... But most of all, for myself.

Hardly aware that I'm doing it, I scoop one of the fallen guards' pistols, feeling for the safety just like Liam taught me. My muscles protesting, the battle a blur around me, I stand up and sprint to Lucas, vaguely aware that the guys have realized what I'm doing and are suppressing his men's fire.

Just as my husband's hand finds the knob to the door, I put the barrel of the gun to the back of his head and click off the safety. "Don't move," I pant.

Lucas spits out a curse. "You really think you're gonna shoot me, Vivian? Huh?" he demands. "You gonna shoot your own husband?"

"You shot me," I point out. "You kidnapped me. You tried to kill all of us. And then..." My throat thickens. "And then you shot my father. You think I won't fucking shoot you?"

Lucas snorts. "You don't know what it's like to pull the trigger, sweetheart. You don't know what it's like to do the shit I do around here. You really think you have it in you?" He gives a breathless laugh. "You're just a fucking puppet, Vivian. Mine, your father's, my father's, Theo's... doesn't matter. You'll never be anything else."

And with that, he turns the knob and opens the door—
—just as I pull the trigger.

I didn't totally expect anything to happen, but then... it does. The gunshot rings through the room. Blood flies. Lucas seems to freeze mid-motion, his hand still on the doorknob... and then he slumps to the floor, dead. I stare down at his body, my ears ringing, the world swaying around me.

Lucas Emmerico is dead, and I killed him.

Just like that, it's like a spell has been lifted, washing over the guards, the guys, everyone who was caught up in the battle just a few seconds ago. Slowly, everyone begins to lower their weapons, their expressions either ones of relief or confusion as they process that the man at the center of it all—the man who was purging this city from the inside out—has just been killed. I don't blame them; I can barely believe it myself. As the new batch of guards storms in, they skid to a halt at the sight of their boss dead on the floor, and I can see the question that's written on all their faces: *What now?*

Theo doesn't hesitate to answer it. "No one move," he says, standing up with his gun in hand. "It looks like this operation is once again under new management. Anyone thinks of trying anything, and I promise you'll regret it."

His eyes meet mine from across the room as he approaches me, taking me by the hand and helping me to my feet. Tristan and Liam are right behind him, surrounding me and pulling me into a collective embrace. Wary, the remaining guards in the office slowly begin to put down their guns as the newly-arrived group looks around, clearly trying to figure out what the fuck just happened.

Me? I'm too busy melting into the guys' embrace to care about anything else. They're okay. They're really okay. The relief that floods through me is so intense, so all-encompassing, that I almost burst into tears right there in the middle of the office. In the end, though, I hold them back, and as I bask in the presence of the men I love, I let out a breath I didn't even know I was holding.

It's over.

It's finally over.

Epilogue



"You're sure you're okay?" I ask my dad as we say our goodbyes and drift toward the foyer of the house where I grew up, with the guys on either side of me and Violet and my mother bringing up the rear.

"Been better," my father grunts, stiffly rolling the shoulder where he got shot. "This is gonna take some time to get back to normal."

"I know the feeling," I agree, my eyes drifting to the spot on my own upper chest where Lucas's bullet pierced my flesh all those months ago. Sometimes it still aches, but I find that those moments are growing fewer and farther between the more time passes.

"You're young," my father retorts. "You heal quickly. Me? I'll take months, I'm sure. Years, maybe. If you weren't taking over for me, I'd worry about the future of this organization."

"You worry about it already, honey," Mum points out, putting a hand on his arm. "You can't keep running things from your bed."

"I know that, Melissa," Dad retorts. "Cut me some slack. Retiring is hard enough without people harping on you about it all day long."

"We're not harping," my mother says, coolly but lovingly.

"We are a little," Violet corrects as we reach the door. "You're gonna have to find something else to do with all your free time, Dad."

"Advising us as we run the new syndicate?" Liam asks, crossing his arms. "I'd say he'll have plenty to keep him busy."

"Don't give him any ideas," Violet warns.

Theo laughs at that. "I think he's got enough ideas to last a lifetime," he says. "Ideas that are, of course, welcome," he adds, and there's no facetiousness in his tone.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," my father gripes, waving a hand at him. "Enough with the chit chat. Don't you all have an art show to go to?"

Tristan checks his watch. "It doesn't start for an hour."

"I was hoping we could talk to Callie before she gets whisked away by all her guests," I reply. "It's tough being a hotshot gallery owner. Just ask Craig. Soon she'll be cranky all the time and start calling people only by their last names."

The others laugh knowingly at that as my mom opens the front door and we start outside. It's strange being back here for the first time since my wedding, having dinner with my parents like we're a normal family again. A lot has changed since Lucas's death, and even now, six months later, we're still picking up the pieces from his coup. Just getting a handle on the confusion has been a task in itself, and even now, we aren't quite sure what we're going to find by the time we've finished sorting out the books. But we're getting there, slowly ironing things out and putting the pieces back together. My marriage to Lucas damaged a lot of things, but the most important ones, my most important relationships, have stayed strong.

Maybe even gotten stronger, I think, glancing from Theo to Liam to Tristan. Having them by my side has been invaluable over the past months, and not just because they've been advising me as I lean into my role as co-leader of the new syndicate. They keep me sane, keep my feet on the ground, and I have hope that together we can find a way to unite all of London's families—even the ones that are beyond our reach right now. I don't think the organization is going to be the same ever again, but it will function. It will thrive. Just like my relationship with the people I love.

"One of these days you all can stay for dessert," my mother says as we trickle out into the night. "We've still got a lot to catch up on," she adds, casting a meaningful look at the guys. She knows, as do Violet and Dad, that there's more to my relationship with them than just business, but to my surprise, they haven't hassled me about it. I can't blame them; after the way my first marriage went down, a four-way relationship probably seems downright tame in comparison.

"That we do," I reply, pulling her and Dad into a hug. "And we've got all the time in the world to catch up on it."

I turn to my big sister as my folks say their goodbyes to Theo, Liam, and Tristan. Violet is watching me with her arms crossed, a smile on her face. "Well," she says, "I can't say you're not making waves."

"Hopefully not too many," I reply.

"Only the good kind." She tilts her head to the side. "It's good to have you back, sis."

"It's good to be back." I pull her into a hug. "We'll have to hang out one of these days."

"In your abundance of free time?" she jokes.

"Yeah." I rub the back of my neck. "When it rains it pours, I guess."

She chuckles and ruffles my hair. "I never thought I'd say this, but I'm glad I'm not the one in charge."

By now, the others are wrapping up, and Tristan is fishing for his car keys. "Shall we?" he asks. "If we head out now, we might be able to beat the traffic."

"Can't argue with that," Liam replies.

"Ditto," I agree.

"You all best take care of my daughter," my father calls as the guys gather me into their arms and we start down the driveway.

"We always do, Mr. Dalton," Theo replies, the others murmuring their agreement, and even if it's a bit tongue-in-cheek, I've never been in safer hands.

My family bundles back into the house as we make our way down the drive to the waiting Range Rover. "Seems like they're warming up to us," Liam remarks.

"They'll get there," Tristan says. "They've just got to get to know us better."

"It's like you said, kid," Theo adds, putting a hand on my cheek, his crooked smile lighting up his face. "All the time in the world."

"All the time in the world," I echo, standing on tiptoe to kiss him. Tristan pulls me in for a kiss next, and then Liam sweeps me off my feet, spinning me around as he presses his lips to mine. Soon we're a pod of breathless affection, standing outside the car, and I relax into the feeling of them around me, of the infinite possibilities that now seem to stretch out in front of us.

And as I hold them all close, I know that however this ends, in this moment I am the luckiest girl in the entire fucking world. Because no matter what happens, I have them, and I'm never going to let them go.

Epilogue



The scene is horrific, but nothing that can't be explained away. A bribe here, a few threats there... that's all it will take to write this all off as an unfortunate accident, a drunk driver going miles over the speed limit and then abandoning the scene of the crime. Cops are idiots, and he has more important things to worry about... like what his father will say when he brings his daughter-in-law back, for instance—and how long it will take the old bastard to finally kick the bucket.

Lucas Emmerico climbs out of his Escalade and strolls up to the Range Rover. The front of his car is totaled, but in the darkness, that won't pose much of a problem. As long as it runs, he's free and clear.

With a grunt, he pulls open the passenger side door. Vivian is unconscious but alive, slumped over the dashboard with her pretty-boy chauffeur in the driver's seat. He's bleeding from the head, and judging by the amount, it looks bad.

Good, Lucas thinks. One less interloper to deal with. Who gives a shit, anyway? Sienna can go to hell; he has what he came for, and he's not here to make sure her precious ex makes it out alive. Soon he'll run more than just London; he'll run the entire scene in this fucking place, and he won't have need of her anymore. If she didn't see this coming, then she must be stupider than he thought.

Wrapping an arm around his runaway bride's torso, Lucas hauls her out of the car, careful not to let her feet drag as he scoops her up and carries her

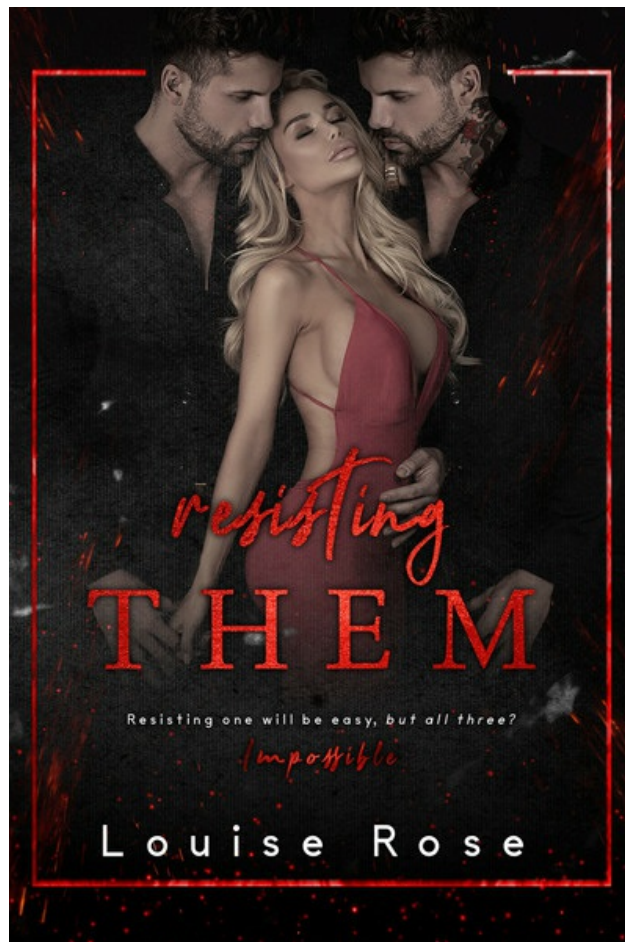
back to the Escalade. She lets out a low groan as he pushes her into the back, buckles her in, and climbs back into the driver's seat.

“Nice to see you again too, Vivian,” Lucas says. “It’s been too long.”

With that, he turns the car around and speeds off into the night, leaving Vivian’s new boyfriend to bleed to death on the road behind them.

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Secret by Louise Rose Bonus Read

Izzy



"Elizabeth, come downstairs!" the angry voice of my foster dad rings through the house. Groaning, I look over at my clock, only to see it's five in the morning. I was hoping for it to be at least seven. I have four hours until school, but I know I'll have to clean the whole damn house before I can leave. I roll out of bed to have a quick shower and throw on jeans, a vest, and a hoodie before running down the stairs. Stopping at the mirror in the hallway, I pause to pull my long, almost-white hair into a ponytail and hoping it doesn't look too messy. The two-bedroom house is a tip, despite the fact I cleaned it yesterday morning, like I do most mornings. Fred, my *lovely* foster dad, is passed out on a stool in the kitchen with his hand wrapped around a vodka bottle. He must have passed out sometime during my shower. I know better than to talk to him, it's not worth waking him up and making him angry. So, I start cleaning around him quietly.

They kept me up most of the night with their loud music and another party that didn't stop until three in the morning. *Let's not mention the idiots who tried to open my locked door.* I guess I should be thankful they, at least, feed me for doing the cleaning. I know that if I didn't get up and clean, there would be no food for a week.

Finally, at eight, it's all done. I grab my bag, slamming the door on my way out.

As much as I try to forget my living situation, I can't, because every day is a reminder. I've lived with Fred and Vivian since I was fifteen. It's been a nightmare from day one. Sure, they act all lovely and great when social services are around, but, in reality, they use me to clean the house. I just try to stay out of their way. I have six more months until I'm eighteen, and then I

can leave. I'm not sure where, but honestly, anywhere would be better. I have no living family and no money, so I don't have many options other than to find a job quickly and a room to rent.

I walk into school thirty minutes later, a little hot from the warm weather we have been enjoying. I glance around at the grammar school which I have to attend. It's this or college, supposedly the grammar school is good for my grades. *But, I have always felt it's more like the better of two evils.*

The day progresses as I would usually expect it to, filled with art and history classes all day. I took a double-A level in art and one in history, which is surprisingly not that boring.

Later that day, as I sit at lunch alone like every day, I think of my best friend, Tilly. She moved to France two months ago and was the only reason I could deal with this crazy-ass school. It's full of posh idiots whose parents paid to get them in, not like me and Tilly, who actually get straight A's. Tilly really didn't need to study hard like I did, but she did anyway, and that's why I like her.

I'm pulled from my thoughts by the intercom. "Would Elizabeth Turner come to the main office?"

When it clicks off, I look up to see everyone staring at me. I shrug as I try not to blush. *I hate being the centre of attention.*

I walk to the office on the other side of the building after getting my things. I keep thinking of what the hell I've done or if Fred has called to say there is another family emergency at home. Which is usually code for '*I have friends coming to get drunk, and I need the house clean again and didn't notice you had already cleaned.*' I roll my eyes and soon I'm at the office, where I'm told to go straight in by the snooty receptionist.

I walk into the room to see my head teacher behind the desk and the back of a tall man with dark-brown hair tied in a loose knot at the back of his head, who's standing in front of the desk.

"Come and sit, Elizabeth, there has been some news, and this man has come to talk to you," says my head teacher, but I ignore him and watch as the dark-haired man turns to me.

"It's nice to meet you. You wouldn't believe how long I have looked for you, and it's a little bit of a shock to finally meet my sister," the stranger says to me in a deep voice.

Wait, sister?

I turn and look at my head teacher, hoping he will help, but he ignores me

and looks out the window. *I guess this is as awkward for him as it is for me.* I look back at the man, taking in his head of dark-brown hair and massive, muscular build and his expensive looking pressed suit. I finally look into his eyes and see the same bright-green eyes I have, which are looking back at me.

I gasp and start to back away into a seat on the couch. I look down at the floor as I try to collect my thoughts. My mother never told me anything about my father, just that I wouldn't want to meet him and left it at that. She passed away a few years ago, four days after my fifteenth birthday. I guessed she would have told me about him when I was older, but who knows? *She never got the chance.*

“Look, I know this is strange, but I am your half-brother, and I have custody of you until you turn eighteen. I’ve come to take you back home with me. Family means everything to me, and once I heard you were in a foster home... I can’t leave here without taking you home. To a real family.”

He states it like it’s an everyday fact that you just find your sister and demand she come and live with you. *Not that it’s weird as hell.* I look him over, again, seeing his neutral expression, how he waits for my answer silently. I get the impression not a lot bothers him, and I’ve only just met him. I have a brother, and if that isn’t enough to deal with, he wants me to move. *I should panic and run, god knows who this man actually is.* Who knows what he wants or if he is even my brother, but, then again, it can’t be worse than where I live now. I doubt the headmaster would have let him anywhere near me if he didn’t have some kind of proof.

“Proof, do you have proof?” I ask.

“Yes,” the man claiming to be my brother says. He walks to the desk, picking up a folder and handing it to me. I skim through most of it, but it’s true. This man somehow has my birth records, a DNA test that was done when I was a baby, and it has my mother’s signature on it. *Holy crap, I have family. I’m not alone.*

“Elizabeth, look at me,” my brother gently asks as I close the folder and put it down on a nearby chair. I look up into those familiar, green eyes, which show me some kindness. I try to think of more reasons to run, but it seems pointless. *Well, I think I’m going to have to trust him.*

“It’s Izzy, my friends call me Izzy. What’s your name?” I ask him.

I’m still looking at his face, trying to see the truth behind his words. I get the feeling he is a closed book as far as emotions go, but I can see some

kindness, and that's enough for me to try to relax.

“I’m Harley King, nice to meet you Izzy.” He smiles, and it takes me a minute to realise he kind of looks like I do in pictures when I smile.

I stand up quickly, putting some distance between us because it’s a little bit too much. “What did you mean when you said you would take me back with you, and custody?” I try to ask calmly and kind of fail when my voice is high-pitched and squeaky as I talk. *Real smooth, Izzy.*

“I meant that you’re coming to live with me, as you have no other blood relatives as far as I know. I have custody of you, so it’s all above board. I have custody of my three younger brothers, too,” he pauses, “well, your brothers, too.” I watch as he scratches his head with a huff, and he sits down on the sofa and straightens his suit jacket before saying, “I know this is hard for you to believe, and *trust me*, this whole situation is difficult.

“Our father is dead. I took over when he died. I was twenty, and the twins, Sebastian and Elliot, were fifteen. Luke was fourteen. It was difficult, but I made it work. I later found out—from a letter from Dad’s will—about you. It had the results of a DNA test done when you were a baby, and an old address and number of yours. Of course, it's taken me two years to find you due to all the moves you, and your mother, had taken.” He stops talking and looks up to meet my eyes, “I’m sorry for your loss by the way.”

I nod and sit next to him, taking it all in. *I have four brothers.* I guess he is right about us moving when I think about it. My mother just liked to see new places, and I was taken along for the ride. Yesterday, I had no one, now I have a family, and I am moving away from my crazy, foster family. *This shit seems unbelievable.*

“All right, I’m going to be honest with you. I’ve done everything I can to leave my crazy, foster parents. So, this could work for me. I mean, moving to your place, and then we can see how things go. I guess I would like to meet the rest of you and learn about you. How old are my brothers now?” I ask, looking at Harley, who looks around twenty-three. *So, they can’t be that old.*

“The twins are seventeen, like you, and Luke is sixteen. I'm so glad you’ll come. I thought I'd have a massive fight on my hands with getting you to come with me,” he says with a grin, which makes me smile too.

He stands up, claps his hands together, getting the attention of my head teacher, and starts talking to him about sending my paperwork over for the switching of my school. I notice he makes a very a large payment to the school to help hurry up my paperwork. I look at him now, in his perfect suit,

and frown. I glance down at my baggy hoodie and shabby jeans then finally to my worn trainers I have had for at least two years. *I'm not going to fit into their world.*

As we head to my house in his massive, black SUV—which is shinier than most of the cars in my small town—I sit wondering what Harley will think of my foster parents or their home. Let's hope the place doesn't still smell like vodka when we get there.

Chapter Two

“Izzy, we need to go soon. I understand if you want to wait until tomorrow to pack and say your goodbyes,” Harley comments while pulling the car into the parking space next to the house.

I sit back and glance around at the house I've spent part of my life living in. The front of the house has long grass, which is mostly weeds, covering the small, front lawn and cracked pavement leading to the door. The house, itself, hasn't been worked on for years, and it's clear from the outside. My lazy, and possibly crazy, foster parents wouldn't bother leaving the house to do any work on it. Well, they didn't care enough to make me mow it or risk neighbours seeing me working my ass off for them. It's a nice neighbourhood with decent people living here, and they need to keep up some kind of appearance. So many memories are bad here, but also, in some ways, this place made me stronger.

“No. I only have a bag of things. So it will only take me half an hour to pack. Do you want to wait?” I ask, hoping he will stay. I secretly don't want to be alone with them when they find out I'm leaving. They have never hurt me, but throwing things near me and screaming at me is normal for them. Frowning, I think of times when it had been worse when they'd been drinking, which I'm guessing they have been by now. *It is midday.*

“Yes. I need to tell them about you leaving with me,” he tells me and then frowns. “Well, your foster parents should have received a phone call or letter explaining anyway.” He hesitates as he stares at the house. “Why have you only got one bag? What about your clothes and, well, girl stuff?” he asks while pulling out the car keys.

I nearly sigh in relief that he's not leaving me here, and I reply quietly, “I don't have many clothes or other things.” I try to get out of the car, not wanting to discuss this anymore, but a large hand on my upper arm gently

stops me. He huffs, bringing my attention back to him as he moves his hand.

“Seb is going to love spoiling you with my credit card. Money has never been a problem for us, and you might hate us for spoiling you, but we are going to,” he says with a cheeky grin, and then he laughs loudly as he gets out of the car.

I frown at his statement about spending so much money on me, but my nerves get the best of me and don't let me think about it anymore. I straighten up and walk into the house, with Harley following me. We walk into the living room, where my foster dad is passed out, face-down on the sofa with a bottle of vodka in his hand. I'm guessing Vivian is at one of her friends', as she is nowhere to be seen.

“I wouldn't wake him up if I was you. I'll go and pack,” I say in a whisper, shrugging at Harley as he glares at Fred on the sofa. He looks around the room in disgust before smiling at me with a look of pity behind his gaze.

As I walk past him, he tells me to hurry up. I suppress a smile at that and run up to my room. I throw my three pairs of jeans, four tops, and my leggings into a bag. I get all of my underwear and the necklace my mother gave me. It's the only thing my foster parents haven't sold of mine. The memory of my mother comes rushing at me as I hold the necklace.

I know I shouldn't be looking in Mum's jewellery box, but everything is so pretty. I'm only seven, so Mum won't be too mad. I open the worn, wooden box, and inside are pretty, little earrings I've seen my mom wear, and, in the middle, is a very pretty, purple necklace I've never seen. I pull it out, holding it up in the air as it sparkles in the light from the window, making me giggle.

“Elizabeth,” the angry voice of my mother makes me jump and turn, and I see her standing in the doorway. *Her white-blond hair is up in a messy bun from cleaning, and she is wearing a pretty, red dress.*

Her face softens slightly before she lets out a long breath *and comes over to me. She kneels in front of the stool I'm sitting on and takes the necklace out of my hand gently.*

“It's real pretty, Mummy,” I say, *frowning at my mummy's sad face.*

“It is, isn't it? I haven't looked at this in years. It's called a sapphire,” *she tells me.*

“Who gave you it, Mummy?” I ask *as she stares at the necklace in her hand. The sapphire is about the size of her thumb and shines like my mummy's blue eyes.*

“The man who still holds my heart, baby. I just can’t let this go,” she whispers the end part to herself, then she stands up, putting the necklace back into her box and holding her hand out to me.

“Do you want to go and get ice cream? Mummy could use some chocolate ice cream,” she smiles, making me laugh.

“Yes, Mummy,” I squeal, jumping up and down.

The memory of her fades, leaving only the sadness that she is gone. I kept it hidden well enough because of that memory. I guess I had always hoped it was my dad who gave it to her, but who knows? It looks expensive, but my mum never dated anyone, that I saw when growing up, so it could be. *I could ask Harley.* I put it into my bag and then go into the bathroom to collect my shampoos, soap, razors, and hairbrush. I chuck those into the bag and look at myself in the full-length mirror.

My long, almost white-blond hair is nearly at my waist. Even in a plait like it is now. I have those bright-green eyes, like my brother, and a layer of freckles, of which I’m not a fan. I’m quite pale, as I don’t get out much, but I have a good body. *As my best friend would tell me anyway.* I’m looking at my eyes, wondering about my father, when I hear a thump and a man cry out. I race down the stairs, finding Harley holding Fred by his neck up against a wall, and Harley’s face is close to Fred’s.

“Don’t speak about my sister like that ever again, or I’ll end you. Do you understand me?” he asks.

Fred mumbles a shaken, “Yes.”

Harley lets him drop to the floor. He looks back at me with a smile and starts brushing down his suit before asking, “You ready?” I nod, and he turns back to Fred with a scary amount of hate on his face.

“We’re going now, and don’t contact my sister or I’ll find you.”

With that, he gestures for me to walk out, and I do so with my head held high. I say goodbye to my old life and head out into the new.

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