



THE
ROYALS

arabella black

THE ROYALS

The Complete Collection



ARABELLA BLACK

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FAMILY TREE + TIMELINE

You can find the Family Tree and timeline of this universe

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CONTENT WARNING

This book treats *very* dark subjects.

Reader discretion is advised.

Please read the [Content Warning List](#) if you need to know more details about the dark content you're about to read.

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EXPOSED

I



PART I



PROLOGUE

MANDY



TEN YEARS AGO

“What’s Mom’s crashed car doing in the garage, Daddy?”

“Have you been snooping around again? I swear...”

“Where is Mom? Where is Valentina? Where did they go? I want to see them. We had plans.”

“Your mother is dead, you pathetic baby. She’s fucking gone. How would I know where your nasty little friend is? Her family probably made a deal with the devil...”

“I miss her.”

“Stop crying. You’re a disaster. I wish you’d been born a boy. Your whore of a mother is to blame for all of this.”

“Sir, you’re upsetting the poor girl. She just lost her mother. I think it’d be wise to take her away now...”

“You don’t tell me how to treat my daughter. Get the fuck out of my office, and don’t ever come back.”

“I want to see them... Mom. Vale. We were supposed to go to—”

“You don’t get to miss them! I should have never even allowed you to befriend that family of dirty rats! And as for your mother... If only she were alive. She’d pay for all her sins. Limb by limb, she’d suffer...”

“Don’t you call her a dirty rat! You must be joking. Mom promised to take us shopping...”

“Mandy, listen to me. Your mom is gone, and so is Valentina. You will never see that dumb child or her imbecile family again. They are gone. Get that in your little head and live with it. Go to your hole of a room in the servants’ quarter. I’ve had your things removed from the mansion. I can’t deal with your whining. I’m going to let you starve for several days so you’ll have something real to sob about. I have to get back to work.”

CHAPTER 1

MANDY

PRESENT TIME



MEN HAD RULED MY LIFE AS FAR BACK AS I COULD REMEMBER.

I stood while two men sat in front of me, discussing business and avoiding my presence. Manuel, a young man at the age of twenty-eight with messy, dirty-blond hair and a five o'clock shadow gracing his jaw, appeared immature in his long-sleeved pink button-up with a navy textured tie. Bought from an online fast-fashion retailer, the shirt was cheap, and the tie had been gifted to Manuel by his boss. His fake leather shoes were coupled with gray slacks and a black belt. I knew the details of his clothes because I cleaned them every day.

“Has Aram agreed to the terms of the Saudis?” the man behind the desk asked. It was a minimalist white desk with a laptop that wasn't even on the market yet. A custom-designed phone by one of his Silicon Valley buddies and a notepad for ideas that not even his trusted tech buddies were allowed to stalk graced the table. Manuel swallowed. “No, he hasn't. Therefore, we can't move forward with the purchase of the fleets. The aircrafts will keep scanning the area, and Aram can't do a single thing about it.”

“I don't know what else to offer the Katantians,” Manuel revealed, exhaling. He rubbed the back of his neck.

The man behind the desk wasn't impressed. Behind him, the skyscrapers of Chicago intimidated me. The windows were wide and endless, but they didn't open. In contrast to Manuel, that man behind the desk was a walking money bomb.

Everything that touched his skin cost more than what Manuel made in a year. His suit was custom-made, and his shoes were real leather, imported from Italy. His hair was immaculate, and his face was shaved clean daily by a live-in barber.

When the man behind the desk refused to talk, Manuel added, “Their minister of foreign affairs is blocking any diplomatic approach of the issue. They want the oil just as bad as the rest of the region. Only our money can help Katantia get there first, but we have conflicting interests, Spencer. I don’t know—”

“You don’t know a lot,” Spencer spat at the man sitting across from him. “You don’t call me by my first name. Ever. I’m starting to doubt that you’re worth a job at my company. Time and time again, you’ve proven how worthless and embarrassing it is to work with you. In the five years that you’ve worked with us, I gave you one task, and you failed. I don’t care about Katantian fleets or the Saudis. The loss of that money means nothing to me. But it means everything to you and the whore of a fiancée you have.”

Times like these, I yearned for my mother. She had never been the most affectionate parent, but she had been better than my father. Elegant, beautiful, and cunning, my mother had been everything I lacked.

“Sir, I apologize. I will stay at the office until I’ve found a solution...” Manuel begged and pleaded.

Spencer had none of it. He raised his hand, silencing the room. “You’ll go home now. I’m not going to fire you yet. I’m putting you on a trial basis again.”

“But, sir—”

“Shut the fuck up.”

I took a step back, although the raised voice wasn’t aimed at me. Spencer noticed. He glanced my way, and I fought to keep the jitters of my limbs to myself.

Addressing me, Spencer said, “Make sure you don’t fuck half the population of Katantia while you’re there. I have a

reputation to uphold. Don't get too close to the Cross family. They're lowlife poison, and they will eat you up given a chance. I'm paying for your trip, so I expect you to behave. Upon your return, you'll report back to me about your experience."

"Why are you okay with me traveling to Katantia to invite Valentina to my wedding?" I blurted out the question before I could stop myself. Adrenaline shot through my veins.

Spencer's chuckle was unexpected. "I'm not okay with it, silly whore. Has Manuel fucked the basic human comprehension out of your brain? I wouldn't be surprised. Your journey to Katantia has a purpose. I doubt Valentina's husband will allow her to fly to the US for your wedding."

"Sir, what purpose are you hinting at? Mandy is untrained. She's not even in college. She's—"

"Dumb, I know," Spencer interrupted Manuel, completing his statement. I didn't even flinch at their words. "But she's been under your claws for too long, so your dumbness has rubbed off on her. It's time that she went out to discover what's beyond Chicago."

Stinging pain from the top of my spine to the soles of my feet kept me alert. Spencer Rawlins didn't even try to appear friendly. Everything from his ashy hair to the white teeth and the million-dollar watch on his wrist was a distraction. His gray eyes housed the devil. In my dreams, his eyes were white and haunting.

"Sir, I don't think Katantia is the right place for Mandy. She's innocent. Perhaps a visit to London would be more appropriate, see the museums and buy some souvenirs," Manuel suggested.

He didn't look at me in my father's presence. He'd suffered a mild concussion the one time he had done so; Father's goons had made sure it hurt. Manuel still had the marks on the back of his head. He hid them with his hair, though.

“Mandy’s not innocent. You took her innocence.” Spencer pushed back his chair, and I remembered the day Manuel took my innocence. It had been on one of my birthdays. Sixteen? No. It was either seventeen or eighteen. Spencer tapped his fingers on the minimalist desk. Then he rose from his seat. “Don’t make me regret this. I’m giving you an adventure. Enjoy it while it lasts because once you return, you’re going to marry an embarrassment. You’ll have to kiss the luxuries you grew up with goodbye.”

Luxuries, he said. I inhaled.

Spencer dismissed Manuel and me from his office.



I WAS ABOUT TO COMMIT THE WORST MISTAKE OF MY LIFE.

We were in the back of an Uber, on our way to the airport.

Manuel was acting strange ever since we left my father’s office. He kissed me too much in an attempt to convince me to stay. His hand traveled between my legs, where he touched me inappropriately over the fabric of my jeans. His touch felt foreign as if we hadn’t been dating for five years.

Today his lingering fingers frightened me. He never overwhelmed me, but right now, I desired for him to stop. But it wasn’t easy telling someone you supposedly loved to stop, was it?

Something didn’t feel right to me.

The traffic was hell, and the Uber was going to charge us too much for this trip. We couldn’t afford it. Perhaps Manuel would ask my father to pay for it. I didn’t want that, but Manuel didn’t listen to me.

While Manuel touched me, I envisioned his tiny apartment in my head. The bedroom and the kitchen were one room. A small hallway led to a bathroom with a barely functioning shower. I did our washing in the laundromat down the street. Would Manuel manage while I was gone? Ever since I moved in with him, I’d done all the housework.

It had been a challenge at first to get used to the size difference of everything. I'd grown up in one of Chicago's most prominent estates. I didn't have space, but I had Manuel.

"Did I pack my tampons?" I asked nobody in particular. Manuel wouldn't know. He didn't even touch them by accident.

"Are you sure you have to go?" Manuel asked, ignoring my question as always. Bored with my lack of reaction to his sneaky touch, he removed his hand.

Manuel didn't outright protect me from my father. He had once claimed he would, but he never did. Manuel was as scared of Spencer Rawlins as his own offspring.

I nodded, turning toward him. My hands reached for his. "You heard what my father said. Plus, since Valentina won't come to me, I'll go to her. I need to see if there's a chance for our friendship."

"You haven't seen or heard from her in ten years. Why go digging for her now?" Manuel inquired with an annoyed undertone. "You're going to the other end of the world. It doesn't get any worse than Katantia. Trust me. I know. I've been dealing with those fuckers for months now."

I could see the worry in his emerald eyes, but it was just that. He didn't understand why I needed to clear things up with Valentina. "Valentina's a part of my childhood. Once upon a time, she was my best friend. If I'm going to get married, I want her to be there as a guest. I need it."

My fiancé sighed, running a hand through his dirty-blond hair. For the hundredth time, he reminded me, "I'm simply worried. Spencer has never permitted you to travel anywhere. I doubt you'd know how to handle these people. Katantia's not for the faint of heart. Innocent girls like you get eaten up over there."

"There are good things about Katantia, okay?" I lied. I had to. I couldn't reveal to him how terrified I was of going there. "They say it is a beautiful place. My father is financing my stay there because we can't really afford their visa system or

their currency.” *Keep lying to yourself*, I laughed inwardly, *see where it takes you*. Spencer called it an adventure; all I saw was a ticket to hell and back. “Nobody’s going to touch me. I’m still Spencer Rawlins’ daughter.”

“The thought of anyone touching you against your will disgusts me.” Manuel was a hypocrite, but that wasn’t anything new. He touched me when I told him I felt too exhausted or when I wasn’t in the mood for anything sexual. He blamed me for my lack of sexual appetite, claiming that there was something essentially wrong with my young body if I wasn’t horny all the time.

I couldn’t go reminding him of that, now, could I?

I nodded. Trying to sound calm, I said, “I get your worries, but we’ll be in contact every day. Three months. Can we survive for three months?”

Manuel didn’t reply. I suspected his answer, but I wasn’t backing down.



OUR GOODBYE HAPPENED IN A HAZE.

A swift peck on the lips, a touch of my lower back, and a promise to call me every other day because of the time difference were all it took. I left him without any hassle because his mood had worsened the closer we got to the airport. Once we reached it, he all but shamed me for having a friend who lived elsewhere.

I felt cold and empty as I strolled through the airport with my luggage.

Since I hadn’t been there in years, its size impressed me. I had never left Chicago for as long as I could remember myself.

I followed the directions to the gate, where I was going to be picked up. A bus ride later, I stood in front of the jet with my luggage in hand. My jaw almost dropped at the sight of it. I hadn’t seen one up close in years. The wind was cruel, and I

started shaking. A stewardess approached me, descending the stairs gracefully. She was the first Katantian I'd ever laid eyes on, and, thus far, she seemed average.

"Can I see your papers, please?" the stewardess asked politely.

I handed her the folder, and she took her time reading each page.

"Not everyone is granted entrance to our country," she stated, her eyes still scanning the pages. "The fact that you're allowed in without an owner is a surprise to me. You must've paid a lot for this to happen."

"Mr. Rawlins gets things done," I responded, mimicking one of my father's employees. It could've been anyone. All of his employees thought he was God.

"Who's Mr. Rawlins?" the stewardess asked, and I held back a chuckle. She handed me back the folder with the documents. "We only answer to Aram Wraith and the royal house of Katantia. Take-off is in twenty minutes."

The stewardess allowed me to climb the stairs to the jet first. With jittery fingers, I held on so I didn't trip and fall. Once I reached the top, a sweet scent of strawberries hit my nostrils. I inhaled it without a complaint.

I stepped inside, my eyes taking in the luxury we'd be traveling with. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been in such an environment. It had been around the time my mother died.

As my eyes wandered, I saw her. At first, I didn't recognize her curvy body and beautiful face. Then she started walking toward me, and I felt speechless.

So many memories hit my mind one by one. I had been wrong. The stewardess was an average woman, but the woman approaching me was anything but.

"Mandy? Do you remember me?"

I snapped out of it. "Yes. Yes, I do. Where have you been, Valentina?"

CHAPTER 2

WESTON

BEFORE MANDY'S ARRIVAL



THE KING HAD HIS HANDS UNDERNEATH THE LONG TABLE. It was decorated with delicacies that our chefs had cooked for us. He wasn't embarrassed by the palace staff that stood at each corner of his private palace dining room. Stiffly, the palace staff stood there with the Katantian emblems blazing on their chests. They observed the scene unfolding in front of them.

The palace was quiet this early in the morning. We were the only ones keeping the staff busy in the king's private floor's dining quarters.

Whenever we had breakfast as a royal family, King Aram Wraith sat at the top. He was accompanied by Kamila and his make-believe object Felicita Cross on each side. Thankfully, family breakfasts were a rare occasion. The king's packed schedule didn't allow family time. Dining with the Cross clan wasn't on top of my priorities list.

Mrs. Cross was incapable of silencing herself. Kamila stayed quiet as the king fingered our sister-in-law's mother. Mrs. Cross moaned herself to an orgasm.

If the king hadn't claimed Felicita Cross, I would have probably fucked her, too. Not because I necessarily wanted to, but because as Wraith Royals, we were supposed to fuck women to show our power over them.

And Travis Cross, her husband, was the one man we as a family liked to dangle our power in front of.

Aris, the Cross' daughter, and I ate our breakfast like it was a regular morning, the only change being that we were

served in the palace instead of our shared house. The palace had high ceilings, Greek columns, and the emblem carved into almost every wall. Our house was simpler than that.

I knew the king called upon Kamila and Felicita before he started his day. I couldn't care less about Felicita, but Kamila worried me. She brushed off what the king did to her, but I couldn't lie to myself.

I could see it in the king's eyes that he expected Aris and me to follow his lead. Grab a woman and own her, make her an object. My brother lived up to the expectations. I did not.

Aris had a girl slash object to finger in public. Valentina Cross. He owned his wife, and he proudly displayed it. I had my fun in private. These public showings didn't do much for me.

"When are you going to pick up the girl from Chicago, Valentina?" the king asked my brother's young wife. Valentina thrived in the presence of royals. Her tits were almost leaking from her top. She didn't wear a bra, so I noticed her hard nipples even if I tried not to. And I did. Living with my brother and his wife, I'd seen both of them in compromising positions plenty of times.

Valentina gulped down a sip of coffee. "I'm flying over there in an hour."

My family had never grown to fully trust the Cross family ever since they moved here ten years ago. The king still kept them close, more than his friends. "You'll show me just how grateful you are that I'm allowing that girl to come and see you."

Valentina nodded eagerly, her eyes swaying toward an unimpressed Aris. My older brother poked his ham like it had grown green.

Father's words were a king's command. "Bring her over here once you land. I want to meet her. Her father says she's quite an uninteresting girl, but I'm curious enough to see for myself."

Valentina was ever the obedient object in the presence of the king, sucking it up to him. “I will gladly do so—”

Kamila recklessly interrupted Valentina, “We all know what you do gladly. Mr. Cross and my brothers will pick them up at the airport later today.”

I couldn’t see beneath the table, but the king’s hungry hand grabbed Kamila’s thigh faster than a lightning bolt. “Aris and Weston are right here. They talk for themselves.”

Kamila nodded, devoid of any emotion. I could only imagine the king’s filthy claws digging into Kamila’s skin. The king hurt her, but she looked stern. She never let anybody see her weak side. Her eyes were glossy, and I wondered what she was on this early in the day. It pained me to see her like this. This routine of seeing Kamila hurt exhausted me.

Breakfast eventually finished, and we all returned to our routines.

Father planned on fucking his older object before heading to his office to work with the said object’s husband. He was a petty man, and he didn’t let anyone forget it. The one thing missing from this charade was the king marrying Felicita and making her his official object. But that would be too honorable on his part.

Kamila, Aris, I, and Valentina exited the palace and hurried back to our homes across the street. Aris and Valentina left for their quarters. Kamila proceeded to her house.

I retired to my bedroom, the dullest room of all. Just a bed and my wardrobe. What was my plan for the day? Right. I was on a countdown to find an object. It would look good to have one for the seventieth anniversary of Katantia. The pictures we’d take would last forever. The king wanted me to keep meeting women of the upper classes of Katantia until one of them impressed me enough to make her permanently mine.

They were too plain, like my room. I wanted something challenging. Valentina thought I didn’t care, but I was fully invested in the girl called Mandy who was coming all this way to see her.

Valentina's childhood friend had a death wish. I was absolutely sure of it. I looked at one picture of that girl and immediately recognized the object in her. Sure, she was supposed to leave in three months, but human laws were void in Katantia. Why was she coming over? Her father was surely behind it. She must have been pressured to come here because she didn't appear experienced, life or sex-wise.

I could change that.

Mandy's looks weren't that of a typical woman in my country. Her curves extended further than hell, and they made me want to showcase the devil everyone expected from Aram's son. Girls in Katantia were usually slim, not because we didn't have food to feed them. It was highly satisfactory to feed your object. All the sex that was being had made them naturally lose weight. Plus, we didn't believe in processed foods.

I wouldn't allow this foreign girl to infiltrate us. If she'd been sent to mess with my family or my country, I'd manipulate her. I'd make her pay.

Rushed knocks on my door woke me up from my daydream. "Weston? Are you in there?"

"Yes, come in," I told Kamila, not having expected her to come see me. She rarely came over to our house. She liked her solitude on the other end of the street. I watched her walk into my room like she owned it. Kamila wore her red hair in curls today. Her almost black eyes hid underneath that dark blue shiny eyeshadow. She had applied her dark lipstick and sprinkles of tiny stars on her cheeks perfectly. Any other person would look ridiculous with a painted face like this at 9:00 a.m. in the morning, but Kamila appeared like the princess that she was. She wore a black dress that ended mid-thigh with her arms covered in lace sleeves. Her heels made her legs look endless. The king wasn't around, and she thrived in his absence. She knew I would never dare to say no to her. Kamila meant the world to me. She made a stop right in front of my bed. "What can I help you with?"

Kamila caught the irony in my voice and allowed herself to grin for a moment. “Look, I have something to tell you.”

“Hurry up. My day is packed with meetings. Then I have to pick up Valentina’s friend. I got shit to do.”

Kamila nodded. She probably wanted to take my car for a spin. The Wraith coupe was one of the most luxurious vehicles on Katantia, and I was its proud owner. All of a sudden, she fell to the floor, taking me by surprise. She knelt, avoiding my gaze. She had a thing for drama.

Kamila took a sincere tone. “You and I, we know the laws of this land. Unlike Aris, we don’t enjoy them as much.”

Aris was more of a Katantia poster child than I was.

“You need to help me. I’ve had enough,” Kamila revealed. I was starting to get the picture, but I hoped I was wrong. “I want to become your object. If you marry me, we have more of a chance to get the throne and initiate some changes around here. I don’t want to be queen, but if it means that Aram will be gone, I’ll do it.”

“Object, as in fucking and bossing you around? Do you know what you’re asking of me?” I was stunned. Kamila had hit a low. She didn’t mean any of the things she was saying. I needed to help her out of whatever deep end she’d stumbled in.

Eager as always, Kamila shook her head. “Are you out of your mind? Of course you’re not fucking me. I’d never ask that of you. If you take me as your wife and—”

“And what? You’re being hurt. I hate to see that. You never let anyone degrade you. Why don’t you stand up for yourself?” I asked her stupidly. Every time the king touched her, she seemed repulsed. Mrs. Cross was indeed a whore for the king, but Kamila wasn’t of that kind. At least, that was what I kept telling myself.

For a decade.

Finally, she looked up at me. “I didn’t take you to be that stupid, Weston. He’d never listen to me. Only another man can make him take his hands and dick away.”

Kamila was a proud woman. I begged her to let me help, but she declined, claiming that she had everything under control. The king had a strange appetite. When Kamila worked in the palace, she came out exhausted. Nobody knew the exact details, but we all could envision what went on. For her to come to me, she must have been at her wit's end.

Letting all of her concerns sink in, I decided what was best for the family and Katantia.

"I'm in," I told her. "I don't promise to be monogamous."

With a smile, she replied, "I'm counting on you not being monogamous."

"You really want to do this?" This engagement would change everything. For the better?

"I beg of you. Marry me and then some." The words flew out of her mouth like it was a routine for her. Her dark eyes glistened in revenge. "Let's piss the fuck out of some people."

Finally.



SINCE VALENTINA WAS OUT OF TOWN FOR THE DAY, ARIS accompanied me to various meetings. We talked to law firms, milk producers, and condom companies. A typical day for us royals, making business and promoting our brand for further investments.

They all knew exactly who we were. Aris had an object, but I was still looking. So they served us the ideas in good-looking portions.

Sometimes I asked myself where all these women came from. Sure, Katantia was huge, but we didn't have those numbers of women.

Every boss or father hoped that I would take a look at their daughter and decide to own her.

What really happened, though, was an entirely different story.

Aris fetched himself a short blonde while I invited a curvy brunette to spend a couple of hours with me.

His relationship with Valentina was complicated. As a wife and object on Katantia, he didn't owe her commitment. He fucked around to prove a point to the rest of us. He didn't want us to know that Valentina was his and his only. As the son of the king, he feared that people would try to harm her. What he didn't comprehend was that nobody gave a fuck about Valentina. She was the least exciting object I had ever seen. Her entire family was irrelevant.

There was no time to leave the city of Katantia. Therefore, Aris and I made use of our royal name. We reserved a suite on top of the most luxurious hotel downtown. It was one of the highest skyscrapers. Its expensive suites had views of the stunning palace on the seaside and the impressive mountain in the middle of the country.

At the fancy reception, where two starry-eyed ladies gawked at my brother and me, Aris demanded, "Bring us some champagne. Be quick."

Aris and I didn't need to be accompanied to our hotel room. The staff knew we had been here too often. The dark hallways were drenched in lilac. Every surface was clean. The staff took care of the hotel's looks every five hours, from what I knew.

We entered our usual suite with the swipe of the card we'd been handed at the reception.

"Are you really planning on marrying Kamila?" Aris asked after making sure that our guests were too busy gazing outside of the tall windows. They gasped and giggled, pointing at the beauty of the palace from up here. "That sounds like the stupidest idea you've ever come up with, little bro. Did you hit your head with a book or something?"

I would've rolled my eyes, but I couldn't give him the satisfaction. The girls had moved on to their phones, taking snapshots of themselves in the suite.

My older brother didn't look at me. He observed the women as they fooled around in front of the windows. "The king owns Kamila. You know that. Marrying her means you go against his will. You must know that since you're the clever one."

"She's way over eighteen. He doesn't own her in that sense. Kamila eventually would have married. I love Kamila," I explained, disgusted at how I had to portray the relationship with Kamila. Aris didn't need to know the exact details of our arrangement.

"Where is this even coming from? Have you fucked her? Are you sure you want to own her? Technically, we already own her if the king dies," Aris argued. He wasn't as close to Kamila as I was, so he took this lightly. "It's ridiculous. There's so much pussy out there, brother. Kamila? For real?"

Now the girls put their phones aside. They were checking out each other's hair.

I shook my head. Aris was my brother. I respected him, but he had gone behind our backs by marrying Valentina, too. "I hope you can understand that I'm not going to discuss any details of our relationship. The king wouldn't appreciate that."

I was full of shit, but Aris was too distracted to pay attention.

"When are you going to tell his majesty that you're taking away his most prized possession?"

"Soon."

Before I could elaborate, our room service arrived, bringing all the goods.

Aris wouldn't talk to them, so I explained, "We're going to tie you up. There will be no touching. Any disobedience will result in punishment. We're going to use the condoms you promote. Let's hope they're as good as you say they are. If the condoms don't work, you get to give up the rights to your lives for the next nine months."

I didn't get hard at the thought of impregnating these women. I wasn't naturally drawn to having kids. Whenever

there were innocent engagements with kids in their schools, Aris and Valentina took care of it. I couldn't stand noisiness. I preferred peace and quiet.

Then again, not that the kids that would result from a random one-night stand had any right to grow up in the palace. Those types of kids ended up in the palace's adoption system.

Aris finally joined me on the sectional sofa. It was the girls' turn to undress now.

Piece by piece, they took off their clothes. They were feeling themselves, swaying to an inaudible sound with shut eyes and parted lips. This was their moment. They put on a show for the royal princes of Katantia. This was the purest form of Katantia. I was fucking bored while my brother nodded along, amused by the scene in front of him.

The short blonde and my brunette even made out with each other to impress us. I barely paid attention to what the women looked like. Tattoos? Piercings? Scars? That wasn't any of my business.

Any woman we met on our shores wanted a piece of us, a chance to reside in the palace. Little did they know that neither Aris nor I would ever consider owning them. Aris was happy in his open marriage. I simply wasn't interested in settling down. The only thing they were getting today were two erections, willing to fuck their holes.

Once the brunette positioned herself in front of me, I forgot about my brother and his girl. She lowered herself to her knees before me. With a smirk, she sought out my semi-erect cock. I snatched her wrist before she could wrap her eager fingers around me. "Did I say you could touch me with your hands?"

Promptly, the girl removed her hand. I didn't have to do much; my name bore a weight that suffocated my people. Her cheeks blushed to a crimson. She didn't want to upset me. Nobody did. The punishment for such actions was severe. Punishment sex houses turned even the nymphomaniacs into traumatized abstinent nuns.

I unzipped my pants. Watching the woman, I stroked myself. There was a routine even if the girls were interchangeable. It was getting boring, but this was my life. I had been born into Katantian royalty. I fucked whoever I pleased.

The brunette in front of me studied my hand on my cock, licking her lip greedily.

“Put it in your mouth,” I challenged her. She obeyed, shifting forward. Her knees touched my shoes. I felt a moment of repulsion. I had to get a grip. Once she started sucking, I was momentarily distracted.

The women sucked our cocks until we almost filled their mouths with come. Both girls eventually attempted to undress us. Aris didn't mind nudity, but I preferred to keep my pants on. It made the affair less intimate.

The girls put the condoms on us. They started bouncing on our dicks. Their moans were loud, but they sounded muffled in my ears. I wasn't paying attention.

Aris fucked anything that walked on two feet with a pussy, but I found it distracting when I fucked girls with fake tits or ass implants. I tried to ignore it like I ignored everything else, but touching their skin forced me to face their implants. The brunette had fake tits and butt implants. It wasn't my thing. It made me think about the possibility of them being coerced into getting their bodies done by their parents or owners. Aram had tried it often enough with Kamila.

We were allowed to have different tastes. As the brunette rode me, I absently examined the woman's body by teasing and squeezing anything I could get my hands on.

When it was time to bust, I pictured fucking the new girl's ass. Girls from overseas had a particular reaction to us. Naturally, it did the job.

The stifled moans gradually decreased as she started spasming around my cock.

Once everybody had an orgasm or two, it was time to pack up. Aris and I took a shower one after the other. We dressed up

as quickly as we could.

By the time we were at the door and ready to leave, the girls still hadn't dressed up. They tried to tease us into another round.

But we were already gone.

CHAPTER 3

MANDY



IT TOOK ME A MOMENT UNTIL I FREAKED THE HELL OUT AT THE sight of Valentina, standing there in the jet. “Is it really you? It is. I can’t believe this. Why... I thought they wouldn’t tell you. Where have you been in the past ten years, Valentina? You vanished! It was like you never even existed! You left right after my mother died. I needed you. You weren’t there...”

The staff had to calmly instruct us to relax and take our seats. The seats were plush and comfortable, but the seat belt stifled me. I hadn’t expected to see Valentina right away. Foolishly, I had anticipated a welcome on Katantia. Perhaps I meant as much to her as she did to me, after all?

The stewardess offered me water. I downed it, gradually getting it together. Valentina had ordered a bottle of vodka. It stood proudly on the table, almost frozen. There were two glasses on its side, but only one was filled.

Take-off had come and gone.

The dark-haired young woman sat on the opposite side of me. Her body had matured. I could see that she wasn’t eleven years old anymore. The clothing on her skin was stylish, caressing her every curve with a sensitive and high-priced touch. She showed way more skin than I was comfortable with, but she did it with grace. She was skinnier and taller than she had been back in the day.

Her dim eyes teased secrets as she asked, “Have you calmed down now?”

Growing up, I had never dreamed of coming into contact with my best friend ever again. Her being here in front of me was a dream come true. My father taught me not to miss her, but I couldn't stop thinking about her and where her family had disappeared.

Her soft voice was covered in honey, deep but sensual. "I was baffled when I first heard about you coming to Katantia. Dad told us. He started working for the King of Katantia back when we left Chicago. He still works there."

Valentina spoke fondly of her dad. I was glad that their relationship hadn't altered like mine with my father had.

"What happened to you guys there? There are cruel rumors." Not that I knew much of Katantia; people who came and went kept their mouths shut.

Valentina crossed her legs, sitting back on her seat. While I still wore my seat belt, she had clicked hers off. "I was homeschooled until I finished high school around sixteen. Then I was sent off to one of the suburban areas of Katantia to gain some experience..." Experience? What was she talking about? "They were two men. The mother had died. Daily, I was... Well, I have to tell you I loved it. I learned so much from them. When I returned, I was old enough to find an owner. Aris basically watched me grow up, you know. The first night we spent together, he said he'd always wanted to make me his. He doesn't treat me well, but I don't treat him any better. We have a very creative sex life, but that's to be expected at home. He's the prince. I have endless possibilities now that I'm his. He knows it. I can allow myself disobedience."

I didn't know her anymore. This was my best friend. I wanted that back. I scratched the inside of my wrists, seeking a distraction. She picked up her glass of vodka, taking a hefty sip. She went on, "Mom works for the king, but in different ways than my dad. She's his plaything. He won't make her his object. I'm glad for that because then that'd mean I'm married to my stepbrother. I already have one weirdo brother. I don't need two."

I hated the calm way she talked about her mother being another man's plaything, but it wasn't my place to console her. This was their reality. "What about Ryan?"

I waited for her to stop sounding this brainwashed, but I had a feeling my wait would be futile. Valentina responded, "I don't really know what's happening to Ryan. He barely speaks to me. He's always absent. He's more secluded than he was before."

At one point in our life, Ryan had been the big brother we loved. He took Valentina and me out for ice cream. Movies. He was fun to be around, and he loved his little sister. What had changed?

"I'm sorry," I commented.

"I don't need you to feel sorry for me," Valentina spat, her mask falling. Uncrossing her legs, she leaned forward. What the fuck was going on with me? I couldn't stop staring at the exposed skin of her tits. "I came here because my dad would be heartbroken if I hadn't. My parents would've picked you up themselves, but they haven't left Katantia in years. On top of all of that, I had to make a shady deal with Aram so I could take the jet instead of flying with the peasants and their collared bitches." A knot formed in my stomach. Her eyes gleamed in loathing. "The king wants to uphold his perfect business relationship with your father, so he's pulling all the strings to make your visit perfect."

The confusion was dominant in my brain. Each word sliced up a memory of V in my past. "My father has a lot of business involvements with Katantia. I don't know anything about them, though. I'm only here to visit."

"Of course, you don't. It's not your place. You're a girl. You breathe to get fucked in all three holes. That's all you are to them." She downed her glass of vodka as I took a deep breath. It had appeared curious to me that she ordered alcohol, but now I got it. I eyed the bottle of vodka on the table. Fucked in three holes? What the hell? Was I traveling to Katantia or to the '50s?

“Don’t look at me like that.” Inspecting her sharp and long nails, she put down her glass. “On Katantia, we’re all fair game unless we have an owner or you’re Kamila. She’s the only woman who can get away with anything. Only the king decides who fucks that bitch.”

This wasn’t the Valentina I knew, the innocent girl who drank apple juice and ate cupcakes by the pool with me when I grew too tired of swimming alongside her. I was starting to wonder why the hell I’d done this trip to myself. This friendship was a thing of the past. We hadn’t even had our periods when she left Chicago, so I couldn’t have known what type of woman she’d grow up to be, what she’d look like. Knowing that she had been brainwashed in Katantia didn’t help the bitter thoughts in my head.

We’d been talking for what felt like ages. I was exhausted from all of the information already. Leaning forward, I poured myself a vodka. I had expected a warmer welcome from Valentina, but, then again, she wasn’t the only reason I was here. My father hated her guts. He had a bigger plan.

So did I.

Gulping down the alcohol, it burned my throat. I wasn’t used to drinking. Maybe it was too soon, but I already felt my head spin.

“You should be grateful,” she blurted out.

“Are you even listening to yourself? Grateful for what? That I get to have sex against my will for the next three months while I have a fiancé back home? Do they even use protection?”

Valentina’s eyes bored into me. Her voice was dripping in annoyance. “Katantians don’t play with protection. That’s what you dipshits do out there, catching all these diseases! We may not do safe words, but health is a priority! Anyone who lives in the palace gets tested every other week.”

Her accusation diminished my confidence. I couldn’t open my mouth. Manuel flickered in my memories. Suddenly, I felt

my promise ring get heavy around my finger. Holding up my hand, I viewed the gift.

“It’s illegal to wear jewelry unless you have a husband,” she told me, her eyes gleaming with satisfaction as she scanned the ring on my finger. “It seems cheap. Where did you get it from? A candy store?”

Before I could react to her heinous comment, the stewardess finally brought another vodka bottle. Valentina ordered the food without asking me what I wanted. I gulped down more alcohol as we waited for the food in silence. Valentina and I were staring at each other in menacing silence.

When the food came, its heavenly smell was a welcome distraction. I didn’t remember having ever eaten food this pretty on a plane before. The stewardess served us. It looked like food, not garbage. I could tell the ingredients were fresh by looking at their texture.

I had a salad, a chicken breast fillet in a champignon sauce, rice, and my dessert. By the time I finished, I felt completely full. I had successfully avoided Valentina for half an hour.

After the stewardess came in to take away the empty dishes, Valentina scoffed at me. “Dad would be so happy if everything went back to the way it was. Nothing’s as it was, though. Your mom’s not around to buy us tiny Chanel bags and let us play catch in a Dior store. You’re not my friend anymore. You’re the enemy. For all I know, you’re coming to snatch away my husband. Don’t even think of fucking my man. Stay the fuck away from him. We do a lot of fuckery, but you won’t be part of that. He’s not fucking you. End of story. ”

I wasn’t interested in her husband. I had a fiancé.

“Dad and Mom insisted. They said that it’d be so much fun to have a girlfriend again since all the girls on Katantia hate me because of my husband.” She crossed her legs. “That won’t be happening. I don’t befriend girls. I don’t fraternize with losers who can’t even dress like their name.”

She was right. I didn’t look like a Rawlins daughter. I did that on purpose. It was apparent to me that my father hadn’t

sent me here for any good. I understood that now. He had intended to mess with my head.

And so far, it was working brilliantly.



INITIALLY, I HAD PLANNED TO SLEEP, BUT MY EYES WEREN'T shutting in Valentina's presence. Inertly, I was terrified that she'd poison me in my sleep. She didn't seem to like me much. I had a notepad in my bag. One that I didn't touch. I sat there, staring at Valentina as she stared at me. There was hunger in her eyes. I couldn't decipher what that meant. "You've definitely gained weight. I remember Spencer wanting all his women to be as skinny as hell. How has he not disowned you yet?"

That was a question I often asked myself. Valentina's scrunched up face showed her disregard when I didn't respond verbally. "Did you break your nose? It looks funny."

Uncomfortable at the childhood memory of my broken nose, I urged her, "Stop."

"Stop what?"

"Whatever you're doing. It won't work."

Cheekily, she replied, "You don't even know what I'm doing."

I rolled my eyes.

Valentina sneered. "Those thick thighs and your wide hips will only get you in trouble. Don't you work out back in Chicago? Or have they banned your ugly face from entry? You still seem afraid of needles. That's why you haven't had liposuction, right?"

"What have I done to you?" I asked. Some percentage of my brain felt flattered that Valentina remembered my fear of needles. The other part... "I'm coming all the way to meet you in Katantia, and you treat me like this."

“I don’t owe you shit,” Valentina responded. “You’re bursting into our lives, causing all sorts of havoc like you’re special. You’re not. You’re just a forgotten daughter. My dad informs us of what you’re up to, engaged to a broke nobody who works for your dad.”

My fiancé had done many things like starve me for a couple of days, eating out while I was at home with a growling stomach and endless headaches. He’d pay for everything once we were married. But he wasn’t a broke nobody anymore. Fuck. Valentina was getting to me.

“It’s so sweet that you want me there when you marry him. I’ll have to ask Aris if we can come, but, spoiler alert, we won’t waste our time. He’s the Prince of Katantia.” She rose from the seat on the opposite side of me. “I’m exhausted from being in your presence. I’m going to bed. Don’t disturb me. Can’t believe I flew all the way to Chicago and back for... you.”

Crossing my arms, I observed as Valentina disappeared behind the curtains. One of the flight attendants suggested I watch a movie or two. They handed me a tablet that didn’t have many functions other than a library of Katantian live shows, which I had no clue about, and a bunch of Hollywood movies. I picked one, letting it roll. The wireless headphones they’d given me numbed out the noises of the plane.

Hours later, I was yawning at the screen. The muscles in my hands were aching from the tablet. I put it away and slipped off the headphones. They had turned down the lights in the plane. I glanced through the window next to me. Once the clouds cleared a bit, I saw the blue ocean that was dark as night. A shore lay ahead, sparkling in the night. From up here, Katantia seemed harmless, average even. The water surrounded the land. Near the coast, there were beach houses. Not every mile was populated.

A couple of miles into Katantia, the woods began on a prominent mountain. Behind it, the real city appeared. My eyes hurt from all the lights. I counted six skyscrapers. The rest of the high-rise buildings weren’t as tall. This side of Katantia was densely populated. The border and the enormous

bridge that connected Katantia to the mainland appeared to be well-guarded, with tanks and high-level fences. The plane took a U-turn. Finally, the modest airport entered my vision.

In the distance from the populated city and the airport, I saw some sort of town. The palace was the focal point. It looked like a broader version of the Buckingham Palace.

The cabin attendants asked us to put our seat belts on. A little later, a yawning and refreshed Valentina reappeared, taking her seat on the opposite side of me. The plane was slowly nearing the ground. We landed without any turbulence. I thanked the flight attendants for their hospitality while Valentina giggled behind me. We exited the plane. I thought the air would be thicker here, but I didn't feel any different. There was more humidity here, even in the night. I felt it in the pearls of sweat that formed on my forehead.

A van was waiting for us. The older driver and Valentina greeted each other like old friends, something I'd wished for but hadn't been granted.

Before we left the van, the man revealed, "Luggage will be delivered to the palace. Find Prince Aris."

There was nobody else in the luggage hall when we reached it. This airport was much smaller than Chicago's airport, but it was cleaner and more modern.

Once we were out of the luggage hall, we walked out into the public, where people were waiting for us. There I recognized Valentina's brother Ryan, Mr. and Mrs. Cross. They had changed. They mirrored a caricature of what they had once been.

Prince Aris and Weston were proudly standing there, their clothes aesthetically pleasing, clean, and ironed.

The contrast between Ryan and the royal sons was visible. He looked pale in comparison to the brothers. Aris was the tallest and the one with the lighter dark hair out of the brothers, almost dirty-blond. Weston's hair was raven black, almost the same shade as mine. Aris's gray eyes found my best friend's. They didn't wander off. Valentina rushed to Aris, her

heels filling the empty arrivals hall with noise. She gave her husband a long kiss. In front of everybody, Aris groped her, slapping her ass. Once these two touched, the rest of the world seized to matter for them.

Weston's blue eyes revealed that he wasn't interested in whatever was happening. He seemed pissed off at the prospect of having to be here. His gaze found mine as I inspected his body. Embarrassment washed over me.

CHAPTER 4

WESTON



VALENTINA HAD THIS SMUG LOOK ON HER FACE WHEN SHE appeared next to her former best friend. I placed emphasis on the former because these two didn't seem in tune with each other at all. Valentina didn't make good friends with women these days or ever. I wasn't surprised that Mandy hadn't changed that.

In contrast to my brother's radiant wife, her little friend seemed disheveled and overwhelmed. Her chocolate eyes absorbed each detail of the airport like she had never seen one before in her life. The innocence in her eyes made my dick hard. Innocence wasn't a concept Katantians believed in.

The Cross family greeted the girl like a family member they hadn't seen in a while. Lots of love and friendly kisses were thrown around. The girl was surprised at the welcome she had received. She showed a lack of confidence this early in her stay without even having been disrobed yet. I almost rolled my eyes, but she wasn't worth the reaction.

I noticed that Ryan checked the girl's tits and ass out, which I hadn't done yet. Mandy didn't realize that she was being watched. Oblivious to her secret admirer, she shrank in place next to Valentina.

When it came to the royal introduction, I could have sworn Mandy was about to pass out. Her fingers trembled when we shook hands. My brother and I behaved respectfully. The Wraith royals were awaiting orders on how to treat this foreigner; further handling would be decided later when the king saw her for the first time.

“These are the nice people of the family,” Valentina explained to her friend. It didn’t ease Mandy. It only earned V a playful smack on the ass from Aris for disrespecting his family publicly. Valentina leaned back unto him, rubbing herself all over what I could only guess was another erection on Aris’s part.

“Mandy is going to make her own assumptions while she’s here,” Valentina’s weak brother said. Ryan knew perfectly well that on this island, women rarely had their own opinions. Mandy, a foreigner, wasn’t going to be any different.

Mr. Cross spoke to end the awkward silence after Ryan’s comment. “We’re going to take you to the palace now. The king desires to meet you.”

Mandy nodded nervously. I anticipated this meeting. This new girl seemed like an easy target. She was frozen like a deer in the headlights, not moving forward. Did she even process what was happening?

I observed the girl’s body as she walked right next to Valentina. These girls would soon be fighting for our attention. Mandy had assets that would come in handy in Katantia. Men here appreciated real flesh. Mandy didn’t appreciate the gifts she’d been handed from her maker. She didn’t carry herself like Valentina did, with pride and seduction. Mandy’s posture was weak, and her head hung low. I mean, women were objects here. They didn’t have any rights whatsoever, but they carried themselves with more poise than this foreigner.

It didn’t take long until we reached the cars.



THE CROSS FAMILY DIVIDED ITSELF. MRS. CROSS SLASH object queen slash king’s whore went to the palace’s hair salon. Valentina’s father hurried away to handle the king’s business. Ryan disappeared. He wasn’t missed at all.

Only Valentina accompanied the Rawlins girl to the king’s quarters with us.

Mandy looked small when she entered my king's office in the palace on the fifth floor. The look on her face resembled a puppy being presented a new master. She'd seen the guards and the staff with the Katantian emblems on their uniforms we had encountered in the hallways. They hadn't eased the tension bubbling inside of her.

It thrilled me. It also upset me for some peculiar reason.

The king sat up from his desk, approaching us. Valentina automatically lowered her gaze. It was a traditional procedure in the presence of the king that women followed in Katantia.

Mandy kept her eyes high, for the first time in her stay, taking in the entirety of the king. It intrigued me. It caused a reaction from the king.

Instead of forcing her to bow in front of him, the king shook her hand. He offered her a seat at his desk. Of course, he lustfully eyed the assets that would make any local woman jealous. The king curiously tilted his head to the side when he noticed that Mandy wasn't shying away from glancing at him with inquisitive eyes.

"Why are you looking at me like that, my sweet girl?" he asked in a soft tone I hadn't heard from him in years. The last time I'd heard it, Kamila was still a teenager.

"Nothing..." Mandy stuttered. She blinked, looking away. "You remind me of someone I used to know."

"How was your flight, Ms. Rawlins?" The king's tone was friendly.

I had expected him to treat this girl with coldness like he treated most foreigners who came to our shores for the sex experience of their lives.

Mandy found it easier to talk to the king. Go fucking figure. She chatted with him like she had finally grown guts. "It was highly pleasant, sir. Your Highness. I apologize. How do I address you?"

"Please, my sweet girl, you're part of our family now. Sir will suffice. Although I must admit it makes me feel old,"

Aram replied. It was time for me to be flustered. The king looked like he was in awe of this girl.

“Sir, it’s truly an honor to visit your great land. What you have here is magnificent,” Mandy complimented the king. The thick-skinned girl knew how to handle words. Aram bought into her compliments. “I don’t want to make you feel old...”

Aram looked at Aris and me, interrupting the girl. “I like her already. Nobody is to touch this delicate young creature without my permission. I hereby claim her.”

Mandy appeared glad to be chosen by the king. Hadn’t she heard the stories? Did Mandy really trust the king’s charm? She should wait until his urges came alive. Then her gratitude would turn into something entirely different.

Valentina had her arm wrapped around her husband. She looked at him with a lively need to either chop his head off or fuck him until he only saw her. He already only saw her. V was too busy fighting bitches to realize that.

“I have come here to explore your land. Do I have to tell you about my plans, sir?” Mandy asked Aram. “Is there anything you’ve discussed with my father concerning my stay?”

The king shook his head. “Mandy, dear, you don’t have to tell me your plans. You don’t have any. My sons will make sure you see the best side of Katantia.” He turned toward his sons. His authoritative voice came back when he addressed his real family. “Show her a good time. She’s not to be touched by anyone.”

There was no other choice for us other than to agree.

CHAPTER 5

MANDY



KING ARAM WRAITH WAS THE MOST IMPRESSIVE MAN IN Katantia so far. The moment I met him, I knew I had to tread carefully around him. If my father had taught me anything valuable, it was to detect the most powerful man in the room and find his weaknesses. Mr. Wraith suffered from God complex. I served him compliments on purpose. He appeared younger than his fifty-seven years, looking healthy and ready to take down anybody who dared to question him.

I wasn't going to unveil that I didn't agree with any of the Katantian traditions.

There was something familiar in his face. My eyes fell on Aris. I understood why I felt that way. Both of their faces were formed similarly.

When he stood to greet us, he was almost as tall as his sons. He made me feel tense as he was the one who had the power on this godforsaken island. His grace had dominated the room. I didn't want him to see that he intimidated me. After what Valentina had told me of her having to deal with the king to get on the jet to pick me up, my expectations were otherworldly.

Up close, his silver eyes seemed magical. They fit his ash-blond hair. This man was close to my father's age with his numerous gray hairs and the wrinkles on his forehead.

"It was a pleasure to meet you," the king said. He talked, and the world stood still. His family didn't utter a single word

of resistance. “I look forward to spending more time with you if my schedule permits it.”

Soon, he dismissed us.

What Manuel had warned me about was beginning to vanish. If the king claimed me, I was safe from the debauchery. Nobody would dare to touch me when this man had put it down as law that it was forbidden.

I repeated that mantra, but it didn't convince me. I was here to explore and humiliate myself. My father hadn't sent me here for any other reason. It was clear that I had no say in his business matters, neither here nor in Chicago. I was his only heir, yet my gut told me that I wouldn't be the one with the inheritance if he ever died.

Valentina didn't owe me anything anymore, but the least she could've done was warn me. In the presence of the royals, common rules disappeared. My best friend had become a seductive siren, and she found herself blended into a world of lust and power.

I had zero intentions of falling for their plays.



AFTER MEETING WITH THE KING, I WASN'T CONSULTED ABOUT the plans of the day.

I was utterly taken aback when the royals put me back in the car and had us driven to a local Hole Store.

The royals drove around in a limousine while the Cross family had an average black BMW. Back at the airport, I hadn't realized it, but being in the palace, it felt strange. The Cross family lived here. Travis worked for the king, and he only drove that car? It seemed like a show of power for me.

As we had done in the drive to the palace, Aris and Valentina took one side of the limousine, while Weston and I sat on the other. Sitting next to Weston, I paid attention to how much space there was between us without ever matching my glance with his. Weston was intimidating because he didn't

seem like he cared much about what was happening around him.

He poured himself a drink. “Do you drink, Ms. Rawlins?”

I flinched at the mention of my name. His brother got his champagne glass filled without question, but he didn’t pour his sister-in-law a glass.

I struggled to answer. I had an image to uphold. “I occasionally have a drink, yes.”

He smirked at my reply. I memorized the image. He didn’t have a care in the world as he downed his alcohol, gazing out of the window. When he turned my way, I flinched. I didn’t know the limits. The turmoil inside of me threatened to make me throw up. Then again, it wasn’t turmoil. It was a pain that had been growing for months now.

Aris asked for two more glasses, which he drowned in an instant. His wife playfully tugged at his white shirt. Her leg was rubbing the inside of his. I wasn’t used to these situations.

Stunned and at a loss for words, I watched Valentina’s hand reach into Aris’s pants and, quite possibly, she began stroking his dick right in front of us.

“That’s it,” Aris told his wife. Their mouths connected. They made a show out of it. It was out of the question that Aris didn’t give a fuck about guests. I had expected more decency from Valentina, who started this.

Weston gazed at my jeans-covered legs. They weren’t crossed. I had attempted to sit far away from him, but all it would take was one swift move, and he’d be sitting right next to me.

I didn’t want him to sit right next to me. No. Who was I kidding? Aris and Valentina appeared pleased, touching each other freely. They didn’t mind the crowd. I wanted... I wanted something simple like that. With Manuel, nothing was simple. Too many lies. A lot of dependencies.

My chest rose and fell rapidly. I felt stunned at the scene in front of me. My best friend had every right to kiss and touch

her husband. I didn't have the right to fantasize about it, though.

I caught Weston's glance without even looking at him. I wanted to hide from him because I had the feeling that he could see right through me. Defensively, I uttered, "Stop looking at me like that."

He smirked when I responded, "I'm not like the girls you know. I'll put up a fight."

"Girls here put up a fight if their owner asks them to."

That shut me up.

For the rest of the ride, he left me alone. We spent ten minutes in the limousine, all the while the sun was disappearing.

The limousine stopped in front of an average-looking store. Multiple cars were parked here. There were no shopping bags in sight. A Hole Store; initially, I had no idea what that was. The neon signs with female faces coated in glitter didn't give me enough hints. Or perhaps they did. I simply didn't want to admit it to myself.

Sale signs were all over the building. I didn't understand what was being sold here. The prices didn't make any sense.

Valentina's face showed that she was unhappy to be here. Her jaw tightened. Her brows were drawn together.

My best friend's eyelashes batted at me seductively.

"Behave, V," Aris told his wife, kissing her cheek.

"I hate this store," Valentina revealed. She crossed her hands in front of her chest. "I don't like watching you get pleasure from other women."

The driver went inside the building ahead of us. After the empty airport, I expected a similar treatment at this store.

The royal men, Valentina, and I waited inside the car. I feared the royal men. I didn't know what they were capable of.

Nobody spoke. The silence was so loud that I almost heard my wristwatch tick.

Suddenly, a dozen men stormed out of the store. They were diverse, but there was one common theme. The men seemed plain. Before I could ask, an annoyed Valentina explained, “Royals don’t engage in sexual activities when nobodies are around.”

Well, her royal had almost fucked her in front of me. Did that mean I was the opposite of a ‘nobody’? I saw his erect penis. It was an unforgettable sight. I should’ve felt disgusted, but in a way, I didn’t care. This was what they did here. As long as Valentina seemed happy doing it, I had no say.

It already felt horrifying enough to have Weston stare at me like he wanted to make an example out of me...

But that was it. Weston hadn’t touched me. He’d only looked at me. Looking wasn’t inherently bad, was it? There were no further attempts.

Weston was by far the most attractive. Aris was close, but Valentina was married to him. I tried to be respectful after her warning, not that I intended to have sex on this island. She practically waved his dick in front of my face.

The royal men walked around in suits of delicate fabric. Aris carried his single-breasted gray suit jacket casually over his shoulder. Weston wore a similar jacket in a jet-black color. In contrast to his older brother, he wore it buttoned.

Both men sported the same type of dress pants.

It surprised me that Aris’s clothes remained unbothered by the heavy make-out session in the car.

Manuel came to mind, but his image seemed blurry, a problem of the past.

Finally, the driver came back. He looked exhausted while attempting to catch his breath. “It’s clear. I checked the rest of the customers. They won’t pose a problem.”

“Who’s in there?” Aris asked. He didn’t sound playful when addressing the staff. “Does it need to be cleared out?”

“No,” the driver replied, placing his hands on his hips. “It’s some condom manufacturers having a birthday party. The

usual. You met with their representatives earlier today.”

Aris and Weston didn't seem bothered by what the driver said. I had a bad feeling. A Hole Store where people celebrated birthdays? It didn't seem like a normal thing to do.

At home.

Here? This was Katantia.

When we entered the store, it was dark and quiet. I followed the reluctant Valentina. The royals were in their element. There was a reception, an elevator, and a bunch of doors leading to God knew where. At the reception, an older woman was knitting.

“We're so proud—”

Aris interrupted her, “Skip the intro. Where's the party?”

They wanted to crash a party. Great.

“Follow me,” the older woman stood up and came forward. She led us to the door in the middle.

When she unlocked and opened it, I heard everything.

Moans and groans filled my ears. People were thrusting and cursing. Bewildered, I stared at Valentina. I wasn't ready for this. I had barely had sex myself; now, I was expected to watch other people do it?

I turned around, ready to stomp out of there, but Weston grabbed my arm. He didn't apply a lot of pressure, but it was a chilling touch nonetheless.

The dark tunnel we were in hid his expression. I begged, “Please, let me go back to the car. I don't want to be here...”

“Sir, should I tie the girls up?” the older woman blatantly interrupted me. I immediately stepped back, shaken. Weston's grip on me loosened, but my heart stammered. Why would they want to tie me up? I wasn't even sure I understood where we were.

The royals nodded. Weston instructed her, “Make sure they have a good view of the glory holes.”

Glory holes?

“I don’t know what that is. I’d like to go back to the car, please,” I urged them, anyone who would listen.

But they weren’t paying attention to me.

The woman departed. Valentina followed her with an eye roll that not even the dark tunnel could hide. I refused. “I’m going to go now...”

From behind Weston, Aris addressed me, “You either go where this lovely lady takes you, or you participate in the fun. Don’t leave Valentina all alone up there. She doesn’t enjoy it.”

Up where?

“You’re coercing me right now. You know that, right?” I responded in a hiss.

“We didn’t force you to come here, virgin. Follow my wife, or suffer the consequences,” Aris insisted. He didn’t even sound threatening.

His voice was collected and amused.

I didn’t like it, but I followed Valentina. It was better than staying here alone with men I didn’t know. It turned out that Valentina and the older woman were headed for the elevator. Once upstairs, we entered a room with huge covered windows.

A row of leather chairs awaited us.

Valentina sat down. I did the same. I asked, “What are we doing here? Shouldn’t we run?”

“There’s no running on Katantia,” Valentina replied, observing her polished nails. They looked like claws. “We’re here to watch them fuck girls through glory holes.”

The prospect of glory holes was beyond me.

The older woman tied me up first as if she knew I would make a run for it while she was tying up Valentina. My hands were now behind my back and barely movable. My feet were next. She bound them to the chair’s legs. I tried to move, but the rope dug into my skin.

I felt smothered. My heart hadn't slowed down one bit.

When she finished up with Valentina, she was in a similar position as me. Then the curtains fell from the windows, and a different world opened up.

It looked like an easy maze. A square surrounded by walls appeared. On the left, walls separated women from men. The women were on the outside wearing nothing at all. The men were inside the large square. Most of them were still wearing their clothes.

Aris and Weston were having a conversation with a man pressed against the wall with his dick sticking out from a hole. Said man's cock was being sucked by a blond girl with a large tattoo of a dragon on her back. It moved as her head bobbed on the man's dick.

Distracted by his surroundings, Weston gazed upward and noticed that the window had now been set.

He signaled Aris, who ended the conversation. His eyes fell on our predicament. Aris smirked before occupying the closest hole.

A naked girl was waiting with her mouth open.

CHAPTER 6

WESTON



WE WERE SHOWING THE NEW GIRL THE BEST SIDE OF Katantia. Sex.

The Hole Store was a little cube that everybody wanted to join. As abominable as life was, the fun time in here could only be afforded by a certain amount of cash. This was the best Hole Store in the country. The rest didn't come close.

Those girls behind the holes weren't ordinary street hookers. They were clean. Their last name probably sounded familiar to me. After work was over, they would keep their mouths shut over what they had witnessed. They had airtight contracts, earning a nice sum of money that kept them and their owners in the good parts of the country.

Countless times, I had been here with my brother and his wife. She spent the hour locked up alone in one of the rooms upstairs. It was amusing to see a woman so determined to please her man over any other woman. This was the purest form of torture for my brother's wife.

Every time we walked inside this cube, the old woman tied Valentina up and dropped the curtains. Valentina enjoyed the punishments my brother served for disobedience, so she defied him in every way she could. Sometimes Valentina watched; other times, she pretended to fall asleep because she truly despised the paid girls behind the holes. I questioned Mandy and Valentina's friendship. My brother's wife was a bitch to other women. It was a tried and tested concept.

This time around, Valentina behaved. She had company. The brunette girl next to her was growing impatient. I could see them talking, or should I say, discussing their situation.

Their faces were red. I swore I could almost hear them yell at each other from down here.

My brother was already on his third hole. This store was like golf to him. He didn't need many strokes to shoot his shot.

On the other hand, I leaned back on the empty wall and observed the tied up girls. My thoughts escalated when I began thinking about Mandy. With Aram claiming her, she was a forbidden fruit now. Denying a spoiled prince like me pussy was unheard of. The only woman off-limits in the entire country was Kamila. While I could've had any pussy in the store, I studied Mandy's crushed face, which expressed a sentiment of anger, not arousal.

I was many things, but I drew the line at taking what women didn't want to give me. I left that role to the king and his friends.

Mandy was definitely experiencing a cultural shock. The new girl was young and impressionable, quite horny, probably. I knew the girls on the outside. My brother and I had traveled often enough to define them as a different breed from the Katantian girls. Here, the world revolved around one thing, and that was sex. There was no shame in that. In Mandy's world, while things were similar, girls like her had a choice. They could choose not to participate in the world's games of power and sex. That was a fundamental difference between Katantia and the outside world.

They weren't shouting at each other anymore upstairs. If I weren't who I was, the son of Aram, I would've pitied Mandy. I should've pitied her. I wasn't fond of Valentina and her games. While pussy was a given in my life, I valued loyalty, family, and friendship.

At that moment, Valentina wasn't behaving like a good friend. That rubbed me the wrong way.

Mandy kept shifting in her seat. Valentina was calmly sitting on her chair while Mandy moved like she was trying to stop her body from taking all of this in. I could see her squeeze her thighs together, biting her lips and avoiding to look down at what was happening. Her perplexed expression drew me in.

Each hole in here could have been mine today. I was lucky that my brother was too preoccupied with his own dick. He'd have a laugh at me for standing here all not-so-excited. I was positive that Aris was going to comment on my withdrawal later on. There was something inside of me telling me to sit this one out.

Once I turned down the volume of the sounds of sex in this cube, I was able to calm my growing erection. This was the perfect place to have my cock taken care of, but there was simply no need in me to go through with it. I had the rest of the year to get that taken care of.

My eyes fixated upon that large window. They must have seen something happening down here because now they were back at it. Their argument had heated up. I couldn't decipher whether Mandy was furious or ashamed. Valentina was barely present for the argument. She was angry at Aris, a familiar sentiment for all of us.

Mandy had the fight in her. Girls around here gave up easily. There was nothing to argue against, no wall to break down.

I would have spent more time feasting my eyes on the girls above, but my brother once again claimed everybody's attention.

Aris had finished inside of a girl's hole and zipped his pants back up. The girls here were checked; we could finish inside them without any problems, something the prime Hole Stores prided themselves in.

If an employee got pregnant, the baby became the property of the palace. Our adoption system sold it to our one percent. Not all sex work establishments were as forthcoming. Some were led by men who liked to do things their way. Aram

frowned upon that. Therefore, this Hole Store was the preferred pastime of the royals.

“Lady! Old lady, out front! I want you to pay Gia triple the amount of her daily salary!” Aris shouted, the chatters and thrusts halting. He knew that there were cameras and microphones here. “Put it on the tab.”

Some were amused by Aris’s demand. Others seemed intimidated. As royals, we caused the latter reaction quite often.

Aris soon joined me. “Aren’t you going to fuck anything?”

Instead of replying, I turned my head in the direction of the girls. He got the message, following my lead.

“What are they doing up there?” Aris asked. He was as curious as I was.

“Mandy has a hard time adjusting,” I replied. “How long do you think she will last here?”

His face lit up. My oldest brother loved a bet. “A week. Tops. She’ll crawl to the king, asking for permission to exit the country, but he’ll refuse.”

“I think this girl...” I stopped mid-sentence to point at her. “Mandy would up and leave.”

“You give her too much credit,” Aris responded, patting me on the shoulder. “For all we know, she’s just another virgin on a mission. We’ve had plenty of those girls here, haven’t we? Their rich daddies sent them over to sweeten the deal. They claim they don’t like it, but they still take a bite from the apple.”

The corner of his mouth lifted as he turned away.

It was time to leave the Hole Store.



ON OUR WAY TO OUR HOME, THE GIRLS CONTINUED TO ARGUE.

Apparently, the old lady had taken the ‘tie them up’ comment too serious this time. Mandy had bruises around her wrists. I made a mental note to confront the receptionist about it.

Aris was on his phone, showing no interest in calming his wife or her guest down. I was the only one paying attention.

Seeing Mandy worked up jumpstarted my enthusiasm about this girl staying with us.

“Everything you told me on the plane... I didn’t think much of it until now! What the hell, Valentina?” The new girl was exhausted. Her eyes were tired. Her limbs moved slowly.

“Stop judging me.”

“They tied us up to watch them do stuff to these poor girls! I didn’t want to see a bunch of strangers have sex,” Mandy argued, blushing. My brother snickered without bothering for a verbal response directed at the girls. He had his phone to busy himself with. “That’s not me. I don’t like that. I’d appreciate being informed of our plans the next time. I don’t like watching poor girls get abused.”

Abuse was a word up for definition.

“Rest assured that they aren’t poor,” Valentina snapped back. Yeah. Valentina was bitter about these girls’ salaries. They were expensive to maintain, did their job right. They got paid appropriately.

“Why don’t you demand your rights?” Mandy asked. Her voice croaked; she needed water, but she refused to drink anything that the car had to offer.

“I don’t have the type of rights you have in your country. This is Katantia, Mandy. I thought you knew. I expected you to be a grown-up about this. Clearly, you’re too naïve for this world,” Valentina replied, crossing her arms in front of her chest. Her face flinched, ready to yawn, but she held it back. “You’re pathetic for complaining. Go back to your shitty home. Leave us alone. We’re having fun.”

My brother’s wife had her paws out. Thank God we were about to arrive home. We were driving by the palace. Valentina

bored me. Mandy's statements were refreshing. As a prince, I never heard these sort of words uttered around me. I was pleasantly entertained.

"Fun? You were kicking and screaming back there! You hated it," Mandy argued. I observed a row of cars on their way out of the parking underneath the palace, palace staff going home for the day.

My brother's wife shook her head, incredulously. "It's not my fault you're so inexperienced. It's called foreplay.

We do that a lot here. We also have sex. You know, where two people fuck each other's brains out? Yeah, I figured you knew nothing about that."

I saw their friendship crumble. To be honest, there was no saving it. Valentina and Mandy were part of two different worlds. Valentina's world consisted of my brother only. Anybody else was a competition to claw out of the way.

It was the wrong time for this conversation. Both women were beaten from their long day. Mandy mumbled, "I had heard things, but this? It's a little too much. I saw your husband's cock after you told me to stay away from him. You don't even care. What am I supposed to think?"

"About my husband's cock?" Valentina conveniently placed her hand on my brother's lap. "Nothing. About Katantia? It better be good. Do whatever Spencer sent you to do and get going."

When we finally reached home, the couple stormed inside. I could guess that they were rushing upstairs to have sex.

Mandy exited the limousine and froze in front of our home. Her eyes were locked on the entrance door.

I tipped the driver, joining the new girl.

"Seems like you're stuck with me," I told her, watching the entrance door with her. She flinched at the sound of my voice. "Let's go inside."

Mandy didn't move, not trusting me. I didn't blame her.

"Are you afraid of what's in there?" I inquired.

“No,” she lied. I was about to leave her standing there. She was a liar. Great. My interest in her began to vanish.

Quickly, she added, “I’m afraid of who’s in there. I don’t recognize Valentina anymore. You people... Time won’t make it easier for me. I don’t think I’ll get used to people having sex around me so freely.”

She continued, “I came here to invite her to my wedding. All we’ve done is argue. I wanted her there for me because she was an important part of my childhood. Now I’m wondering whether I only imagined all that.”

Wedding, huh? Not so much of a virgin like my brother thought.

I extended my hand toward my home, showing her the way in. “I’ll show you where your room is. We made sure that you’re secluded. You have your private space.”

There were various reasons why we had given her a room on the least vacated space in our home. Firstly, she wouldn’t have to listen to my sibling and his wife having sex. Secondly, Aris and I would have to think twice before striding out to her place to fuck her.

I led the way inside. When she followed me, it felt like I had won this small battle of trust.

CHAPTER 7

MANDY



WORDS COULDN'T DESCRIBE HOW ALARMED I FELT WHEN I entered their three-story house. Once inside, I realized this was all it was.

A house with hardwood floors.

Surprisingly, there were no golden details or crests upon the walls. We walked into an average hallway—average for royal standards. The Katantian emblem graced every other wall. Every staff member we encountered politely smiled at the prince. They had a dress code, a white shirt, a light blue tie, a gray suit vest, gray trousers, and black shoes with laces. The country's emblem was sewed unto the white shirts.

“Unimpressed?” Weston seemed amused. There was a friendliness in his eyes I had missed in our limousine ride.

“Not at all,” I replied, trying to justify myself. Weston led the way up the staircase. “I'm glad we're not in the palace. How does everybody fit in here, though? Valentina told me that only the king lives in the palace.”

I couldn't help but notice how fitting his suit was. He ascended the steps like his clothes were his armor.

He explained, “Kamila has her own house. She lives right next to the palace. It's the first one when you enter this street. The Cross family's house is right next to ours. We live the farthest away from the palace.”

If I looked outside the window, I would see the property. The palace's entrance was only ten minutes away on foot.

Weston must have seen the puzzled look on my face. He added, “We’re one household, but we each have our separate houses. It’s confusing, I know.”

“It’s very rich-people like,” I replied. The second story was plain. I could have mistaken it for a fancy hotel. I followed Weston through a hallway that had numerous doors. He didn’t bother to give me a detailed tour.

“Why do you live with Aris and Valentina?” I asked. Kamila had her own home, so why didn’t he as well?

We got to the end of the hallway. There was one final door here. Weston reached into his pocket, taking hold of a card with the Katantian emblem. Before he unlocked the door with the swipe of the card, he said, “I lived here first. Valentina joined us later.”

Everything my former best friend had told me on the plane was still imprinted on my mind. “How long have you been living with your brother?”

Behind the door, there was another staircase. It looked more like a fire escape rather than actual stairs.

Clipped, Weston replied, “I’ve lived here since my mother’s death. Are you always this inquisitive?”

There were so many questions I wanted to ask him. I desired to dig deeper and find his darkest secrets under that armor he called royalty.

It fit me that he had to ask about my curiosity.

But I realized I had annoyed him. Seeing that this man might as well stop being nice to me if I kept egging him on, I decided to keep quiet.

We eventually stood on top of the stairs. I was as confused as ever. I had expected more closeness. The idea had intimidated me, but I had also felt excitement.

Up here, it seemed like I was going to live in their attic. The top floor wasn’t occupied in any way. It seemed smaller than the second story. There were two doors here. I wondered where my things were.

Weston opened the first door, and a furnished room appeared. A relatively large bed was accompanied by a sofa in the far corner. A television separated them. There was a desk in front of the window.

My eyes noticed the view. It spanned the edge of the palace, the house's entrance, and a tiny bit of Katantia itself. "It's beautiful."

He didn't react.

The room was enormous for one person. The closet I was provided with could host twice my entire wardrobe from home.

Close to the desk, I also noticed a round table with four chairs. This wasn't a room. It was a small suite.

"The other door outside leads to the bathroom," Weston explained before taking a seat at the round table. Maybe I was projecting things upon him, but he sat like royalty. I couldn't take my eyes off him.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Like what?" I inquired, crossing my arms in front of my chest.

"Like you're dazed."

I rolled my eyes. When Weston spoke, he demanded my attention. "Sit down. There are things you need to know."

I joined him at the round table but sat on the opposite side of him. No word was spoken on my behalf. I could barely think of a logical sentence.

"Your luggage will be brought up soon," he began. "The local police have been made aware of who you are. With the king claiming you, there's no need for fear. He's too busy to bother socializing with you. I'm sure you're glad to hear that."

I was. "Am I expected to sleep with him?"

"I don't know," Weston responded honestly. "Stay under the radar. He'll forget about you. For better or for worse, he

has Valentina's mom and Kamila for that. A foreigner like you isn't of interest to him."

"Valentina said I have to get fucked in all three holes." I bit my lip nervously, the pain doing nothing to trump what I already felt.

"Does that excite you?"

Weston's eyes wandered across my body, landing back on my face to see me blush without another reaction. He placed the card he had used to unlock the door on the table. He gestured at the suite. "For as long as you're here, this will be your home. You get this card. It's your Katantian ID. Remember to keep the door locked."

Stupidly, I asked, "Why?"

"You're in Katantia now. Us monsters can expose you for what you truly are." He gazed out of the window. "You should know that there's only one intention in this country. That's sex. People are curious."

I swallowed, taking a deep breath. It didn't help. I crossed my arms. My heart almost jumped out of my chest.

"I'm not the only one with access to this room, aren't I?" My voice was dry.

Weston stood up without giving me a direct answer. "Have a little faith, Mandy."

"Are you my tour guide now?" I asked, trying to lighten the mood. "Am I supposed to be afraid of you, too?"

"I don't know your threshold of fear." He continued, "But I'm no guide. I don't want you complaining to your dad that we did a horrible job at showing you the ropes, that's all."

The royal straightened up his jacket. On his way out, he informed me, "The Cross family has invited you for breakfast in the morning. Be ready at eight."

Halting, he tilted his head in my direction. "What are you hiding?"

“Nothing,” I responded, shaking my head. His fierce blue eyes were full of distrust. I straightened my spine. I glanced at him with all the confidence I could muster.

Weston took a deep breath. Turning away, he left my vision. I checked my watch. It was late. I suddenly felt the fatigue that the tension in my body had distracted me from.

I was barely able to wait for my luggage to be brought up. The moment my hands touched my comfortable pajamas, I changed into them.

Falling asleep was only easy because my exhaustion overwhelmed me. I already feared the nights that were to follow.

CHAPTER 8

WESTON



AT THE CROSS' HOUSE, THE LONG TABLE WAS SET FOR SEVEN people. Breakfast was served in silence by Mother Cross. Katantia didn't have any traditional food, so the plates were filled with a mixture of everything. Fruits, homemade baked goods, eggs... Imported bacon and ham. We even made our own butter on Katantia. In between simultaneously acting as the object of this house and the king's plaything in the palace, Felicita had found the time to cook it all up.

Today, I silently sipped on my cup of coffee without eating a bite of what the Cross family had to offer. I hadn't come here for the chitchat. I'd only come to see the show. It was bound to be juicier than fake tits fresh out of surgery.

Travis Cross, the father of the family, sat at the top of the table, attempting to assert some sort of dominance over this room. This was one of the few places he had an ounce of power in. The king made sure that Travis had his limitations. Only in the company of his family, Travis seemed carefree.

His wife, Felicita, was there next to him. What a difference a day made. Yesterday, the king used his fingers on the woman at the palace's breakfast table. Now she was only enjoying her homemade croissant with marmalade.

In the Cross house, which we owned, but they inhabited, one could think that Katantia didn't exist. When they'd moved here, they brought a flair of the outside world with them. They talked like Americans. They walked like them. It didn't take my family long to bully those traits out of them.

Aris was bored out of his mind. Sitting on Travis's right, he played with the imported bacon on his plate. He hated coming to this house mainly because he had to keep his hands away from Valentina.

Fingering Valentina at family gatherings had gotten him into trouble quite often in the past two years. Travis didn't tolerate it, and Ryan, her pathetic brother, always attempted to take a swing at Aris. Not that Ryan could ever land a hit on my brother.

Valentina managed to control my brother enough for the duration of the dinners. She did love her family. She didn't want to overtly upset them.

I sat next to an observing Ryan. Today, he was occupied with not only his omelet but also his sister's guest as well.

What a guest she was, indeed.

I had gone to pick her up. Her terrified eyes when I greeted her at the door told me she finally understood where she was. It had sunk in. Good. Perhaps I could get a glimpse of her pussy in three days' time. It was bound to happen at some point.

Nobody prevented me from getting the pussy I set my sights on.

Mandy was tense. The comfort of being close to the Cross family dissolved after the argument she and Valentina had last night. Before that argument, Mandy hid behind Valentina's shadow, hoping my brother's wife would save her.

Now, I could see she knew she was alone in Katantia.

Ryan's thirst for pussy was evident. His eyes stalked Mandy. She ignored him as much as she could. Good girl. Obviously, he didn't get as much pussy as we did. Valentina spilled the details every time she got drunk. He was jealous of what my brother and I had.

I would've befriended the piece of shit, but I couldn't quite wrap my finger around what bothered me about Ryan. It wasn't jealousy. It wasn't his last name. He was a secretive guy, more so than his father. At least his father seemed

friendly. If you caught Ryan's stare once, it soured your day. If he were a bit like his sister, he could have accomplished great things on this island. Hell, we could have been friends.

But Ryan's only friend on this island was his father. He was on a not-so-secret crusade to save his father's honor.

Mandy shifted next to me while downing her orange juice. She hadn't eaten much, visibly shy. I couldn't take my eyes off her because she was the most exciting creature at the table, all new and shiny.

Father had claimed her. That made Mandy even more desirable. I understood the concept. The girl had curves for which she didn't stuff her mouth with food at this table, unfortunately. There was something aesthetically pleasing about watching your object eat. It filled you with serene satisfaction. That was what I'd been told.

Mandy was starting to look ghostly. She hadn't eaten last night. I wondered if I should say something to animate her to eat more. She looked like she had decent meals instead of buckets of come. Valentina might have survived on my brother's come purely because it pleased her, but the new girl wasn't like that. She hadn't once willingly looked at one of the men at the table. Without touching most of it, she'd eyed the food instead.

My eyes drifted over her long hair that was ready to get pulled at. I drew my fist together, testing how hard I'd pull it. I could almost hear her moaning for me. The fear in her eyes intrigued the people in her presence. In this case, me.

It almost made me laugh.

"Hey, Weston, I'm talking to you," Aris uttered, waving at me from across the table. Nobody else was talking. "What's on your mind, brother?"

Before I could give him an answer, the door flew open in time because I was one lucky bastard. The dramatic Kamila walked in with confidence applied to her like makeup. Her red hair was disheveled and messy, yet it still radiated a majestic

ambiance. Her makeup was smeared, but it made her look more punk than a drunk.

I noticed Felicita's face drop. The king's main objects of tyranny didn't like each other that much.

Addressing the king's whore, Kamila said, "I'm done. You're expected at his office in ten. Hurry up."

Travis stepped in. "She's not finished her breakfast yet."

"She'll get enough to eat at the palace. The king provides for his people," a ruthless Kamila uttered, placing her hand on her hip. Her nails were longer today. One seemed broken. I could guess where she had broken it. The image made me want to twist somebody's neck, but all I could do was sit there and act like the prince everybody expected me to be.

Brave Ryan helped his father, who had already given up, out. "You don't talk to my father like this, you—"

It was time to remind him who the Wraith royals were. Aris kicked back his chair, standing up. I turned toward Ryan. "You better wash your mouth when you talk about Kamila."

Mandy's eyes were big now. The shock in her face tickled me.

"Or I'll make sure you lose even the last bit of dignity that you have," I told Ryan. He scoffed.

Without offering resistance, Felicita left in silence. She knew there was no escaping when it came to the king. We all knew that. He had his surveilling soldiers surrounding us, staff, and guards alike.

Kamila advanced to my side. I stood up, taking her hand. The reaction on Mandy's face was priceless.

Aris spoke. "I think we're done here."

And we were.

Valentina and Mandy followed us outside without another word.



SINCE VALENTINA DIDN'T BOTHER INTRODUCING HER GUEST, I had to once again let the cat out of the bag.

“Kamila, this is Mandy. She’s an aspiring journalist. She’s visiting us from Chicago,” I told Kamila. Mandy took a step back with a questioning look in her eyes. “I read your file, new girl.”

That didn’t calm her down.

Kamila’s eyes gleamed. She knew Mandy had been claimed by the king. She didn’t care. Instead, Kamila held out her hand for a handshake, which Mandy gladly accepted. Our guest’s voice was shaky when she said, “It’s an honor to meet you, Kamila. I’ve heard so much about you.”

“I like you already,” Kamila exclaimed. Valentina rolled her eyes. Mandy felt flattered. At that moment, something wordless transpired between these two. They didn’t exchange words, but their chemistry matched. I studied them, trying to figure out how Kamila had grown fond of Mandy so soon.

Kamila addressed me. “Do you have plans for today?”

“Aris and I were planning to take her to a club later tonight...”

Kamila looked like she had won the lottery. “Great! That means we can spend the day together. Do you want to go shopping, Mandy? I’ll show you the city.”

It was a royal offer she couldn’t resist. “Okay.”

“We’ll be back around seven,” Kamila announced, taking Mandy’s hand. I heard a giggle somewhere. Our young guest was blushing. “Bye!”

Just like that, Kamila and Mandy were gone. Valentina looked like shit. I guessed it wasn’t the appropriate time to tell her to step up her hospitality.

“What the hell was that all about?” Valentina asked, seemingly annoyed.

That was Kamila sweeping your best friend off her feet,
Valentina.

CHAPTER 9

MANDY



“HOW’S EVERYTHING OVER THERE?” MY FIANCÉ ASKED. HE sounded sleepy on the other end of the line.

“As expected,” I lied. I didn’t want to tell Manuel that Valentina had turned out to be less than happy to see me, nor did I want to mention that Weston was a feast on the eyes. And. Willing. To. Fuck. Anything. That. Walked—even Spencer Rawlins’ fat daughter.

“Is anyone bothering you?”

“No, everything’s fine. They tried to get me on the shot, but I refused. They wanted to run some tests on me, but I refused. I don’t trust their doctors. It helped that the king’s name protects me—”

Like he didn’t listen to a word I’d said, he interrupted me, “Your father called.”

“What did he have to say?”

“He wants us to postpone the wedding,” Manuel revealed. I rolled my eyes, grateful that neither Manuel nor my father could see me. It was too early in the morning for their bullshit.

“I hope you told him that we won’t.”

“I told him that we’d consider it. He said he’d pay for it if we did it.”

I sighed. Money. My father had tons of it. We had almost none. Manuel had filed for bankruptcy before he’d started working for one of my father’s companies. He was older than

me, yet my father impressed him a lot with his financial freedom and shallow accomplishments.

“I don’t want him to pay a dime for that wedding,” I stated. If it were up to me, he wouldn’t even be a guest. You couldn’t tell Spencer Rawlins no, though.

Manuel didn’t want any part of that. “It’s not like we can afford it right now anyway.”

“He waited for the right moment to bring this up,” I scoffed. “Can’t we do things according to plan for once?”

“Apparently not. We’ve had plans before. You messed them up.”

That stung. “Look, about that. I think I’ve missed my—”

“You know it hurts every time you say it. I don’t care what you’ve missed or how long it’s been. We’ve been going down that road for a year now. It’s time to give up,” Manuel interrupted me. His level of finality annoyed me sometimes. I was only twenty years old. I had an entire life ahead of me. A painful life that I would spend with him.

We hung up moments later without any further pleasantries.



EVERYTHING I HAD HEARD FROM KATANTIA BACK HOME WAS atrocious. It sounded like a caveman’s wet dream with ten steaks on top. Living in their houses and breathing their air, I didn’t understand them better. I frowned at almost anything that I encountered.

Women were nothing here, but... I didn’t want to think about it. I’d find it hard to remain here for the days that I’d planned. Mostly since my plans, inviting Valentina to my wedding, had vanished into thin air.

When I arrived on the peninsula, I had witnessed it firsthand. Valentina was the key example.

The Katantia royals she surrounded herself with were adamant about their traditions.

Weston didn't seem that much into it... Right? I wanted to believe that. Out of the king and Aris, Weston had tried to show a gentler side to himself. He even guided me through the house, halfheartedly, but he did. He gave me stares when he thought I wasn't looking, but he didn't act upon them.

Those were things that were standard back at home. I shouldn't be surprised if he was trying to impress me. I was sure he wasn't doing it because I was me, Mandy. He did it because our fathers were involved in business and because I was the new girl.

I'd played with the idea of writing an article on Katantia during my stay here. I might be able to sell it once I returned and earn some money out of it. Manuel would agree that we needed it.

Kamila Ruby being this approachable made me soften up a bit. Upon seeing her, I decided that she was the one person here that I could trust. Previously, I had read and heard a lot about her.

None of what I knew did her justice.



THIS MORNING, IT DAWNED ON ME THAT I HAD NO HELP ON Katantia. My lost best friend was a needy wife now with no time for female friendship.

I couldn't trust anybody.

Kamila was the first woman on Katantia who seemed relatable. The abuse she suffered from the king was disgusting. On Katantia, it was infamously known that she was unhappy.

After a little digging back at home, I found out that nobody was willing to marry her because they feared Aram Wraith's reaction. The King of Katantia was the most powerful man on the peninsula. He wasn't afraid of crossing boundaries.

I thought Kamila would be like Valentina, helplessly focused on her man.

When Kamila stepped into the dining room this early morning, an aura of confidence surrounded her. She walked in like she was the king, striding in poise and affluence. For a moment, I forgot where we were because she looked like she was pulling strings.

“What are you thinking about?” the woman asked. Her hands calmly grasped the steering wheel.

Kamila was eleven years older than me. Truthfully, she reminded me of my mother. The music that was playing in the car was almost ancient. It was one of the things I remembered clearly from my childhood.

I imagined my mother listening to the song Kamila had on. My knowledge said it was called “Sunshine of Your Love.” Kamila moved her lips to the lyrics. From time to time, she tapped her fingers to the beat on the steering wheel. My mom would have done the exact same thing from the few amount of times I witnessed her drive. My father had drivers for us back then. He despised his wife driving around on her own.

Her wavy cherry hair wasn't her natural color. On top of her head, I could see the dark roots growing. My mother had been a brunette as well.

My mother comparisons were steadily getting weird.

“You, actually,” I told her. I was mentally taking notes of everything I witnessed. Kamila's warm behavior toward me had been a surprising turn of events. “I didn't expect you to take me shopping. I thought Valentina would make an effort.”

“Don't get me started on Valentina,” Kamila began. She stopped herself before she could reveal too much. “I know she is your friend, but we were never on good terms. She's pussy-whipping Aris any chance she gets.”

She didn't seem to understand the concept of a pussy-whipped man. It was okay. She was a Katantian royal. She'd learn... Never.

We had entered the city. It had taken a couple of minutes only; there were only a few cars driving around at this hour. I figured everybody was at work. Nobody paid attention to the car we were in because it was an old BMW. It wasn't washed, relatively average, and not luxurious, a step into an entirely different direction than Aris and Weston.

"You can talk to me," I told her. Kamila didn't come across as evil as Valentina did. "I'm desperate for somebody to talk to. Weston isn't a good conversationalist."

She laughed. I liked her laugh. It felt lively. "Weston doesn't talk much. It doesn't mean he's bad at it."



SHE PARKED THE CAR. ONCE WE STEPPED OUTSIDE, THE crowds took notice of who was driving. Every street we crossed, there was one or more persons who asked for a picture with the Princess of Katantia. Inside the stores, they treated us with respect. Sometimes I felt like they were overdoing it, but I didn't complain.

Mostly since there were instances that reminded me that this was Katantia after all. I counted three women begging for money or a husband on the high-end street we walked on. Another woman was manhandled in the middle of the street.

The women in this area were dressed nicely, don't get it wrong. But they were missing true happiness in their eyes. Then again, I wasn't sure I knew the definition of happiness.

Kamila's name got us everything for free. It felt uncomfortable for me because I didn't want to abuse her hospitality. Plus, she was technically bribing me on behalf of the royals.

On our way back to the palace, I asked her, "Are you coming with us tonight?"

Aris, Valentina, and Weston were planning a club night. It wasn't my scene, but they were my hosts. I didn't want to insult them.

Kamila smiled gracefully. A Beatles song was playing in her car. It was one of my personal favorites. She said, "I don't go out like that. It's not because Aram forbids it. I'm simply not in the mood to spend time with Aris's wife."

"You don't like her at all, do you?"

She replied in a whisper, "Between you and me? I don't. I never will. She walks around like she owns the place when she doesn't. She keeps taking without ever giving anything back. The Cross family causes too much trouble for me."

"I would've thought that there is a female alliance over here in Katantia because of how they treat you," I commented. Kamila took a left. We found ourselves in front of a home that looked like Weston and Aris's house. I looked around, noticing the right wing of the palace on the right, scarcely hidden behind large trees.

"I'm past that way of thinking," Kamila replied in all honesty. She turned the engine off, glancing at me. "On Katantia, every woman's fighting for herself, meaning there's no defiance. Everybody allows the men to get away with what they do because it's more comfortable to get fucked than punished. Besides, women who know the definition of equal rights are rare on this island. Valentina, Felicita, and I might be three out of ten."

I was astounded at her statement. There was a hurt expression on her face, even though she tried to hide it. Kamila continued, "The Cross family moved here. I didn't mind. Then the king, who had been a widower for almost five years at the time, started having private dinners with Felicita. One thing led to another. Soon, I found myself entangled."

Kamila emphasized, "Aram was focused on his two sons, the official heirs of Katantia. He had barely even registered my existence before he started having sex with Valentina's mother."

That seemed troubling to me. Felicita didn't strike me as the type of person to allow anyone to get harmed purposely. Valentina's mother reminded me of summer because her attitude lit up a room.

If what Kamila was telling me was correct, then I felt genuinely disappointed by Felicita. What she'd done was unheard of.

“Then the Cross daughter threw herself at Aris and got set for life,” Kamila uttered. I didn't want to imagine what Kamila went through with the king. “I don't mean to sound bitter. I must seem spoiled. I mean, look at my house, my car, and my life...”

“You're being abused, Kamila. There's no way you can sugarcoat that.” She didn't respond right away.

“Sometimes”—Kamila shook her head, lowering her gaze—“I wish to change some things in our country, but then I remember I have no power or say in what goes on, so I stop make-believing. It makes me sad to think of the hopelessness of my situation.”

We sat there in silence for a moment, in front of her house.

“Do you want help dressing up?” Kamila asked me, changing the topic into a lighter one. It was five o'clock on my watch. “I don't have any other plans today.”

I didn't want to overuse her kindness, but secretly, I appreciated her company. I felt safe in her presence. Alone in my room at Aris and Weston's home, I felt lonely and vulnerable.

I responded, “I think I need your help. I don't know what's appropriate in Katantia.”

“Spectacular!” She grabbed her phone. I grabbed the shopping bags.

Together, we entered her home.

CHAPTER 10

WESTON



CLEARLY, MANDY DIDN'T GET THE MEMO.

Or Valentina failed to tell her 'best friend' that we were attending the opening of a club at the beach.

We picked up Mandy from Kamila's house. They exited her home together. Kamila was carrying an overnight bag. I guessed that Mandy's clothes were inside that bag because our guest... Well, she was wearing something entirely different.

Every detail from her eye makeup to her shoes was in black. Only her lips were showing off in a dark red color.

The little black dress she was wearing ended dangerously close to the junction between her thighs. I felt my cock twitch awake.

Since Kamila had dressed our guest up, I wasn't surprised to see the over-knee boots ending with heels. They were Kamila Ruby's signature.

She turned heads whenever she wore them on her long legs.

Her new acquaintance wasn't as tall as Kamila without the heels, but it was rare to find that type of woman anyway. Kamila was taller than most models and almost as tall as the king. I guessed Mandy was around above five-foot-seven.

They descended from the stairs holding hands. My thoughts went to places. What if we could be happy? What if we could enjoy life for once without fear of Aram?

Mandy showed cleavage, but it left you wanting more. Her tits looked like they wanted to escape that black dress of hers.

Her arms were covered by sleeves. Mandy's body allowed the dress to form itself according to her curves. Why had she made this young girl dress like this? Had it been a conscious choice? I was sure that Kamila was attempting to send me a sign.

There was one tiny flaw. The beach was going to ruin those irresistible boots.

The driver opened the door for Mandy to enter.

Kamila stood proudly next to our guest. With gleaming eyes, she said, "She's drop-dead gorgeous, isn't she?"

She was definitely trying to tell me something. She continued, "She wasn't feeling very well earlier after we ate. I think she's still getting used to our food here. Be careful with her, please."

Absently, I nodded. My eyes were on Mandy because I didn't care if jealous Valentina looked or whether Aris was drooling all over his jaw at this sight.

I shamelessly took in her body. She caught my gaze and lifted the corners of her mouth. It wasn't a flirty smirk but a smile.

We knew that telling Mandy to take off her boots to change into sandals in front of Kamila would cause another verbal war amongst the family.

"Do you remember everything I told you?" Kamila asked Mandy as if she were her guardian. Mandy nodded eagerly as she stepped into the car. This time she sat down next to me.

The door shut. Mandy let the window down. Kamila continued, "It's important to stay close to them. Don't lose them."

It was tough to keep my hands to myself on our long ride to the beach, but I managed it. Mandy was here to make us look more handsome than we already were.

She wasn't here to get her heart broken.



TAKING ONE BOTTLE OF CHAMPAGNE THAT COST AS MUCH AS college tuition with me, I left the crew I came to the club with. Sure, Valentina and Aris could have behaved worse. They were only making out every other thirty minutes and not ten like they usually did.

Other than that, there was silence at our table.

Mandy felt exposed because her bare feet were touching the sand. She didn't have sandals with her in the overnight bag.

I missed the over-knee boots gracing her legs.

So I took the bottle, making my way into a more secluded area with a roof above it. The music wasn't as loud here. It was replaced by the sounds of a bar. Almost twenty employees were running around because it was the busiest night of their career.

The royals were attending their opening party.

I sipped on my champagne bottle, trying to avoid the thought of Mandy. It was an admirable move to leave her with the others. At least, Aris wouldn't attempt to fuck his wife's best friend. He could go insane for a fuck, but he still loved Valentina to a certain degree. His wife didn't think that because she had trust issues, but he did love her.

"Sir?" A light voice addressed me. I turned my head to the left. A waitress appeared. She was wearing a black dress like Mandy. It didn't look the same on her body. "The party's outside. Are you lost?"

Her hair was dirty-blond and curly. She stepped closer, realizing who she was talking to. Abruptly, her face twisted into an awkward smile, where she flashed me her perfect manufactured white teeth. "Your Highness, I'm sorry if I interrupted you—"

"Am I bothering you here?" I asked dryly. She seemed polite but dull. She was a random employee, not the

representative of a company we had arrangements with. I checked her skin for a tattoo. I observed her neck for a possible collar...

The young woman frantically shook her head, signaling that no, I didn't bother anyone with my presence. Her eyes glistened with passion or submission. I couldn't differentiate between those two. I had drunk too much champagne. "No, not at all. You can do whatever you want, Your Highness."

"Then go back to work," I instructed her, harsher than I had intended to. I waved at her with the champagne bottle. My mother would scold me for my lack of manners, but, then again, my mother was six feet under in the graveyard behind the palace. "Bring me another one of those."

"Your Highness, is there anything else you need?" She licked her lips. Why had she done that? I was trying to be an example for the foreign girl's eyes. Image was everything for Katantians.

"Are you suggesting something?" I emptied the rest of the bottle. I didn't usually drink as much. Blame it on the strange girl, sitting at my table out there at the party. Blame it on Kamila. Blame it on the fucking circumstances of my home and its people. Since the champagne was imported from France, the liquid tasted splendid on my tongue. It cost half a fortune to drink from this bottle on Katantian soil.

Studying the young woman in front of me, my cock wasn't being easy on her. I had too much to drink. She had tilted her head to the side, exposing her neck to me. She practically invited me to devour her skin, but I didn't do that sort of thing to just about anyone. The young woman gazed at me through hooded eyes. Sure, her body was fuckable. She looked fresh out of high school; nineteen, tops.

While this girl's appearance left me cold, Mandy's appearance got me fucking hard. The girl didn't have a clue that people were staring at her.

She was the new girl.

Her long legs killed me every time I glanced at them.

Talking about knees, the waitress dropped to her knees in front of me. She took the empty bottle from my hand and carefully placed it on the floor. Her hands went straight to my belt. I waved them away. She dropped her hands instantaneously.

“Can I suck your cock, Your Highness?” Another lick of her lips, she was trying hard to seduce me with her thick and black eyelashes. Kamila had taught me to differentiate between fake eyelashes and real ones. These were fake.

Fuck it. The curly dirty-blonde might as well try to distract me. “Go ahead. Impress me.”

I freed my dick from my pants for her, giving it a couple of strokes. Then she took over with her mouth.

Hadn't we done that already? No, that was a different woman on another day.

It only took a couple of licks from her enthusiastic tongue to get hard. I was impressed with myself and with her.

One look into her eyes made her turn shy on me. I felt the girl's insecure fingers on me. She had more performance anxiety than my drunk self did. I took pity on her. “You can use your hands.”

After stroking me a fair amount of times, she spat on her palm to make the passage easier.

Spit. Nasty girls got what they wanted.

Finally, my dick went full hard-on for her.

When she pushed me past her lips, I only felt the inside of her mouth. It took her two or three attempts to get me to her throat.

I kept my hands off her. The waitress had started off with doubts, but now she had taken full control of the situation. Her head bobbed up and down on me with ease.

She honestly looked like she didn't care whether her makeup was ruined for the rest of the night. A royal offspring was in her mouth. That was all that mattered.

Royal offspring. I scoffed at that.

The bar's sounds kept clouding my ears. I couldn't focus on the sloppiness the waitress created. I had to give her credit for attempting not to mess up my suit with her spit.

Precum leaked from my tip. The waitress licked it all away with one swipe. She licked the base of my cock. She licked my balls. Then she licked the tip again.

There was a lot of licking going on.

She returned to sucking. I was almost finished. Her makeup was ruined now. Her cheeks were covered in black tears.

Smartly, the waitress guessed what was about to happen. She removed her mouth from my cock. She started stroking my erection with both of her hands.

I had seen this scenario before, but I wasn't dumb.

For the first time in our session, I grabbed her hair and moved her mouth right back on my cock, forcing her to accommodate my girth. She bobbed once. She bobbed on me twice.

Her eyes looked up at me as I filled her with my come. She swallowed it, but there was disappointment in her eyes.

The waitress tucked my now relaxed dick back into my pants. She stood up, straightening her clothes. Halfheartedly bowing before me, she said, "Thank you. I would've liked to fuck you. I do yoga. I can twist into all sorts of positions. Maybe another time?"

I shook my head, disinterested in her athletic abilities. "That won't happen."

She sighed. I handed her the empty bottle of champagne and left without another word.

I took a deep breath, moving away from my secluded spot.

I had dodged a bullet once again. It was never a good idea to have sex with random girls you didn't know. The condom

girls had a representative. The Hole Store had girls with contracts.

These random girls on the streets or wherever were dangerous. As Aram's son, I had to be careful.

I needed another bottle. I needed it fast.

Taking a couple of steps away from the quiet, my eyes sought out Mandy. She was outside, sitting next to Valentina and sipping on her water. Kamila had suggested that she drink water. Good suggestion.

At least one of us could be sober and sane.

CHAPTER 11

MANDY



KAMILA HAD WARNED ME. SHE HAD TOLD ME, “DRINK ONLY water. Don’t leave the table alone. Avoid male gazes.”

Her warnings would have been offensive in my country, but in Katantia, I had no say. Not that I particularly knew what it felt like to have a voice. At twenty years old, I had previously left one tyrant to enter the webs of my controlling fiancé. I liked his control; it was less abusive than my father’s.

When Weston stumbled away from our table, I felt saddened. This night wasn’t going well. We hadn’t exchanged a single word. How would I get my plan to work if he walked away every time I breathed the same air as him? His eyes had been everywhere and nowhere at the same time like he was purposefully trying to avoid me.

I didn’t fail to notice that we were on his turf; sex was on everybody’s mind in this club, except mine. Valentina and Aris occasionally kissed, touching each other inappropriately and leaving me in solitude. Valentina hadn’t once tried to open up a conversation. I wasn’t that dumb. I had realized that the ship had sailed. It was merely disappointing, that was all.

The music was excellent, heavy bass lines thumping in my ears seductively. The location looked ravishing, right out of an oriental dream. People danced in the sand. We sat at the VIP corner. Our table was frequently attended to by the staff.

I felt the sand touch my toes and shivered. Kamila and I had created an entire appearance. Now half of it was missing. I was showing too much skin without over-knee boots. I didn’t

feel comfortable. This wasn't me. Manuel would totally freak out at the sight of me like this.

A dirty-blond waitress—she hadn't served us yet tonight—came by our table with a new golden champagne bottle. She looked disheveled. Maybe it was me. She didn't wear any makeup, but her skin glistened like she had washed her face. "Is everything all right here?"

Valentina and Aris didn't need anything, but my glass and bottle of water were empty. I had drunk it all because I was on edge.

"I'd like another water, please," I said.

Valentina giggled. Aris intervened, "You sure you don't want a cocktail or a sip of that champagne? The bottle is sealed."

"Don't be such a killjoy," Valentina uttered with a smirk. "Drink with us."

Kamila had been clear about this. No drinks. But why would a sweet waitress poison a sealed champagne bottle?

"Okay," I gave in, remembering Manuel's words. He thought my young body was damaged for some reason. A little drop of alcohol wouldn't hurt me then, would it?

The waitress smiled, making an attempt to open the bottle. When the cork popped, Valentina and I followed the sound. The cork landed somewhere behind us.

I was presented with a fancy glass. My new drink was poured into it. The waitress left us.

Both Valentina and Aris glanced at me as I took the first sip. It tasted expensive and pearly. At home, my father never granted me an alcoholic beverage. He was strict. He reminded me of the fact that I was still underage in the eyes of the law. Not for long. There were only a couple of months to my next birthday. I didn't mind celebrating it away from my loved ones on Katantia because I hated my birthdays with a passion.

I drank the rest of the champagne in my glass in silence. I didn't intend to drink any more than I already had. I kept

wishing for Weston to show up. He drank this champagne-like orange juice. He'd want a piece of it.

Where was Weston? My eyes looked for him, but I couldn't find him. There were plenty of men in suits here, but none who looked as exquisite as he did in one.

"Do you want another round?" Aris asked.

I shook my head. "No, thank you. I'd like to use the restroom, though."

"What are you telling me this for? Are you asking for permission? It's granted. Go. We don't need you peeing in public," Aris uttered, his rude tone taking me aback. I had expected him to suggest that Valentina came along.

But he didn't. His wife sat there with her arm around his, not even bothering to pretend like she cared.

Kamila's words echoed in my head, but I had no power over Valentina or Aris. I didn't want to be ridiculed.

So I made my way to the bathroom alone. It could be found far behind the bar. Luckily, it had a floor. I tried not to think about the fact that I was barefoot.

There was a small line, so I didn't have to wait that long for my turn.

When I finished and attempted to wash my hands, I suddenly felt dizzy. The other women didn't ask what was wrong when I almost tripped on my way out of the bathroom.

I made my way out, but it was the wrong way. Which direction should I have taken? I ended up somewhere where the music was only a backdrop and not the dominating sound.

There was sand on my feet again, so that was a good sign, right? My vision was spinning. I only needed to find my way back to the table.

Damn Kamila. She was right. Mental note: Trust Kamila Ruby. Her ideas are certainly best!

I heard moans. Was this a new pop song? What was going on?

There was barely any light out here. I tried to coordinate myself. We had entered from the side after a long walk across the beach when we first got inside the club...

“Haven’t seen you around before,” a male voice addressed me. Bells rang inside my head. My arm was roughly grabbed. I was too slow to react. My head was giving me nightmares. “Legs up to there. Beautiful hair. Nice ass. How much do you sell it for?”

I couldn’t see the man’s face. He was a tiny bit shorter than me, but he had double my strength.

He grew impatient. “Do you understand English, whore?”

I nodded.

“Name your fucking price.”

I didn’t have a price. I wasn’t an object! I was merely dizzy. Fuck, my vision blurred. My knees buckled.

“Please... Let me...” My lips were almost sealed. I couldn’t find the strength to move them. If he hadn’t been grabbing my arm, I would have fallen to the ground.

“For free it is then, stupid whore.”

Somehow I found myself up against a wall surrounded by two naked girls. Men were behind them. They thrust into them. That was the source of the moans.

I turned my head around to see another three girls getting banged on the sand. BANGED. I internally laughed at myself. I was too young to refer to fucking as banging. Or too old?

The man pushed back against the wall, forcing my face to look left.

There was no time to ask questions. My heart beat hundreds a second the way things were going. I needed to get out of here.

My little black dress was pulled up, revealing my invisible black panties. Those were courtesy of Kamila Ruby.

Wraith! “Wraith. I’m... Wraith.”

“Shut up, you wannabe.” The harsh words were a slap across my face. Why was I even complaining? I expected this. My panties were torn down, exposing my skin to anyone who wanted to see it.

Was anyone filming it? Could I save the footage and send it to my father and Manuel?

“King. The king claimed... Me. I’m a guest. Stop it. Please...” I was slurring the words. The man didn’t listen to me. His nasty fingers went straight between my legs. I breathed hard, but my insides were muddled. My stomach believed that it was the perfect time for stomach aches, so it hit me with it like there was no tomorrow. Perhaps it was the anxiety. When Manuel took what he wanted from me, it was still Manuel. He didn’t bruise me. This man was in the mood to bruise. He didn’t have to. I knew the risks when I came to Katantia. If I could only speak and form a clear sentence, I’d give him what he wanted...

You didn’t save your sanity for this prick, Mandy. I gathered all my strength and insisted, “I’m here with Aris and Wes! Weston. Stop. Get off of me. I don’t want it like this...”

A force violently removed the disgusting man from my skin. My attacker landed on his ass. Above him, another man was throwing punches directed at his head.

The sex around me stopped, no more moans. I was glad.

I couldn’t see the face of the man who had saved me. Maybe this was a Katantian tradition? I hoped he had saved me.

My knees suddenly felt like they were made of butter. I dropped to the ground, positively bruising my ass.

“You don’t fucking touch Mandy Rawlins.” I figured it was the voice of the man who had saved me. There was so much anger in his tone. Why was he so angry? I didn’t like this level of animosity. “She’s claimed by the king and an honorary guest in Katantia.”

Why did the man know my name? I hadn’t been introduced to anybody.

I was starting to get dizzy, my eyelids fluttering shut. My lower stomach hurt. I closed my eyes, but somebody shook me up. The man in the suit who fought the short guy picked me up. He was warm. His scent was familiar. I rolled my eyes back in pleasure, taking it in. I attempted to hold onto to him and his broad shoulders in a suit, but I couldn't animate my arms. I had zero strength and coordination. Eventually, fingers wrapped around my wrist, placing my arm around his neck. I snuggled myself closer to this man's touch, ignoring my inner vigilance. My head nestled into the crook of his neck, his scent my lifeline.

He carried me to the car like I was a grain of sand.

When we reentered the beach club from the back. Lights hit his face, and I finally recognized my savior. Piercing blue eyes stared back into my soul.

Weston Wraith had saved me.

CHAPTER 12

WESTON



I HOPED KAMILA WAS AT HOME AND NOT OFF DOING KINKY shit. Mandy was about to start throwing up. I needed help with her.

“What the fuck, Weston?” Kamila exclaimed when I rang her doorbell at 1:00 a.m. in the morning. Kamila’s eyes looked tired. Her wavy red hair was a mess. Strains were sticking out. “You stink. Have you been drinking?”

Kamila was wearing a sizeable snow-white T-shirt and loose lilac pajama pants. When she slept, she didn’t match the colors with her cherry hair, looking all sorts of crazy.

“Somebody must’ve roofied her drink,” I explained to Kamila. She let us in. Mandy was holding on to me like I was her anchor. “I didn’t know what else to do. I got in the car and had the driver bring us here. Can you help her? I don’t want to touch her.”

Kamila crossed her arms in front of her chest, tapping her fingers on her elbow. The look on her face spelled out ‘I’m judging you.’ “Oh, you don’t want to touch her? I’m curious to know why.”

We reached her living room. I sat Mandy down on one of Kamila’s sectional sofas. Kamila noticed the missing boots. She shook her head, disappointed.

“You can’t tell me that you didn’t suspect it after spending an entire day with her. Mandy must be a virgin,” I told her. Mandy was mentally absent. Kamila checked

her pulse and temperature. “She’s not from around here. Aram claimed her. There are a lot of arguments against fucking Mandy Rawlins.”

“That never stopped you before,” Kamila shot back, removing herself from Mandy. “She’s not a virgin. She’s getting married soon, you idiot. Besides, helping her out in her time of need is something entirely different than fucking her, don’t you think?”

“You’re talking to me,” I reminded her. Her words had scratched my ego. “Not Aris. I don’t feel like being accused of harassing her tomorrow. She seems afraid of me.”

Kamila rolled her eyes. I loved Aris and Kamila, but sometimes they both drove me insane.

Ignoring my statement, Kamila said, “I’ll get her some water. I told her to only drink water! Who’d spike water? What the fuck is wrong with people? I’ll also make her a sandwich.”

Before she left me alone with Mandy, she added, “After that, she’ll sleep here. You can go back to your opening party.”

“I’m not leaving her,” I responded. I was determined to end my night with Mandy safely tucked away in bed, preferably my bed, but, you know, circumstances and all.



MANDY THREW UP ONCE RIGHT BEFORE KAMILA FED HER A sandwich. She drank water. Kamila took her to the bathroom and dressed her in one of her bed T-shirts and pajama pants. She was out of lilac, so she went for a crimson color.

Then we put her to bed together. Kamila retired to her room after she showed me where I could sleep for the night, but I went back to Mandy’s room after Kamila was out of sight. I sat down in the armchair across from the bed, watching her sleep. Her breathing affected me. I liked watching her stomach rise and fall. It was... adorable.

I was pretty sure I dozed off once or twice, letting my own hangover get to me. Mandy woke me up with her whimpers. From time to time, she mumbled the word ‘mom.’ I saw her jerk underneath the light covers. I wondered what was bothering her.

In the morning, she woke up, staring at the ceiling. I didn’t make a move to startle her. She would have to see me for herself.

Mandy stared at the ceiling for five minutes until I finally broke the silence. “Is that a hobby of yours? What’s interesting about the ceiling?”

She almost jumped out of bed, letting out a shriek. I was positive I had done it. I startled her. Her voice was weak. “What are you doing here?”

“Am I interrupting your mysterious plans?”

She shook her head in the same fashion as the other day, too quick and unconvincing.

“You were drugged. I brought you to Kamila’s home. She took care of you. Meanwhile, I sat here, watching you stare at the ceiling,” I told her. Mandy’s face looked blank. The red lipstick from last night was gone. Kamila had also cleaned up her face.

“I was thinking, okay?” Mandy defended herself. Thinking in bed? She was definitely a virgin. What was it with me? I didn’t like innocent women. They were the opposite of what I’d been told to waste my time on.

“Thinking? That’s suspicious,” I pointed out, joking but not so much. She was Rawlins’ offspring. He fisted my country on the daily because we owed him tons of money.

Rolling her eyes at me, she went on, “Was I really drugged? I barely remember anything. Fuck. My stomach hurts.”

Great. Mandy didn’t need to remember that filthy fuck’s fingers on her pussy. Or the fact that I almost beat him to death because of it. “What’s the last thing you remember?”

“You left. A waitress came by and brought one of your golden bottles. Aris and Valentina convinced me to drink a glass of champagne. I did. After that, everything is blurry,” she told me, seemingly confused. A waitress brought her a bottle. Superb.

I asked, “What did she look like?”

She answered. It was the perfect description of the bitch who sucked my cock last night. I mentally scolded myself for that misstep. I could do better than club bitches. Here I thought a man had drugged her. Two people were to be punished now.

I stood up and took quick steps toward the door. Something about my action alarmed Mandy. She intervened, “Wait. Where are you going? Wait for me.”

“You better stay here with Kamila.” *Fuck. What if Kamila is on palace duty today?* “Or go back home. It’s right across the street. One of the house staff will open the door for you.”

She descended the bed, stumbling toward me. The poor girl was a mess. “I want to come with you.”

I was easy to convince.

We looked for Kamila. She was nowhere to be found. In her room, she laid a note on her bed, claiming that Aram had called her in. She also prepared a comfortable outfit for Mandy.

Kamila refused to have staff living in her house. So we had to make our own morning beverages. I got a coffee to-go. Mandy mixed her own chocolate drink. She helped me in Kamila’s kitchen as I was an ‘indecent’ human being for not knowing how to make coffee.

Last night, I’d gone soft because I had been drunk myself. That didn’t mean they were off the hook.



“WHAT THE FUCK IS A PUNISHMENT SEX HOUSE?”

“You’re cute when you curse,” I commented. Leaving behind the palace and Katantia’s two newest prisoners, I accompanied Mandy back home because her stomach was acting up again. My initial plan was to show her around the beaches, have a swim. She’d feel better afterward. Days after arriving, she still seemed tense.

“Seriously, though, what is it?” she insisted, tucking a strain of her long hair behind her ear. She’d just witnessed the waitress who had blown me last night throw a fit while the man who’d almost raped Mandy stood there, accepting of his new fate in a punishment sex house.

“That’s where Blowjob Waitress and Rapist Club Owner will spend the next five years. A blowjob house, to be exact. It’s like a training camp, but it usually results in facial surgery because your muscles go loose,” I responded nonchalantly. It was as simple as showing up to court, pointing at the bad guy, and asking for his punishment. My brother and I had that power. Kamila could do it without the court’s interference—but she barely knew she was able to pull Aram in any direction.

“That’s harsh, but...”

“Yeah?”

“Well-deserved. Rapist Club Owner didn’t even bother to listen to me. Blowjob Waitress—thank you for that image, by the way—is a threat to society,” she said. Her attempt to hide the scowl on her face failed.

“Jealous much?”

Mandy’s arms fell to her sides. She frantically shook her head. “I’m not interested in sex. I’m getting married soon. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t talk about sex like that all the time.”

“Do you even believe a word you just said?” I asked, scanning her blushed cheeks and parted lips. She avoided my gaze, making it even more obvious. Mandy was hiding something.

Kamila’s house came into view. There were packages on her doorstep, left there by our private delivery service. I

jogged over there to pick them up, inspecting them. Kamila was the most loved celebrity on the island, but I reserved the right to worry about her safety.

I returned the packages because Kamila didn't like it when people meddled with her things. Even if said people were doing this for her own good.

Mandy observed the whole thing, saying nothing with her mouth but everything with her wide eyes. She was trailing my fingers for some reason.

In silence, we sauntered back to my house. The staff had prepared food for us, fries, and burgers in tune with our American guest. Valentina and Aris weren't present.

My brother was taking care of an appointment, and Valentina was wherever girls like her went. I had no idea.

"I'm not really hungry," Mandy said apologetically.

"Too bad."

"So I'll just go upstairs then..."

"My staff didn't waste their time and energy on food that'll be thrown away. You'll eat. It's time for lunch," I told Mandy. She took a step back, studying me. I caught the twitch of her lip and the questioning gaze.

Frustrated, she crossed her arms in front of her chest. Her tits looked bigger that way, and I was indecent enough to check them out. Teasing her was fun. The shade of red on her face and the heat that she radiated in this state was worth it.

I accompanied her to our massive dining room. It could host up to twenty people, but it was usually only my brother, his wife, and me eating here. The staff had set the table for us. I'd told them to go all out. They were to bring my family's finest china for Mandy's stay here. She was a Rawlins. She'd appreciate the gesture.

When her eyes fell upon the cutlery, plates, and glasses, she didn't comment. I was taken aback. Did she not care? I frowned.

"What did I do?" she asked.

We were gawking at each other, clasping at straws. The presence of another human being hadn't been this challenging in years.

“Nothing. You're proving that you're not as I expected you to be.”

She lifted her eyebrow. “What did you expect?”

“You had an internship at your dad's. You never left the house until you moved in with Max? Matt?” She rolled her eyes. Of course, I knew her fiancé's name. But I didn't care enough to get it right. “Your file says you never went to college after applying to study journalism. You've taken online classes ever since. You were friends with Valentina. Your family is one of the richest on the East Coast, if not the entire US. You seem a little...”

“Underwhelming?” she intervened.

“Indifferent.”

She went quiet. We took our seats, and the staff started serving us. One of the male staff members began, “We have all sorts of milkshakes...”

I didn't listen; they knew what I liked and whatnot. Mandy nodded along. In the end, she ordered a chocolate milkshake. Mandy didn't know that we couldn't grow chocolate on Katantia. She had no idea that she'd consume something that had traveled half the world to land on this table. As an American, I assumed she was used to such things.

Our plates were full, but neither one of us dared to touch our food.

The Katantian emblem was all over the table, on the staff's clothes. I caught Mandy staring at the end of her fork, where an impressive K was engraved. Finally, she said, “All of this doesn't impress me. It doesn't mean much.”

My gran would agree.

“Before my mom's death, one could say that I had it all. When she died, and everything was gone, I didn't miss the cars or the private jets. I missed her. We'd spent so little time

together. We weren't even that close, but her death meant we'd never get a second chance." She picked up the glass that one of the staff had filled with water, lifting it to her lips.

Our staff was curious, and they reported everything back to the king. Therefore, I couldn't give Mandy an honest answer.

"Why are you here?" I asked her.

She sighed. "I'm starting to think I made a mistake."

I agreed, "You did. Obviously, you're not ready for Katantia."

"I'd like to be."

"Sex is like our currency. You don't understand that. Women on this island know why they're here. You don't." I added, "It will be difficult for you to transition into that mindset, and that's understandable."

"A mindset? We, as in the normal people in the outside world, know that you psychologically manipulate people to do what you want here in Katantia," she countered. The woman who refilled Mandy's glass of water gasped, quickly retreating from the table to join the rest of the staff at the wall.

This was my fucking home. There was a choice. Bad. Good. Decent. Easy. Appropriate. Disgusting. I replied, "Normal people from your normal outside world pay millions for a week in our land. That's how normal they are. People don't care how we live our lives unless it's hurting them. We have too many skeletons of your normal rich people in our closets. They don't want that to get out, so nobody dares to hurt us."

Briefly, I remembered the sketchy military aircrafts stalking our country from above. I didn't feel at ease when I heard Aram's government discuss that there was a research vessel looming in our waters.

"How can you sit by and watch while women are hurt like this every day? I haven't even been here for a week, and I've already witnessed an almost rape. Do you want to be king of this land?" Mandy asked. She didn't touch her food. She

wouldn't leave this table unless she'd eaten. I wouldn't allow her to starve for another day on my watch.

"I'm not the good guy. I haven't claimed to be. Our definition of disgusting is vastly different." Once upon a time, I'd longed for the throne. I educated and prepared myself for it. Then Kamila happened, and it all went down the drain. Amongst us, we had to attempt peace. Aris and his wife were into drama, but Kamila and I didn't want none of it. "Are you sure you're not your father's spy?"

"No!" she yelled in response, causing more gasps from the staff. "I'm a nobody in my father's eyes. I'm here to humiliate myself."

"There's something you're not telling me," I warned her. I could smell it from a mile away. She cowered away from me, but I didn't budge. Was she frustrated? She was mad, and that was a fuckable look on her. "You don't want to humiliate yourself, do you?"

"I want to go upstairs. I don't want to eat. Everyone has a price. You can name yours. What must I do for you to leave me alone?" She honestly dared to tell me I had a price. I fucking had everything I wanted.

Glaring at the staff, I ordered, "Take the day off."

"But, Your Highness—"

"I said, take the day off." One by one, they left the dining room. Once the door was shut behind them, I inhaled, taking in Mandy's blackberry scent. Kamila smelled like this after showers, but I wasn't thinking of Kamila anymore. For all I cared, she'd never even been in contact with blackberry shampoos.

"I'm not asking anything extraordinary of you. I simply want you to eat, so that I don't feel like a shitty host." I refrained from telling her that I was also ready to play a game in my head, envisioning Mandy as my object while she ate the food off my plates. I wanted to know what Aris felt like when he witnessed his wife at this table.

"I can't," she responded sharply.

“Care to tell me why?”

“I’m in pain,” she blurted out. “I can’t stomach anything.”

“I can call up a doctor.”

She shook her head. “No, please, don’t. I live with this pain. It’s normal. Girl stuff, you know.”

I knew ‘girl stuff.’ I had Kamila, and she made sure that I knew she bled every month. I couldn’t help but feel like there was more to it with Mandy. Her cheeks were too flushed like I had caught her doing something she shouldn’t have been doing. “Are you sure?”

Mandy nodded, swallowing back a sob.

“No need to cry.”

“You can’t tell me what to do. I’ll cry if I feel like it,” Mandy countered.

“I’m just saying...”

“Eat your food, Weston.” She sighed, taking in the food in front of her. I hadn’t been joking—burgers, buns, ketchup. We didn’t do those sorts of things over here. My staff had to improvise with most ingredients to cook what I’d asked of them. “I’m sorry that I can’t eat mine right now.”

“I can have it packaged and sent to your room,” I offered. It didn’t feel right to eat in Mandy’s presence. She seemed jittery, aloof almost. She reminded me of Kamila back when she’d just gone sober. Mandy wasn’t a recovering addict, though; I’d memorized her detailed file.

“Can you do me a favor?” She took a sip of her water, ignoring the milkshake that my staff had brought her.

“Depends.”

“I’m a burden to you,” she stated, feeling awfully confident of her words. “I would like to move in with Kamila for the rest of my stay.”

“You’re our responsibility. You came here to invite Valentina to your wedding. Why leave?” I asked, baffled. I

didn't let her see my confusion. I kept a straight face. Aram had trained his offspring well.

"It won't work with V. We don't get along anymore," she confessed. Her eyes were glossy, but she didn't let herself cry. She anxiously bit her lip instead. "I think Kamila and I are a better fit."

"You are, but I know there's something you're not telling me," I insisted. Did I want to be the prince for this exchange? My indecisiveness was a beast of its own. "Tell me one truth, and you can pack your things. I won't hold you back."

"One truth?"

I gave her a quick nod.

"I want revenge." She swallowed. "But I'm afraid that I'm never going to get it. The circumstances have changed."

Smirking, I told her, "Good girl. Now run along. Go to your room."

PART II



CHAPTER 13

MANDY



I HAD TO GET AWAY FROM WESTON. MY INSECURITIES WOULD never allow me to flat out ask him what I wanted to ask, but one could never be too sure.

A couple of hours after my disastrous not so dinner with Weston, I grabbed my luggage and left. I knocked on Kamila's door. It was either too hot, or I was experiencing hot flashes again. My body was playing strange games with me. Sitting there in Weston's dining room and being ordered to eat, I'd felt like a different person. I was used to Manuel telling me not to eat. Having people ask me to eat was refreshing. He was performing his royal duties, but it still affected me.

Coming here, Valentina had been my priority. Everyone thought I jumped on a plane for her. After being secluded for so long, I went through all of this for a former friend. My father seemed convinced. Manuel bought it. I meant it. I would've loved for Valentina to come to my wedding.

There would be one. Manuel wouldn't let me go that easy. I could cheat on him with a thousand men, and he'd drag me back to his shoebox apartment in Chicago, lock me up, and give the key to my father. Manuel was going to marry me, for God's sake. He could claim that my body was broken all he wanted, but he still set a date.

Truth be told, I came to Katantia to upset my family, but so far, I'd only managed to upset myself.

They'd taken me for a fool, and for a long time, I'd behaved like one.

Kamila opened the door in her own time. When I saw her face, I understood why. Her eyelids were smeared with green sparkly eyeshadow and sweat. Her lipstick was smudged. Exhaustion dominated her features.

“Mandy?” Her face went into panic mode when her eyes dropped on my luggage. She stepped out of her home, looking over at Weston’s house. “Why are you here? Come inside.”

She led me inside to her living room. I left my things in her hallway. She’d only gone to the palace for a couple of hours, but she seemed done with the day already.

“I’m in pain,” I told her, on the verge of breaking down. I gestured at my abdomen. It had been getting worse again. Weston had bought my period story, but Kamila knew it wasn’t that.

Her place looked so much more comfortable than Aris and Weston’s. No unnecessary people were running around and doing errands. Kamila’s home was her home. Nobody else’s. I felt like I could breathe without being judged.

She joined me on the sectional sofa and grabbed my hand. “Do you want some tea? Soup? Candy? What will make you feel better?”

I asked for tea, and we headed to the kitchen together. Kamila didn’t let me touch anything; she prepared everything for me with precision. A drop of water on the counter made her frown. She rubbed at it with a towel, making it disappear.

When she handed me tea, I sniffled. My period still hadn’t come. I began, “I’ve made a horrible mistake. I’m having thoughts... Bad ones. They’ll hurt somebody I’m supposed to care about. He’s hurt me often enough, but I still feel guilty. If I stay close to Weston, I’ll do something I regret.”

“You fancy Weston?” she asked, teasing me. Kamila prepared the herbs, dark ones that smelled like Earl Grey.

“I don’t have a crush on him!” I responded, overreacting a little. Kamila didn’t need to know that Weston’s terribly confident gaze turned me inside out. He was the guy who got everything he ever wanted, and when he looked at me like I

was just another fuck, I feared I might just give him precisely that. “It’s just that... Never mind. Can I stay here with you?”

Kamila’s tired eyes lit up. Her excitement surprised me. “Why are you even asking? I’d love to have you! It’ll be great. I’m a good host. Better than Aris and Weston. Welcome to my house!”

Then she cleared her throat. “I don’t have any staff, as you can see. I clean on my own. I’d like to go over some rules...”

Listening to her concerns, I noted that the cleaning I’d done back home was minuscule in comparison. Kamila couldn’t stand a single spot of dirt. No dirty dishes ever. She sounded convinced that she needed everything to be clean at all times, so I entertained the idea for her. She was letting me stay with her. It was the least I could do.

When she finished talking about her obsession with cleanliness, I asked, “Where were you this morning? Is everything okay?”

“I was at the palace. Work. So much work! I’m exhausted.” My heart ached for her, and the things she left unspoken. Was she in pain like I was? If she was, she didn’t speak of it. Her ruined makeup represented the only hint at her discomfort. “Felicita finally arrived to switch shifts. I just came back.”

“I’m so sorry,” I told Kamila, not knowing what else to say. I hadn’t understood half of what she’d talked about, but it sounded painful and exhausting.

“You don’t have to...” She interrupted herself. “I’ll be sore, but it’s okay. I’m used to being sore. Tell me about your stomach. It still hasn’t stopped hurting since yesterday?”

I shook my head, lowering my gaze. “I need to tell you something.”

Kamila leaned closer to me, worry coating her eyes.

“I need a pregnancy test.”

CHAPTER 14

WESTON



A COUPLE OF HOURS AFTER MANDY LEFT THE HOUSE, THE KING called Aris and me over for a conversation. I expected the worst. The king saw how I handled the Mandy case in our court. I was unsure of what he wanted to see us for.

I was prepared for both of his reactions. He had eyes everywhere, especially in our home. The servants would even tell him how often Aris and Valentina fucked and where they did it, just to save their own selves.

He called us to his office, so I guessed he had bad news. I couldn't be fired since I was his son, but he could do unspeakable things to me if he was dissatisfied.

And Aram Wraith had a lot of reasons to be unhappy with me. I hoped that today he was addressing only one of those reasons.

Aris and I met the usual set of guards on our way to His Majesty's office. There were no other offices active this late. The king was the only one still in his workplace.

When we walked in, I noticed he was alone. It was another unfortunate sign. Whatever Aram had in mind, I would take it. There was no other choice. I had to man up and take it.

I wasn't his little son anymore.

"You're early," Aram remarked, looking at his expensive watch. "What's going on?" Aris asked. He casually took a seat while I observed the king before making a move.

As expected, this meeting was about me. The king stood up, walking right over to me. “You tell me. What was this morning about?”

Aris was bewildered. I hadn’t told him what happened yet. We only met on our way to the king. Aris did all the work today on his own.

“Mandy got a spiked drink. She went to the bathroom. When Mandy didn’t return, I went to look for her. She was in the back of the club, almost ready to get raped out in the open,” I told Aram. Aris looked at me. He knew I was lying, but he didn’t react. We covered for each other when necessary. “I saved her.”

“She should’ve never been in a position in which she needed saving!” Aram seethed. His face had gone red. “Do you both understand what she is here for?”

Both Aris and I nodded, money, tons of it, in the form of investments by her wealthy father.

Aram continued, “I may control the general narrative, but she still has a mouth, unfortunately. Mandy is claimed by me. Nobody touches her. Nobody fucks her. Nobody even glances at her without my permission!”

“We haven’t done either,” Aris defended us. He was older than me, but he also didn’t know when he was wrong. “Why are we getting this lecture? It’s not our fault that guy is a bastard. Weston brought him to justice, though, right? In front of her eyes. Doesn’t that save the situation?”

“There was no need for a situation to even exist. I wanted Mandy to accompany you to the best parts of Katantia. That was it. She didn’t have to interact with anybody,” Aram fumed. His raucous voice could probably be heard outside. “Where is she now? Care to tell me?”

Aris hesitated to answer. He had no idea. I didn’t either. I began, “She—”

“Mandy left your house. I know because one of your staff members told me. He watched her approach Kamila’s house.”

I felt an ounce of relief. The king caught it. “Why do you feel relieved, boy?”

Aram was staring me down now. He went on, “Are you interested in her? Are you glad she’s safe? Do you want to fuck her? Is that why you played the hero today?”

The king knew how to read people. He had seen it all. I had to disguise myself in front of him. He saw everything.

With a straight-up lie, I responded, “I did what I had to do. I don’t fuck girls who are claimed by the king.”

Soon, Aram Wraith would be forced to find out that I was taking away Kamila. Soon. Not today.

“That better be true,” Aram warned me. He was disappointed. “I don’t want Mandy living with Kamila. She could slip. Kamila’s fascinated with that girl. I don’t want Mandy to think that our life is all about my relationship with Kamila.” I cringed. “Things are different here. We fuck who we want to fuck.”

“We do,” Aris agreed. I wanted to slap him. He almost started clapping. The tension was too high for his humor today.

Aram sat back down on his desk chair. He had said everything he wanted to say in his lecture. He addressed my brother, “You’re on outside business duty this week. It’s short notice, I know, but it has to be done. It’s about the investments for the new skyscraper that will be named after your mother.”

The plan was to inaugurate the building on her twentieth anniversary of death.

Typically, Aris and I traveled together. It didn’t take the king long to explain why I was staying home. “You will make amends with Mandy. I allow you to even lick her pussy if that will get her back to your house. Kamila needs to live alone.”

Licking Mandy’s pussy would’ve been a nice thing to do, but it wasn’t on the menu yet. Besides, I believed that Kamila was better off with Mandy in her house. Anything that could result in less palace time for Kamila was a blessing.

I had to come up with a plan to convince Aram. Mandy and Kamila got along perfectly.

The king discussed a few details with Aris. He was going to fly away the next morning. "... Spencer Rawlins gets updated on Mandy's whereabouts every day. We're in discussion about her stay on Katantia. I want to sweeten the deal, not make him fly her back to Chicago. I had to tell him about what happened. He was displeased."

"I understand. It won't happen again. Mandy will be under my close supervision from now on," I assured the king.

"Tell your wife to suck it up. She asked for permission to be in contact with this girl. She's considering to attend Mandy's pathetic little wedding. She needs to work for it. Mandy doesn't seem convinced that they're friends anymore. Make her demand Mandy's return to your house," Aram demanded. "We want the girl to get used to feeling at home here."

"Valentina doesn't like her much," Aris responded. "I can't force my wife to like another girl."

"Your wife hates anything with a pussy and tits. Mandy doesn't pose a threat to her ambitions. Spencer's daughter is an ugly little toy in comparison to that object of yours."

It was hard, growing up with Aram in our lives. We heard the strangest shit on the daily. At the same time, it toughened us up. Neither Aris nor I flinched at the king's words. We nodded like good little soldiers, displaying a united front of patriarchy.

Aram and Aris exchanged details on Aris's upcoming trip. I didn't pay a lot of attention. I knew that with Aris gone, I'd have to do all the upcoming work. Plus, I'd be alone with Valentina this week.

That was never fun.

CHAPTER 15

MANDY



I KNEW I HAD TO GET UP WHEN I HEARD THE DOORBELL RING. Kamila didn't have any staff working at her home. The bell rang a couple of times. I figured I was alone at Kamila's home.

So I dragged my half-asleep self out of bed. On the outside of my door, there was a note. Kamila informed me she was out shopping for groceries. She didn't tell me she was getting my pregnancy test. She'd told me we needed to keep the entire process a secret.

I trusted her to know what she was doing.

I figured Kamila had forgotten her palace ID card. I hurried downstairs, almost slipping on the stairs.

To my negative surprise, it wasn't the person I expected. Valentina was about to ring the bell again when I opened the door, facing her. Out of breath and blushed to tomato levels, I took a step back.

Valentina was wearing a revealing short black dress. Was she going out? It was morning. Her almost exposed breasts had me feeling ticklish in places I didn't want to feel tickled in her presence. Her deep plunge décolleté was paired with an excruciatingly short length that barely covered her mound. I bet that if she sat down, her private parts would be fully visible.

I tried not to think of her pussy. My own core reacted when I thought of Valentina's well-fucked orifice, as she'd called it during my short stay in their home. Fuck. What the hell was I

thinking? She was in my mind, altering my desires like a siren. I needed to get a grip.

I invited her in out of politeness, but I wasn't sure how Kamila would react if she found out that Valentina was in her living room.

"How long are you going to stay here?" Valentina asked with a wicked smile when she sat down. She crossed her legs. I noticed her black heels. I didn't catch sight of her folds. I guessed that was appropriate.

I answered, "Until I leave Katantia."

Valentina giggled. Her eyes observed Kamila's living room with ridicule. "Why do you want to be here? Kamila's boring. Come live with us. We go to parties almost every night. We're busy."

"Is that where you're going with that dress? To a party during the day?" I asked her. It sounded judgmental. I couldn't help but touch on the subject.

She seductively shook her head, her dark hair flowing so smoothly across her curves. "I wore it because I know you like looking at my breasts. Aris is away for business for the week, so I can wear whatever I want. When I want."

She enunciated her words one by one, slowly, as if I couldn't comprehend what she was attempting to do. I felt my own folds go wet. I internally cringed. Valentina patted on the empty space in front of her. She instructed me, "Come and lie down with me."

My brain urged me to decline. I hesitated for a moment. Until I ended up listening to my willing body. I wanted to feel V's warmth.

Once my body settled next to her, I started to feel the betrayal. Manuel was going to despise me for this.

Valentina was skinnier than me, so she shifted to allow me to fit on the sofa next to her. I inhaled. I exhaled. I hadn't planned this. Never. I'd never touched anyone until Manuel. Holy shit. What had got into me?

Were they feeding me aphrodisiacs? I had to be careful around her. Staring at her tits would only get me into trouble. “What’s going on with this outfit? Is this how people dress here every day?”

“You don’t like it?” Valentina didn’t see my criticism as unfavorable. Climbing on top of me, I felt her heat against my skin. While straddling me, she helped herself out of half the dress. One of her breasts was fully revealed now. “When Aris doesn’t like something I wear, I change. It’s all about the eyes, you see. They need to be pleased as much as the rest of the body.”

I cursed the day I agreed to come here.

“Please, put your clothes back on,” I begged. I wanted to look away, but I couldn’t. My eyes were fixed on Valentina’s half-nudity like I had the right to stare at her body. This used to be my best friend. Now, she had been reduced to a naked body, trying to seduce me to go with her flow. I squeezed my thighs together, thinking that it would help simmer down my reaction. I was turned on by Valentina, although I didn’t want to admit it.

She kept her eyes on me, batting her eyelashes at me. I felt uncomfortable. Her body was inviting me in, but I didn’t want to go there. I didn’t even want to think about what was going on with her pussy. Was it her wetness or mine that was ruining my clothes?

Somewhere in my mind, Manuel’s existence rattled me awake. I had never liked girls. Why would I start now?

Instead of dressing up, Valentina pulled her dress up and over her head, throwing it away. My eyes trailed, where it landed on the floor. Kamila would freak if she saw. She hated chaos in her home.

Back to Valentina, my eyes basically gawked at her. She had kept her heels on. Thankfully, her mound was covered by a nude thong. “Let’s have some fun, Mandy. On the plane, I noticed the look in your eyes.”

I wanted to touch her exquisite body. My hands were itching for it, but I knew that it was the wrong thing to do. Speaking of hands. I noticed the ring on her finger. It woke me up. I remembered how Valentina behaved when Aris was around. She only came here because Aris was gone.

This wasn't about me.

Valentina started playing with her nipples. I bit my lip.

"You should come back to our house," Valentina said. Her hand reached out to my face, placing a strand of my hair behind my ear. I almost shivered at her hot touch. "I feel so alone now that Aris is gone."

I couldn't keep it inside. "You only want me here because Aris isn't here. That says a lot about our friendship."

Or lack of it.

Her fingers made me think awful things like touching her nipples myself.

"I don't know what you expected," Valentina uttered. She distracted me entirely with her touch. My nipples peaked. "We're not friends anymore. We're too different. All we could be is lovers."

"Lovers?" My jaw fell open. Katantia had a way of making people sexual beasts. I wanted to slap myself because of my impure thoughts. I couldn't help but enjoy it when she writhed on top of me. "I don't—"

Valentina's mouth found mine. After a moment of indecision, I pushed her off of me. She wiped her mouth, chuckling.

"You haven't been fucked, right?" Valentina whispered, her eyes wide. She sneered at me. I shook my head at her ridiculous question. I had a fiancé. I was quite possibly pregnant. Of course, I couldn't tell her that. My eyes were big and focused on her face.

We were on opposite sides of the sofa now.

"Aris and I can arrange something for you, I'm sure," Valentina suggested. She licked her lips. My eyes trailed her

tongue's movements. "Of course, I wouldn't mind keeping you to myself. Fingers do the job just as well."

My best friend made out with me like I was her girlfriend. The most shocking aspect of it was that I wanted more. I'd pushed her away, but I couldn't wait until she kissed me again.

"If you want me to kiss you again, you need to get naked," Valentina demanded. "We can leave it at a kiss. I can see that you regret pushing me away. It's okay. I forgive you. Nobody's ever rejected a kiss from me, so you need to make it up to me. I'm your best friend. You don't want to hurt me, do you?"

All of a sudden, Valentina made sense. She wasn't talking to me. She was seducing my pussy. It was working. Obeying like a lap dog, I slid out of my pajamas. I placed them on the sofa next to me, and now I was left with my underwear. I bit my lip, squeezing my thighs together.

"Take off your underwear and spread your legs. I'm still hurting from when you pushed me," V said, pouting at me. Her big eyes could convince me to do anything. I hoped she didn't ask anything more of me. Carefully, I removed my underwear. I added them to the pile of clothes next to me. Terrified, I checked Kamila's big windows. I didn't see anyone outside, but you never knew in the palace. Anything could happen.

Finally, I spread my legs.

"Your pussy looks so cute," Valentina commented. Her eyes were on the junction between my thighs. She probed my pussy with her eyes. I felt a shiver run down my spine. "I want to see what it will look like after it's been fucked. Will you send me a picture?"

"I'm not going to sext you," I told her.

"If you want to be friends, you need to do as I say," Valentina uttered. I could see why she was so commanding. Everybody else treated her as a submissive factor. I was the only one who treated her as an equal. She took her repressed feelings out on me. "First things first, come back home. We'll

use your holes and make you happy. I'll even let Aris touch you. I'm sure he'd love that."

"I can't," I told her. I was too wet. Valentina had me exactly where she wanted me. One move toward me and I would come. My inexperience showed. Her eyes made me feel more alive and horny than Manuel's touch ever had. I could've sworn that most of the time, he barely knew what to do with his dick.

"You can't?" Valentina responded. Lust faded from her expression. Annoyance replaced it. She stood up, searching for her dress. She was back in it in a matter of seconds. "You're missing out. Girls and boys alike beg for a chance to sleep with me. Aris has to chase them all off. You fucking suck. Bye."

Tossing her dark hair over her shoulder, she turned, leaving Kamila's house.

How much time passed as I sat there, speechless?

"Mandy? Are you here? Why's the front door open?" Kamila yelled. If I had been asleep upstairs, I wouldn't have heard her. She didn't yell loud enough. She was in the hallway. I rushed to join her. Her hands were full of grocery bags.

I immediately explained myself when Kamila's eyes widened at my distressed appearance. "Valentina came here. I didn't invite her."

Kamila placed her bags on the floor, kicking off her shoes in the hallway. "Did she try to seduce you? You look flushed as fuck, M. Perhaps Weston should fuck you to help you out."

Sighing, Kamila ventured into her kitchen with her shopping bags in hand. "I got the tests. I had to call up some old contacts, but I managed. It's amazing what my name can do."

"I don't think it's your name only," I told her, rising from the sofa. I rubbed my forehead. "You're kind and awesome. Fun. Everyone loves you."

"Right..." Kamila snickered as she placed her groceries in their rightful place.



KAMILA WAS DRIVING AGAIN. WE PLANNED A TRIP TO THE highest spot a car could reach in Katantia. Kamila said there was a comfy café up there. I got to see another sight. At the same time, we were far away from the palace's prying eyes.

She'd subdued her red wavy hair in a ponytail. She had a blush shirt on and dark blue jeans that showed off her long legs. Old music from the sixties graced the radio.

This could've been me with a friend back in Chicago. This didn't have to be Katantia, but, unfortunately for me, it was.

"So, what do we do?" Kamila asked, watching the road. We had brought the tests with us. I'd done all of them. Now, we had to get rid of them. "Aram doesn't like that you live with me. He probably sent Valentina to drag you back home. Aram doesn't trust me. This might be one of the reasons why."

Weston warned me not to endanger Kamila. And that was the first thing I did.

"I shouldn't have asked you to do this," I admitted, regretting my trip to Katantia. My father had agreed to finance my trip if I remained in Katantia for three months. What those three months entailed, I didn't know. I'd been kept in the dark.

I only knew that I had to befriend the royals and let them show me around like I was interested in this forsaken place.

The pregnancy test changed things.

"Nobody can know. I had a close friend get the tests for us. Contraception is the greatest gift for a girl on Katantia, especially one without an owner," Kamila explained. I was getting dizzy by the constant sharp bends of the road. Kamila drove casually as if she'd done this route often enough before.

"Do I want to know what you're hinting at?" I asked, swallowing.

"You don't want to, but you need to." She sighed. There was a car on the opposite side of the road. It was speeding way

too much, causing our car to shake at its passing. I grabbed onto the door handle. “There’s this Katantian tradition. It’s shameful. I’m not proud of it at all. Aram and his grandfathers conducted it in the seventies and eighties when our population wasn’t growing at the desired rate.”

The café came into view, not resembling the oriental dream of a beach club I’d got roofied at the other day. This was a heaven of huge windows and modern art. It was named Euphoria. When I looked in the other direction, I was astounded at the sight. Katantia indeed did look beautiful from up here.

“Human trafficking has plagued Katantia for years. I... I try to help, but it’s not enough. You help one victim. Another one reveals itself. Aram and his government blatantly ignore the issue, but the youth on Katantia can’t stand it. The elders turn a blind eye, supporting these activities that hurt women and men of all ages.” Kamila looked ready to combust. “It’s unhealthy. It’s brainwashing at its finest and ugliest.”

“You’re trying to help. That’s what people need to see,” I reassured Kamila, trying to make her feel better.

Kamila parked the car near the café. She turned off the engine. The music that reminded me of my mom stopped. I admitted, “Being pregnant derails my plans.”

“How? What were you planning to do?”

Kamila’s eyes widened as I explained my plan of revenge. It sounded pathetic, coming from me. I had never touched another person, but I had come to Katantia, looking for an adventure. One that would hurt Manuel as much as he’d hurt me in the past.

“Let’s get rid of the tests. Besides, the tests could be wrong,” Kamila blurted out. She seemed irritated. The keys to her car were jingling from her nervous hands.

We placed the tests in one-use coffee cups. The plan was to throw them away in a random trash can. When I exited the car, I spotted a convenient trash can for the job. Calmly, I took the

two coffee cups and threw them away. Then I rejoined Kamila. She'd locked the car.

On our way to the café, she said, "You need to be careful with Weston. I don't know what he does in his personal life. He never brings anyone around. He has his regular girls. The ones he fucks when he needs to unwind, but, generally speaking, Weston doesn't care. On this island, I'm the only one left that he would do anything for. Ever since Queen Penelope died, it's been this way," she explained. "I'm not saying this to excuse his behavior. I'm telling you the facts. Queen Penelope's death changed a lot of things in the family."

She turned to face me. Her hands grabbed hold of mine. "Weston's a good man. I truly believe that. That's why I need to tell you this, in case you're interested in him."

"I'm not interested in him. I'm engaged," I told Kamila, working hard to convince two people, her and myself.

"Weston and I will be getting married soon," she revealed. My heart dropped. "I want you to be aware of that."

I froze. Fully dumbfounded, I asked, "Why are you trusting me with this information?"

"There's no romantic or sexual relationship between us, so you can stop looking at me like that. Weston accepted it because he wants to help me out," Kamila explained, calming me down. My breathing went back to normal. "Of course, we'll have to play that relationship in front of the king, but it won't be real."

The owners of the place weren't starstruck by Kamila, further proving that she frequented this café. Once we were seated at a table, the terrific view of Katantia from up here captivated me. It looked so innocent. From up here, the monstrosities that went on in Katantia seemed irrelevant.

We drank our beverages, discussing irrelevant things. There were other guests here. They knew who Kamila was. She didn't want them to gossip.

At some point, I went into the restroom. Taking out my phone, I dialed Manuel's number that I knew by heart. It rang

for a long time until he picked it up. He yawned into the line.
“What happened?”

“My period’s late,” I informed him, my voice warm and content.

“I told you that I didn’t care.”

Quickly, I added, “I’ve taken pregnancy tests, six of them.”

“Get to the point. I’m exhausted. I need to sleep.”

His precious sleep was more important than our future baby, but it was okay for me. I was used to it. “They all came back positive.”

I had expected a lot of things, but I hadn’t expected Manuel to hang up on me. When I tried calling him back, there was no answer.

CHAPTER 16

WESTON



TWO DAYS PASSED, AND THE NEW GIRL REMAINED OUT OF sight.

Against my wishes, Kamila stepped in for Aris's absence, which made me wonder what Mandy was doing all alone at Kamila's home. Was she spying for Spencer Rawlins? Quite possibly.

The king's advisors set up our work schedule. Travis had to make significant changes now that Aris wasn't present. It was the most convenient time for him to be away.

Kamila approached things differently than him. That meant there was less to no sex in her presence. The people had caught wind that she would accompany me, so they sent mixed representatives. The girls with bodies ready to fuck were gone. Men in suits and women in classy dresses replaced them.

The princess handled the business in a way that almost made me forget that this wasn't her day job. She didn't deal with the business side of things. Usually, she handled the image. Kamila had an impressive body that represented everything King Aram wanted to cast forth.

Basically, we were show figures for the king. Neither they nor I were ready to admit it to anyone. We were content not knowing what the military aircrafts spying on our soil were so interested in. Or why Aram, his government, and Travis were upset that our neighbors' research vessels were snooping around in our waters.

Out of the three of us, Kamila was the only one without a high school degree, but today, Kamila showed that she learned more than my brother and I ever did. She bargained. Kamila represented the crown even though she hated the bearer. She forced the men in suits to listen. Kamila didn't settle for anyone, and definitely not those who would rather see a man than a woman in power.

It felt ironic that I was incredibly proud of Kamila for proving her worth. Meanwhile, we were the rulers of Katantia. We caused all of this, but I wouldn't feel proud of any other woman's independence other than Kamila's.

While Kamila once again proved to me that she was worth more than she was getting, I watched for the signs. I'd given up on the throne after she had attempted to commit suicide ten years ago.

Kamila wore her confidence as makeup. She succeeded in fooling everyone. She always did. The palace was full of deceitful people.

Kamila was one of the tallest women I knew. She had a beautiful body. Every woman in Katantia aspired to be the king's object princess. They didn't know the price.

I watched Kamila condemn herself for the way she felt. In the early days of her sexual relationship with Aram, we didn't talk much. She distanced herself from us, the people closest to her. Sometimes weeks went by. We didn't speak even if we lived across the street from one another. I thought she was being difficult. Having just hit her twenties, I supposed she was going through a phase.

Younger as I was back then, I didn't bother much with her feelings. Friends, family, or pussy, I didn't care about anyone because I was too caught up with the throne. I wanted to graduate college first, getting to the throne before hitting twenty-five.

I didn't believe in signs, but something in me that day moved me to check on Kamila.

I saved her that day, the girl who was stronger than all of us. I began plotting from then on. Today, she saved me from doing everything on my own. It wasn't the same level of saving, not by far. That was what we did to remain close. The little things mattered.

Work was irrelevant. I had other things to worry about.

Secrets didn't come without a price, even for me.



DURING LUNCH BREAKS, WE DRANK COFFEE IN KAMILA'S garden. The green space was enormous and guarded by tall fences. Kamila didn't need any surprise visitors. Here, we received the privacy we needed.

"Does Mandy always sleep this late?" I asked Kamila with a hint of unhealthy curiosity. A blue bird fluttered across Kamila's yard. Once it reached the ground, it tiptoed around her flowers. Kamila's face brightened up. She put aside her coffee and studied the bird.

"She had another tough night. I'm thinking of importing food for her. She seems to react badly to everything I serve her. I don't know what to do. Then again, she rarely throws up. She doesn't have diarrhea. It's like period pain what she's experiencing," Kamila explained, her eyes glistening in excitement. She mumbled sweet words at the bird that had joined us. The tiny bird was strolling toward us.

"It seems sketchy to me," I commented.

"Sketchy? How?" Kamila turned to face me. She seemed flustered. "She's not faking it if that's what you're insinuating. I can feel her pain when I'm standing next to her. It's disturbing."

"We have a bunch of doctors at our disposal, you know."

Kamila rolled her eyes. "Doctors mean no privacy. Aram will find out. Then her father finds out. She doesn't want anyone to know of this. She's adamant that it's food poisoning."

“Do you believe her?”

“I want to,” Kamila stated, sighing. The blue bird let out a squeak. Kamila returned to giving it all of her attention. “I told Mandy about the engagement.”

Picking up her cup of coffee, she stirred it. Her long legs were crossed as she sat on the opposite side of the round glass table. Both of our visions were fixed on her wonderful garden. She curated it herself. The water fountain in the middle was the most majestic fountain outside of the palace’s fountains. Plants, trees, and other decorations were spread across her garden.

Kamila’s face dropped when the bird got bored and flew away. She loved animals. She wanted a dog, but it was difficult to get pets in Katantia. A dog would have been her perfect companion. One could say pets were almost illegal. The king didn’t want criticism like ‘pets endangered on sexual Katantia, help us save them’ drawn to us. It was hilarious.

I ran my hand through my hair. Kamila trusted Mandy too much already. Kamila continued, “Don’t tell me not to trust her. She’s not a spy. She’s naïve and innocent. I’ve been around liars all my life. I know the truth when I see it.”

“Aram wouldn’t appreciate our strange wedding to have headlines outside of Katantia,” I argued. Mandy knew. This changed my way of thinking. “She could tell her daddy.”

“I don’t know. Maybe I told her in hopes for her to get the message out. Maybe I had hope for once in my life,” Kamila exclaimed, snapping at me. She took a hefty sip of coffee. Her eyes were glistening again.

I decided to ignore her pleading. We were trying our best. The king wasn’t shy of killing his enemies, even if they were family. Caution was a priority. “Speaking of Aram, we need to tell him about the engagement.”

“I’m scared, Weston,” Kamila told me. Her red hair shone in the sunlight, but fear dominated her body. “I’m fucking terrified of what he’ll do to me and how I’m going to react to it.”

Kamila was vulnerable. I was the only one willing to help. Aris was awfully busy fucking Valentina and half of Katantia. This week he would fuck half of America. There was no doubt about it.

Kamila had been getting abused for years now. We never discussed the filthy details. But I was the one she came to when they had anal for the first time. Kamila needed a doctor to fix her because he had forgotten to train her before using her. It had fucked with me mentally. Distracting myself with the help of my university studies, I didn't leave my room for weeks at the time. Childish, but it had been my way of dealing with Kamila's pain.

Now, I was old enough to go against the king. It was a given fact that he would escalate, but we were stronger together than apart. We had learned that from our past. I said, "We need to tell him before Mandy or anybody else does."

"Mandy won't tell," Kamila assured me. She trusted the girl a lot. I wondered if Mandy had told her about my proposal. "Unfortunately for Valentina, Mandy and I have this thing called friendship going on. I took her to Euphoria. She loved the view."

"Who doesn't," I said. We'd been children when it had opened up. The Queen used to take us up there often.

"Are you going to fuck her?" Kamila asked bluntly.

I took a sip of my coffee. I checked my watch. In fifteen minutes, we had to leave. There was no time to dwell on a virgin foreigner. Shifting in my seat, I responded, "If I want to fuck a girl, I got plenty on speed dial. Hae-won's coming back soon. Charlotte's in town after being in Dubai for a month. Aisha's just recovered from her flu. I get around. Besides, Aram claimed Mandy. It's more complicated than that."

"The king does what he does to me, yet you still plan to marry me," Kamila reminded me, crossing her arms in front of her chest. She had finished drinking her coffee. "You should try a different approach than you're used to. She's not from around here. She won't drop to her knees and offer up her holes for your taking."

“You said it yourself. Mandy’s a foreigner,” I replied. My cup was empty, after all. “If I fuck her, it’ll probably happen one time. She’ll leave like a scared little girl.”

“You underestimate her.” Kamila rose from her seat. I handed her my cup. She reentered her house, disappearing into the kitchen. She couldn’t stand untidiness. She wouldn’t be able to concentrate if she left the cups dirty on her kitchen isle.

I waltzed into Kamila’s living room, plopping down on the sofa. My phone rang.

CHAPTER 17

MANDY



HOLDING MY BREATH, I KNELT DOWN AT THE TOP OF THE stairs to listen in on Weston's conversation downstairs. I'd been on my way back to my bedroom when I heard his voice. I didn't eavesdrop back home; mainly, because our home was so small; the only separate space was the bathroom.

Kamila was in the kitchen. I could hear her do the dishes while humming an old song. The smell of coffee was in the air.

"When are you coming back?" Weston asked. I doubted that there was another person in the house. He must've been talking to his brother. However, I'd never heard him so laid back. In my presence, he seemed tense in front of his brother. I couldn't see his face, but I knew he had a smug expression.

"Yeah, I've been fucking at work. A girl blew me the other day, but she turned out to be a pain in the ass. She drugged a royal guest."

Now I doubted that Aris was on the other end of the line.

I ached in the uncomfortable position I knelt in, but I continued eavesdropping. Weston went on, "She's been sent to a punishment sex house. I put in the word. By the end of her sentence, she'll need facial surgery for her bone structure or something."

Weston chuckled. I shuddered at the sound. Somehow, his chuckle felt even better than seeing Valentina naked. His laughter was an unusual sound. You had to earn it. It was very pleasing to hear. "So it's official then? You're getting an

owner? ... A tattoo? That's serious. Congrats. I assume we can't have a goodbye fuck?"

His laughter distracted me from my pain.

"Weston?" Kamila yelled from the kitchen. "Is everything all right?"

"I'm only on the phone," Weston assured her.

Kamila responded, "Ah, okay."

"That was Kamila," he explained to the person on the phone. "We'll come to your wedding. Now I'm going to have to find a new girl. Charlotte's being strange after her Dubai stay, and Aisha just got a new job at a bank, for fuck's sake. Fuck me and all the clever girls I'm around. I need to start fucking stupid girls... Of course, I'm joking. Thank your husband because I'm going on a search for a new fuck right about now. I'll come over to meet him, no worries. I've got a lot going on with our royal guest. ... No, I'm not getting a real object. It's a lot of responsibility. Yeah, no. I'm not letting you introduce me to none of your friends. Bye, Hae-won. We'll speak soon."

I tripped, falling on my ass. I let out a squeal that the people downstairs heard. Of course.

"What's going on out there?" I heard Kamila ask as I lay on the ground. Then I heard steps coming up the stairs. It wasn't Kamila because she had a lighter step.

"It's Mandy. I'm checking on her," Weston told Kamila. He arrived, staring me down. I crawled away from where I had fallen. I had to collect my thoughts.

"Did Kamila make you lick the floor, or why are you plastered all upon it?" Weston asked, smirking. His deep voice almost scared me to death. He looked the most handsome when he was amused. I enjoyed the delight in his face. The smoothness of his body was attractive to me. Kamila's rescue was on my mind. He would do anything for Kamila. He wasn't the worst man on Katantia.

I felt drunk.

“Why are you not replying to my question?” Weston went from relaxed to worried in the matter of a moment. “Were you drugged?”

Damn these Katantians. They assumed the worst. I had to calm him down. “I just woke up. No, I wasn’t licking the floor. I fell.”

“If you have anything to say to me, say it. I don’t bite. I’ve done it before, but I’m not into blood,” Weston explained. I blushed. My core appreciated his comment a little too much. Had they put something in my water? I wanted Weston to take me to bed. I didn’t feel any guilt. “Kamila and I are going back to work soon, but we should talk sometime.”

“I don’t think there’s anything to say,” I said, rubbing the back of my neck. I wanted Weston gone.

He smirked, testing me with his blue eyes. “There’s a ton to say, don’t you worry. Do you need new batteries? I can call someone.”

“Did Kamila...”

“She doesn’t need to say a thing. I’m quite the observant prince,” he said. Was he sarcastic? His smirk was puzzling.

“There’s nothing to observe.”

“For a barely legal virgin, you have quite the high opinion of yourself,” Weston pointed out. I felt too comfortable around him. I rose from the floor, feeling dizzy as hell.

“I’m twenty years old. I lost my virginity on my seventeenth birthday.” To my now fiancé... I’ve been feeling a pain in my womb ever since.

Weston moved closer to me. I breathed him in. Our eyes locked, but his hands still found their way to my top. “Kamila tells me you’re experiencing problems with your fiancé.”

I nodded.

“You want to add fuel to the fire.”

My heart almost jumped out of my chest. Weston towered above me, yet he made me feel at ease. Like he’d never tell my

secret. He didn't move. I couldn't stand in one place, needing to distract myself from the throbbing pressure between my legs.

I could've foreseen it, but I was blinded by Weston's enigmatic presence.

"Mandy!" Kamila startled me. She appeared at the end of the stairs, climbing up. "What's going on here? Weston?"

Well, that was an unfortunate turn of events.

CHAPTER 18

WESTON



MANDY NEVER APPEARED COMFORTABLE IN KATANTIA, BUT this time around, she seemed wounded, ashamed, and the best of all, horny. I was going to fuck her. I couldn't tell my other girls about her; Mandy was private business.

Yeah, Aram had claimed Mandy. Obviously, she wasn't to have an atrocious time. I had to be careful. I didn't know what her previous experience was. Strategically, I considered what a union, physically and mentally, would mean between the new girl and me.

But Kamila and I had to go back to work. There was no time for a quick fuck in Mandy's bedroom. Besides, I didn't want a quick fuck with Mandy. Fuck. Perhaps I should call the bank Aisha started working at and tell them to give her a day off to fuck me.

"Mandy! What's going on here? Weston?" Kamila ascended the stairs, worry on her face.

It was a successful method to kill my hard-on.

"Nothing really," Mandy began apologetically. "We were just—"

"Oh, please," Kamila responded. I felt relief when the corners of her mouth lifted.

Whenever Kamila caught me with women, she made sure to throw a judgmental look at us. Mandy was on Kamila's good side. I had to remember that.

It wasn't only Aram who would fuck me up if I messed up with Mandy. Kamila would murder me twice.

Kamila crossed her arms in front of her chest. "Weston, I thought you had more class than this. Are you okay?"

She directed the question at Mandy, who seemed to be in a poor state. Guilt took over Mandy's body. Her thighs were squeezed together as she approached Kamila for a hug. Kamila welcomed her by uncrossing her arms and gently placing them around her. Kamila patted the back of Mandy's head with nurture. Mandy mumbled an apology against Kamila's chest. "...I don't know what's got into me."

"We need to get you to a doctor," Kamila told her gently.

"What's going on?"

"She's not feeling well. That's all. There's no need to alarm Aram," Kamila warned me. Her gaze was directed at me, telling me to back off. "You and I will talk after work."

Mandy immediately shook her head. The new girl uttered, "My stomach... I fell."

Kamila dropped the look of disappointment. She scanned us, searching for a reason to hate me. She didn't find any. I hadn't hurt her friend. "Weston and you? This isn't a good idea with everything that's going on with your body right now..."

"Are you cockblocking me?" I asked Kamila.

Cheekily, she responded, "Somebody has to keep that dick of yours in check."

"It's my fault," Mandy replied cheekily. I could hear the tremors in her voice. I felt worry in my bewildered thoughts when I should've been pissed off at her statement. "I need to get a grip."

Kamila smiled. "You'll be leaving soon. I don't want things to escalate prematurely."

Mandy's eyes popped open. "I know. I'll do better."

The new girl was a lost cause.

Kamila getting between whatever was happening with Mandy changed my perspective on things. If Kamila took Mandy under her protection, she was to be protected by me, too. I couldn't do much about Aram, but I could sweeten Kamila's life in other ways.

We ended up downstairs in Kamila's living room. There were a couple of minutes left before we had to go back to work.

My eyes scanned Mandy for signs. She scooted close to Kamila and distanced her body from mine.

Our connection was still present. Mandy's eyes searched for mine. Whenever we found each other, she looked away shyly.

Mandy asked, "You said you'd have to pretend in front of the king. Doesn't he know about your engagement yet?"

"We plan on telling him soon," I responded quickly. Both of the women's heads turned toward me. Neither of them expected my participation in the conversation.

Kamila added, "You must understand that we can't walk up to him and tell him that we're getting married. Aram might go crazy on us. The entire country will go nuts once they find out!"

Mandy had to process what Kamila told her. Once again, she glanced at me. Mandy suddenly suggested, "I should be there with you when you tell him."

She didn't hesitate to add, "The king doesn't want me to see the bad side of Katantia. Maybe he'll spare you if I'm around."

The girl surprised me. Kamila and I shared a quick moment of thought until we agreed to go through with Mandy's plan. She was the only person on this island that Aram wouldn't dare to hurt. The Spencer Rawlins deal was too important.

Just like me, Kamila still had doubts. "Are you sure you want to do this? I wouldn't suggest poking the bear."

“You just saw in a strange predicament in your hallway. You didn’t kick me out,” Mandy uttered, tilting her head. “I have to repay you for that.”

“Nonsense. You only do this if you really want to. We’ll find another way. We’ve survived for this long. We’ll survive a bit longer.” Kamila’s red hair graced her shoulders now. It was gradually drying.

Mandy was steadfast. “I’m in.”



AFTER WORK, KAMILA AND I PICKED UP MANDY. WHAT DID she do in Kamila’s home all day? Clean up? Where the fuck was Valentina, and why wasn’t she spending time with the new girl?

Together, Kamila, our guest, and I walked over to the palace. Travis had waved us in a minute ago. We were headed for Aram’s office on the fifth floor.

Kamila led the way. Mandy followed her friend while I watched them both from behind.

Mandy’s curves were stealing a lot of my attention, so I distracted myself by gawking at the chandeliers on the ceiling. Kamila rolled her eyes when she realized what I was doing.

The staff let us into Aram’s office, where he welcomed us appropriately. He didn’t make out with Kamila. He simply kissed her on the cheek, patted me on the back, and shook Mandy’s hand.

The women were told to sit down by his desk while I was free to pace around his office.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of you three here?” Aram asked. He wore a smile, but it wasn’t sincere. The king rarely smiled from his heart.

Mandy took over. I was dumbfounded by her confidence. “Sir, I want to thank you for your generous hospitality. I’m truly grateful.”

Kamila didn't want to feel inferior next to Aram, but she did. I saw the way she submissively lowered her gaze around him.

Mandy's posture was firm and open. The new girl had a lot of balls to stand around the king like that. Katantian ways declared that a woman had to bow in front of the king. Inertly, I was amused by her stance.

"Now, answer my question, you three. I doubt that you came here to waste my time with declarations of gratitude." For a moment, I thought he finally allowed Mandy to see his truth. Frankly, he only wanted... Never mind.

I had enough. I announced, "Kamila and I are getting married. It's over. She'll become my object."

Aram's face went blank. I felt the deep satisfaction that I'd craved for years. Speechless, he froze in his seat. I felt like I breathed victory when, in reality, it was just the blackberry scent the women carried around.

While I held back my expressions, keeping a neutral face, I saw Kamila shiver. Her eyes were glossy. Her hands were trembling as she stood next to me, petrified. Mandy took her hand in a gesture of support, but Kamila was in too deep. She was anticipating the king's explosion.

After what felt like an eon of silence, Aram finally spoke. Dryly, he uttered, "You two are getting married. You're trying to sabotage our country in the West."

Aram croaked, so he cleared his throat. The king left his seat, approaching me. I could see the anger in his face, red veins threatening to pop. Why weren't they popping? *Combust. Explode. Do us a favor.*

The king attempted to hide it, but I knew him, all of his little quirks. I watched his every expression as he stepped closer to me. His eyes were trained on Kamila, lust dripping from him. His perversion sickened me. I wanted to do smack something. "Are you sure that you want Kamila's used holes? She's almost a whore by the amount of sex she's had. Kamila isn't well, Son."

It took every ounce of self-control that I had built up over the years not to bash his head against his desk. I remembered my gran's words on behavior and appearances. She advised me to keep calm, not to be hotheaded like the king.

“Isn't an experienced woman the best woman in this country?” Mandy asked, trying to soften the blow of Aram's words. She didn't know. She wasn't truly aware of the damage the king could cause.

The seconds that passed were torture. Watching Kamila crumble beside me, I felt like a failure.

I was mentally prepared for his every action except the one I had wished for.

Aram waltzed over to us, halting in front of me. We were almost the same height, but he towered above me with his title and his power. He'd seen right through our charade with Mandy.

When he opened his mouth, I expected venom. “What are you waiting for? Let's have an engagement party. If we ruin our connections to the West, we better do it big. I want every single person on this island to celebrate your happiness. Mandy will go back home, and she'll have so many stories to tell.”

He addressed Mandy. “I want to say goodbye to my favorite object. You need to leave the premises. Weston will accompany you back to Kamila's house.”

“Kamila and I wanted to—” Her confidence was swept away by pure and unadulterated terror. The poor girl knew how to read Aram after all. She had sensed the danger.

Aram's fury was in his eyes. The king didn't need to share words. His face expressed what his mouth couldn't. That brain of his was the reason why hundreds of men and women killed themselves every year after their return from our punishment sex houses. “Weston, take Mandy away. The princess and I have things to discuss. If you don't leave, there'll be consequences.”

I refused to move. I had come here with both women. I would leave with them.

“Take her,” Kamila urged me. Her face showed bravery, but her eyes flooded with fear. “I’ll manage just fine. We’re getting married now.”

Kamila was going to get used by the king. Mandy took my hand, but I still didn’t want to leave Kamila behind. It didn’t help that Mandy kept staring at Kamila, waiting for a sign.

“You need to go,” Kamila warned us. Aram’s reign over her was evident. She didn’t beg or plead to be let go. “We’ll see each other back home.”

Mandy and I exchanged looks. It was a difficult decision. However, I took her out of there before the king decided to lash out on the poor new girl who dared to defy the king.

CHAPTER 19

KAMILA



I GAVE HEROIN A TRY. WE COULD HAVE BEEN BEST FRIENDS. But even I know that heroin doesn't make you pretty. Heroin and I, we didn't click. I needed something that didn't make me look like an addict. I was already ugly for Katantian standards, too tall and cocky.

So, painkillers did it for me. We almost fucked each other to the point of nothingness.

On Katantia, prescribed medication was easier to find. People didn't feel quite as bad when asked to provide me with a cure to the pain I suffered, poor princess.

When Weston caught me passed out on painkillers in my bathtub, he forced me to stop taking them. He watched me closely. He sent every single person who attempted to sell me drugs to Katantian court. I felt terrible for overpopulating our local punishment sex houses.

Weston wanted me to get away from my addictions. He asked me to stay sane. I was far from rational. I had stopped being lucid years ago.

Heroin, cocaine, prescription painkillers... In comparison to him, they were easy to get over. I only took the drugs to forget him in the first place.

My most abominable addiction couldn't be cooked up in a lab or extracted from a plant. Withdrawal symptoms didn't include sweating, vomiting, and irritability, amongst others. Most of these symptoms occurred during the use of the drug.

As much as Weston tried, he failed to save me from the man who ruled not only Katantia but me as well.

We lost the Queen. The Cross family arrived. Felicita and Aram got closer. I felt jealous. Why couldn't Travis keep his wife on a short leash? The King was mine. I was his little girl and his only girl, not in a sexual way, after the Queen's death.

However, he had other plans.

He was my king. I was his princess. I had no idea that Felicita would awaken the monster inside of him. When he started fucking Felicita, his cruelty grew once again. Perhaps it was always there. We just ignored it.

He insulted my clothes as too slutty when I was dressing the same as always. My hair was too blond. Or too blue. It depended on my mood.

I struggled to remember the exact moment that it all began.

I forgot the day the King became Aram Wraith to me. Our first time was blurry. I repress the memories. They're uglier than the monster I face every day. When did I start allowing this to happen? Was it a conscious yes or a manipulated maybe?

My body felt numb every time he was finished with me. I loved the pain, and I welcomed being sore, but I was disgusted by the person doing it to me.

Aram Wraith was such a force that he sent me to the hospital when we started having anal.

I felt shame. Queen Penelope had been in this predicament. Who was I to take her place in the king's bed? I was the silly tall girl. Beloved by the population but not fucked unless it was Aram's dick shoved down my throat. I was surrounded by sex addicts.

Even before the king had claimed me, men were scared of me. I was too big for their taste. Too royal. I had too many men around me with power. There had been one option, but that was over before it even started.

I felt sick of myself most of the time, but I couldn't escape the king. He was unpredictable. I cared about Aris and Weston. I didn't want them to be hurt. I saw what Aram did to those who wronged him. When I misbehaved, he showed me exactly how he could punish Aris and Weston for my actions.

I wanted to end my life at the thought.

I would be long gone and safe, but he would destroy Aris and Weston to prove who had the ultimate power. I already thought of myself as an incompetent and lost human being.

Aris, Weston, and fear of the king weren't the only reasons why I stayed. Not leaving Katantia resulted in a constant fight of right and wrong inside of me.

Aram Wraith had tricked my body into his complete control. I was fully aware of it. It was my fault. My useless brain and my inadequate body were weak.

Do you get the message now? Good. I had to convince you of how fucked up Kamila Ruby really is.

I didn't wear pink because it didn't go with my hair, and you'd never see me in heels unless it was on my terms. No man would ever dare to stand next to me being taller than him.

Guess what? I didn't fucking care that they would feel emasculated. No man ever dared to approach me because I said what was on my mind, doing what I wanted. I didn't care to apply to Katantian social standards outside of the palace.

Stop beating around the bush now, will you?



MANDY LOOKED AT ME LIKE SHE WAS A LOST PUPPY. SHE HAD to leave. Aram wasn't in a good mood. I could feel his fingers twitch the way they did when he was about to spank me. The gleam in his eyes was evil.

Desperately, I urged Weston, "Take her. I'll manage it. We're getting married now."

I wondered why Weston hadn't dragged her out of here yet. I didn't like it, but he was fond of her in one way or another. This wasn't a safe environment. Weston should have escorted her out of here five minutes ago.

They were holding hands. What were they waiting for? I was ready. I would always be...

Weston clenched his free fist. Mandy's knees shook. I gave them a final warning. "You need to go. We'll see each other back home."

If I survived what Aram did to me next...

Reluctantly, they left Aram's office.

"Let's go to our bedroom, Kamila," Aram ordered. He never let his guard down around me. Aram didn't let loose. He was prone to showing his dominance over anything that breathed on this island.

I didn't wait for him to open the door. I opened it myself, leading the way I knew by heart. I turned my head around toward him as I kept walking. "It's not 'our' bedroom. I don't share bedrooms with that whore. It's your fucking bedroom."

"You're the whore, Kamila," Aram rebutted. He made it sound like an honor, but it definitely wasn't, coming from him. "Wasn't your engagement just announced? Weston will take you away from me. You won't be welcome in my bed anymore, whore."

My body filled with hope. "So, you're going to stop fucking me when I marry Weston?"

Aram laughed bitterly. It was a terribly loud laugh. My ears almost hurt. "Until you marry, you're mine. The moment another man owns you on paper, I will stop. You have my word, whore."

Suddenly, my heart bloomed. It would be over soon.

One last fuck. Or two. It didn't matter. The king had already done everything to me. He couldn't do much more.

We reached the king's master bedroom after an excruciatingly short elevator ride. I entered, undressing

routinely.

“Did I tell you to take your clothes off?” Aram asked me.

I shook my head with confidence. Small choices of defiance like that gave me pleasure. I firmly believed he would never chop my head off. Right? He would fuck me all over, but he wouldn't kill me.

I countered, “You don't tell me to breathe either, yet I do. Shut up and get it going.”

“I'll bury my cock in your pussy. Then you'll shut up,” Aram responded, and I shuddered. He took off his blank shirt and his pants. Soon, he was naked just as I was.

Aram didn't have the patience to wait on my first move. His hand roughly grabbed me by my neck, shoving me against the wall. I anticipated his aggression, responding by pulling at his hair when he leaned forward to kiss me. I didn't want his lips on mine. They were dirty. We were dirty.

My neck was about to get as red as my hair. Aram took my breath away. Just a little longer, and I could join the Queen in the backyard, six feet under.

Today Aram was taking it too far. Heaving, I felt a cough coming up and let my hands fall to the sides.

Aram stopped asphyxiating me right before I was about to faint. It took me a moment to recover. My heart almost beat out of my chest, but he kept going. The man whose sperm had created me pulled my hair roughly, turning me around.

“Have you gone weak, old man?” I teased him, loving the fight. I didn't even register that he shoved me against the wall. I'd shut down mentally. “Where's your cock? Are you scared of your son, old man? He will own me soon!”

Weston would never own me, but I needed Aram to know that his games would find an end soon. The king almost tore my red hair off my scalp. I screamed at the pain.

“Don't talk of my sons when I'm fucking you,” Aram demanded. My head was turned to the side.

I laughed halfheartedly. My throat was still recovering from the lack of breath. “You aren’t fucking me at the moment.”

That was all it took. Aram shoved his cock so far up my orifice that I saw stars. I counted each star, patiently. I envisioned my wedding dress, the crown on top of my head. It would be over soon. *This is a job, Kamila. Finish on time. Go home.*

I positively believed that I broke a part of my vocal cords, reacting to his filthy touch.

“Do you feel that, whore?” His arm was pushing my neck against the wall, making it impossible to shift my gaze away from him.

I felt him all right. The tears were ready to fall, but I didn’t let him see them. Nobody sees Kamila cry. Not even Aram Wraith.

“I don’t. What is it?” I smirked at him. Aram’s hands returned to my hurt neck. His fingers surrounded my skin like thousands of snakes. He took my breath away once again. He knew exactly how to do it. Asphyxiation play was a favorite treat of his.

Felicita and I had granted him a lot of practice.

The king liked playing God, deciding on who got to die, and who didn’t.

Aram’s hands left my neck. I felt a slap. Then his thrusting began.

He didn’t dominate me; my self-hatred did. I despised my body in his presence. I wanted to crush it, break it, and burn it. I didn’t want to be in my skin.

Aram felt up my breasts. He fondled them until he squeezed and pinched them. I shrieked. He enjoyed it, and I treated it like a chore.

The king penetrated my pussy like it was his final time ever doing it. Perhaps it was.

“You’ll get my come inside of your pussy,” Aram warned me, his penetration reaching depths that I didn’t know I possessed. “You’ll walk back home, dripping in it. I want Weston and that skank to see you bruised and thoroughly fucked, do you understand?”

He finished his sentence with a sinfully rough thrust.

I replied, “You’re too ancient to come. Fuck you, old man.”

Aram lived for my insults. I lived to rebel. He sank into my folds a couple more times, one quicker than the other. He cursed the gods that brought me unto this world. “... Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. I can’t take it.”

I already felt sore. He had fucked me without preparing me at all. I had just showered. Now I needed to do it all over again. The sweat on my skin wasn’t going to feel as good once we finished having sex.

Aram probed me with his cock. I craved it. I occasionally felt his balls against my clit and squirmed, biting my lip. My moans and his grunts were loud enough to send everybody home.

After one final breach, he emptied himself.

Like a used doll, I fell to the floor when he removed himself from me. I hadn’t paid any attention to my soft knees.

Usually, he ended it with a kiss. I hated it. Today there was no kiss. The king yelled, “Get out.”

I put my clothes on and left his room.



ON MY WAY OUT OF THE PALACE, I RAN INTO TRAVIS CROSS. He had gotten off work, offering to help me get home. Together, we walked back to our houses past the curious gazes of the guards.

“What did he do today?” Travis asked. He always wanted to know. I would mistake him for a voyageur if I didn’t know

any better.

I told him the details. There was no threesome with his wife today. Just a fucked up announcement, and angry come in my belly.

My clothes would need to get washed. I felt wetness in the junction of my thighs.

“Weston and you?” Travis was shocked. It wasn’t what he wanted. I considered him a friend, but his loyalty lay with his wife, even if she cheated on him on a daily basis.

“Yeah. It’s about time.” I held on to Travis as we stumbled toward my home. “It’s getting to my head. He could have killed me today. I would’ve had his cock inside of me while I left this world. The thought is insulting.”

Travis listened to what I said, always. He didn’t react to it. He didn’t get off on my pain. He wasn’t the king. Valentina’s father was as emasculated as one could be on Katantia.

“This will affect Felicita, won’t it?” Travis asked rhetorically. The sadness that coated his voice tantalized me.

“Yeah, it will,” I told him. Sometimes, he was a pathetic loser that annoyed the fuck out of me. “Get it together. You have lost your wife.”

“You managed to leave,” Travis countered. In his head, there was hope for his wife. Why did he want her to come back to him? Was he that much of a fool? Why couldn’t he be true to himself?

I scoffed. “I know what’s wrong with me. Excuse my language, but your wife became his bimbo the day she sold me out to him. I was right there. She could have stopped it when he asked her, I’m sure. But she said, and I quote, ‘fuck Kamila, please.’ I’m screwed up. I’ve been trying to get away from him for ages. I’m finally close. Feli-bitch-cita isn’t going to ruin it for me.”

Travis went silent.

One of these days, I said to myself, one of these days, everything was going to find a natural order. I’d find myself

and stop running around getting fucked by kings...

CHAPTER 20

KAMILA

SIXTEEN YEARS OLD



“ABOOOOOOVE! I’M NOT THAT...” I LET THE CROWD FINISH the song for me. I dropped the karaoke mic. I bowed in front of my admirers, chuckling all the way. They cheered and screamed my name like I was the girl who sang the song. I wasn’t Britney. Reeking of alcohol and cigarettes with smudged makeup and a tiny dress, I was just a regular homeschooled princess on a rebellious path—the Princess of Katantia, heir apparent of a kingdom that the first King had built.

“Babe, you’re smoking hot when you’re on that stage,” Colton commented as I jumped down from the jolted tables these teens called a stage. If I were hosting this party, the Queen would make sure I had the biggest and brightest stage to shine on.

But I wasn’t hosting any party. I never did.

Parties were the king and the queen’s thing. Weston, Aris, and I weren’t invited. Whenever there was an event, our nannies ushered us away to the newly built houses outside the palace. The Queen said Weston, Aris, and I would get one each. I already called dibs on the one closest to the palace. Apart from being the prettiest, I sensed the potential of a magnificent garden with all sorts

of birds flying around. Perhaps a dog to guard my little kingdom wouldn’t be too bad either.

Even if the king said that pets would never be a thing in our home country.

“Babe, are you listening? We’re going to the tattoo parlor later. A buddy of mine wants to practice his skills on real skin. Wanna tattoo a little crown on your body? It’d be fitting for a queen,” Colton said, raising his voice above the music and chatter. He was hoping I’d give him the time of day. Colt was a nice guy, five years older than me and taller than the king. He played some sort of sport; basket something? I had no idea. I wasn’t interested in sports. He was gorgeous, too. A blond, gray-eyed madness that would drive any sane girl nuts. Any sane girl would be all over his nuts. But I wasn’t rational. I was the Princess of Katantia. Boys like him didn’t work for me. The king made sure of that. I wasn’t supposed to be out here, partying. The Queen expected me to stay home every day, studying and behaving. I had a lifetime of debauchery ahead; I didn’t need to start this early.

“A crown?” I chuckled. “I’m not getting tattooed, Colt,” I told him. I didn’t need to raise my voice. People heard every syllable without me even trying. We walked out of the crowded area. Strolling into the kitchen, we witnessed a couple making out by the fridge. “Do you have a death wish?”

“You know that I don’t care about that,” Colton replied, smirking. He picked up two plastic cups, grabbing a random bottle from the kitchen isle. He poured our drinks. “I’m leaving for the States soon. I’m gonna play ball. I’m gonna make more cash than any of those lunatics here. Katantia can fuck off!”

I shushed him, taking the drink. “You can’t say those sorts of things in my presence! I’m the princess.”

“I’m well aware.” Why wasn’t his smirk working on me? He was the only guy on the entire island who was even remotely trying to flirt with me. And he was tall. So fucking tall. I downed the contents of the cup without an ounce of fear. I didn’t need to be afraid. I walked with a protective halo around me, my name. If the Queen knew that I drank like that guy in *Leaving Las Vegas*, a movie I’d seen on a VHS tape with Colt in secret, she’d lock me up in the palace’s cellar for the rest of my life. “Can’t wait till you become the queen of this hellhole. You’ll show everyone the way it’s done.”

“I’ll make deals with all the big alcohol brands. Life will become an endless party!” I called out, raising my cup in the air victoriously. The couple making out by the fridge froze. They tilted their heads in our direction, quickly lowering their gazes out of respect. Embarrassed and blushing, they shimmied out of the kitchen in a matter of seconds.

“I’ll never be queen,” I said, pouring myself another drink. I didn’t even know the name. The liquid was brown this time around.

“Says who?”

“Aram Wraith, Aris Wraith, and Weston Wraith.”

“That’s a whole lot of Wraith in one sentence.”

“Exactly. They’re in line before me.”

Colton chuckled, fire blazing in his eyes. “Fuck them. You can be the bitch who makes it happen.”

“If you’re trying to get in my pants, calling me a bitch won’t make it happen,” I warned him playfully. “U.N.I.T.Y.” The song by Queen Latifah started playing in my head. The Queen had gifted me the cassette of her album on my twelfth birthday. I imagined myself playing it while I drove around. The Queen had promised me a car for my sixteenth birthday. We were waiting for it to be delivered all the way from Germany. Girls on Katantia didn’t drive, but I would.

“We both know you’ll never fuck me, K,” Colton stated, sounding sober. He’d dropped his tone. He looked at me with his intense gaze.

“You’re right about that.”

The crowd in the other room called my name, yelling for me to go back to the makeshift stage and entertain them. I was their opium. They were mine.

“You’ve never told me why, though.”

“I’m too young for you,” I lied. If Colt had been the one, age wouldn’t have mattered. The age of consent on Katantia was sixteen. I was the princess. I acted twice my age most of the time. “And you’re leaving to play... Ball?”

Gulping down another cup, I set it on the kitchen isle. Colton hadn't moved, still gazing at me with a hint of lust. I didn't want to accidentally catch a glimpse of his hard-on. He was sporting one. I'd felt it when we'd walked into the kitchen.

"Would you ever leave Katantia?" he asked. I reached for the cup again. I didn't feel dizzy. I felt a little warmer than before. I could take another drink, right? I tested the theory, downing another cup of alcohol. Shit. I'd grabbed the Tequila. Yeah, that got to me. I squeezed my eyes, rolling my lips between my teeth. After a moment of getting used to the bitter taste down my throat, I went back to normal. Only now, I couldn't stand still, swaying on my feet. Colt observed me with fascination in his eyes.

"The king would kill you for that question," I reminded Colt, blinking at him sheepishly.

"And I say fuck the king."

I swayed to the beat as Queen Latifah's song continued. "If I could fuck you, I would."

"You would?" His eyes filled with hope.

"But I'm the princess. I'm supposed to stay pure," I reminded him. I scoffed. Weston and Aris were getting more action than me. Weston hadn't even hit puberty yet. I was pretty sure Aris had slept with half his school at his fifteenth birthday party the other day. I rolled my eyes at the double standard. Boys will be boys... The Queen had taught me the words as early as I could read. "And, unfortunately, you don't do it for me."

"I don't," he repeated. Now, it was time for him to fill his cup. He grabbed the Tequila, but instead of filling his cup, he drank from the bottle.

I twitched watching him. "Ew. That's gross."

"What's gross is green hair on your head. Thank fuck you went with pink today," he slurred, smirking at me with the bottle firmly in his hand.

Commotion built outside. The music was turned down while the chatter went on. It sounded less peaceful, though. I didn't pay attention because I was too disgusted by Colt kissing the bottle.

"You know that I have to drink half a bar to be able to put up with nasty teenagers and all their bacteria. Don't make me have a panic attack while you're trying to seduce me to fuck you," I said, lifting the corner of my mouth. The Queen said I'd been born with all of my father's family's qualities. Charm radiated from me. People naturally gravitated toward me. If I was more petite and less drawn to coloring my hair in rainbow shades, I'd have ten thousand suitors waiting outside the palace.

"Kiss me, K. Just once before I leave." The urgency in his tone spoke to me. I dropped my gaze, meeting the erection I'd felt earlier. Something inside of me wanted to help him out, take care of him, meet his needs. They suited mine, didn't they? I wanted to have my cherry popped as the girls outside kept saying. I was dying to know what the main attraction of my country felt like. Sex. Would I feel more like a woman after I'd done it? What if this was my last chance?

"How far is it to your place?" I asked, my mouth dry. I licked my lips. I could do this. I wasn't having sex, but I was regularly tested like the rest of the palace. Katantia didn't play when it came to diseases. Safe sex was all the rage. Colt was leaving, so there'd be no hard feelings either.

"I'll drive you back to the palace," Colt responded, deflated. "You're drunk."

I shook my head. "I'm as drunk as a Barbie, Colt. You know that stuff doesn't affect me. I drink it like water."

He tilted his head to the side, scanning me to find what the fuck was wrong with me. I took that as an invitation. I lunched forward, planting a gentle kiss on his neck. Pressing myself against him, I felt everything. It sparked something inside of me. I wanted more. I didn't feel anything for Colt, but sex wasn't about feelings. Not on Katantia anyway.

"K, don't."

“But you want it, don’t you? That’s what you’ve wanted for a year. You want to fuck me. You want me to rub my tight body all over your aching cock. You want to fuck the princess before you leave. I’ll grant you that wish. I’m feeling generous,” I said, peppering his neck with more kisses as he let out a groan. Was I too innocent? Fuck. I knew trigonometry, but I didn’t know the other things... The Queen had made sure that the only thing I knew was how to practice safe sex. Not sex in general. Foreplay. During play. Aftercare. All the girls talked about these things, but I had zero knowledge of any of those subjects. I could list all the condom manufacturers instead.

“K, I want to fuck you but not like this. You’ll hate me tomorrow. I don’t want to leave you behind hating me.” The honesty in his voice pulled at my heartstrings, making me forget the tumult outside of the kitchen. It made me want to drop to my knees and free his cock that’s been poking me for so long. I didn’t. As drunk as I was, I knew that consent was a challenging subject for Colt. His older sister had committed suicide after a man at her workplace had raped her. She’d worked in a Hole Store, but that didn’t give anyone the right to take what wasn’t theirs. That man had turned out to be the Mayor of Katantia, a lowlife that the king was buddy-buddy with. He was still mayor while Colt mourned his sister. Colt’s family decided to remove themselves from Katantia because of that. I didn’t blame them one bit.

“I hope you find what you’re looking for, Colt,” I whispered against the skin of his veined neck.

“WHERE THE FUCK IS THE PRINCESS?”

“YOU’LL PAY FOR THIS!”

“KAMILA RUBY, SHOW YOURSELF!”

Fuck. I had been the reason for the uproar outside. Cries and yells made me shake. I didn’t like our palace guards. They were too mean. The king pulled their strings. Their intimidation tactics worked on anyone who had eyes and ears.

Colt pulled me into a hug, lifting me from the floor. He rushed us to the back of the kitchen, where we hid in the

shadow of the fridge. “I can get you out of here.”

“I won’t have you risk your life for me,” I told him, embracing him tighter than before. “You smell like weed and whiskey, you know that? Don’t let no basic bitch touch your dick out there in the States. Give it to a nice girl who would be my friend.”

“Why would you want to be friends with my girlfriend, K?”

“I don’t know. Maybe we could have a threesome when I’m older?” I giggled. He joined me, amused at my dramatic self. “Besides, if I ever leave Katantia, I’m going to need friends. I can’t have a basic bitch blocking you from me.”

“You’re such a drama queen.”

“You haven’t seen nothing yet.” I kissed his cheek, removing myself from the embrace. I took one last glance at him and his smirk. If I had known it would be the last time I’d see Colt, I would’ve stayed in the shadows with him until the storm, aka the king’s guards, had passed.

I strolled out of the kitchen, straightening up and clearing my throat. I knew how to act sober. I’d been doing it for years.

“HEY! I’m over here. Leave them alone!” I yelled at the guards who were on the other end of the place, roaring at innocent drunk kids about my whereabouts. Some guards had pressed up kids against the wall, searching them for drugs and weapons or whatever guards searched for.

The guards dropped everything at the sight of me, stomping over to my side. One of them, the tallest one, grabbed me by my arm. He dragged me outside, where their palace van was waiting for us.

As soon as we stepped inside and the door shut close, I sensed that this wasn’t a regular pickup. The Queen hated me going to parties, but the king didn’t mind. He let me think I was sneaking out of the palace while he had guards trailing me.

“Miss, we have bad news for you.”

“The Queen was found unconscious in her bathtub.”

“She’s been pronounced dead.”

CHAPTER 21

MANDY



KAMILA'S HOME WAS LIFELESS WITHOUT HER. WE ENTERED IT, and I shivered at the thought of what she had to endure now. With my free hand, I caressed my belly, trying to find comfort. Weston didn't think twice about my gesture. He didn't know that I was possibly pregnant.

I needed to get out of here before I started showing.

Fuck. Who was I kidding? My period had played games with me before. I wasn't pregnant. Tests lied sometimes.

"Let's wait in the living room," I told Weston, shifting from one foot to the other. He didn't let go of my hand.

Weston replied, "It's probably going to take long."

"I don't care. I'll wait. I want to talk to Kamila when she comes back," I insisted gently. I approached the sectional sofa and took a seat.

Weston followed my example. Our fingers were still joined. We sat close to each other. Questions burned my brain, but I couldn't find the strength to ask them. It didn't feel right to intrude on the family's privacy.

We didn't talk. We sat there in silence. It didn't take long for me to fall asleep on Weston's chest. It was a comfortable angle that I had never checked out. My father and I weren't that close. Manuel... There were no phone calls, no news, or messages. I wanted to cry, but I wouldn't grant him that reaction. He'd been playing a beta

Spencer in my life for too long. I had one almighty ruler; I didn't need another one.

Once I left Katantia, I'd write an article on it with the sole purpose of selling it. That would get me my own apartment for a couple of months. Perhaps I could cook somewhere to make ends meet. I'd forgiven a lot of things that Manuel had done, but this was going too far. I shared my news with him, news that he had put inside of me. All he did was ignore me. I was done being his punching bag.

I woke up with a caress of my hair. I was using Weston's lap as my pillow. The junction between my thighs had a couple of remarks to make about that. Cheater. Whore. Horny bitch.

Weston's gentle fingers were exploring my head. He noticed that my eyes opened. He lessened his movements. He informed me, "Kamila's here. She came in late. We missed her."

I rose from his hold and looked around. The sun was up. I panicked.

"But I... Is she asleep?" I asked, running my fingers through my hair. I felt like yawning. I considered keeping my mouth shut because I hadn't brushed my teeth. He was a spoiled man. Every girl was perfect around him. I simply hoped he wouldn't embarrass me by pointing out my bad breath.

Father had made sure to let me know that I was worthless and ugly. Men like him or Weston didn't want my imperfections. *Stop. Stop. Stop.* Their brainwashing wouldn't work on me anymore.

I noticed the smartphone on the coffee table. It was smaller than the ones I knew. I figured they were easy to hide in pockets. Weston casually replied, "I don't know. She wrote me a message around midnight that said she was fine and in her bedroom. We should check on her."

This time around, Weston hurried ahead. He did it so masterfully that I was almost left behind. My gaze was too

distracted by him.

I got myself together, following him.

When he knocked on Kamila's door, he and I exchanged looks. We were on edge. I thought that all men in Katantia were monsters. Weston appeared like a monster, cruel and with his mind set on one thing only. There was more to him as I was beginning to discover.

"Come in!" Kamila yelled. She sounded wide awake. Weston opened the door to a sunlit room. The windows were open. The wind blew the curtains left and right. The humidity didn't allow for the cold to win.

Kamila jumped up from her bed, fully clothed. It was too hot for a turtleneck, but she rocked it spotlessly. She had been sitting on its made covers. Her face looked freshened up.

I searched for bruises on her visible skin, but I failed to find any. My eyes fell on Weston, who was doing the exact same thing as me.

Kamila noticed we were scanning her. She waved her hands in front of her face. "I'm right here, guys. Did I interrupt you two lovebirds from your lovemaking downstairs?"

The corner of Weston's mouth lifted. "She's not fucking me. You made sure of that, big sis. You should've woken us up when you came home."

I twitched at his tone. He sounded convinced that we'd never... I shouldn't consider the option.

Kamila dismissed yesterday's topic. "I'm fine. I was fine yesterday, too. Aram didn't do anything new. Speaking of Aram," Kamila added. She seemed full of glee. I was utterly confused. "Travis said you need to go to the palace and make the first preparations for the engagement party."

It was inappropriate and fully possessive, but I immediately asked, "Why him?"

"I know who we'll invite," Weston answered. He addressed Kamila. "Aram's sending you out to do the work alone today, isn't he?"

Kamila nodded. “I couldn’t care less. Aram’s mad. Aris is screwing American chicks as we speak. We’re getting married. Mandy slept on your lap. We’re a modern family, Weston. We should be celebrating.”

The smile on her face told me a thousand stories. It held relief. She was happy. Kamila seemed relaxed.

Weston hugged Kamila goodbye. I got a hug as well but also a parting statement that only I could hear. “I’ll see you around, Mandy Rawlins. Bring a date to my engagement party, or else it won’t go unnoticed that you only came to eye-fuck me.”

My core wanted him to take me to my room and fuck me. He knew precisely how. We were adults. Why did we need to hide behind excuses? Wait, I was the one piling up excuses. He simply wanted to fuck.

I responded with a simple nod. Weston left the room. I gazed at the spot he had occupied previously. Kamila noticed how I stared after him. “What did he say?”

“I need a date for your engagement party,” I informed her.

She laughed. “Weston really doesn’t seem to remember that you have a fiancé back home.”

“I think my own fiancé has forgotten that he’s my fiancé,” I told Kamila, rubbing the back of my neck. I had spent my entire life being my father’s pawn. Seeing Kamila and the king, I realized that my father’s abuse had been mild in comparison. However, it didn’t diminish his cruelty. He’d send his only daughter out here, to be surrounded by sex-obsessed lunatics. At the same time, he worked out another way to make nasty business deals with them.

Kamila’s eyes were directed at my belly. “What are we going to about that? I can arrange a secret doctor’s appointment. It won’t be pleasant, but I can make sure it stays between us.”

“I’m afraid to find out the truth,” I told her. I shook my head. “I don’t want to endanger you. It’s for three months. If I start throwing up uncontrollably, we’ll know.”

“You deserve the best care, Mandy,” Kamila responded, approached me. She pulled me into a hug. I was this close to tears. I wanted to sob against her chest. She was strong. She didn’t let her father end her.

I had lost the fight to my own father years ago.

“I’ll beg Ryan to take me to your party. He’ll do it as a favor, for old times’ sake,” I informed her, changing the topic. She nodded.

The red-haired woman smirked. “I disagree with your date of choice, young lady. Valentina’s brother will beg you by the end of your question. He’s desperate for pussy, excuse my language. Are you sure?”

“He’s an old friend. I’m sure it won’t mean anything to him.”

“You need to stop this victimization of yours,” Kamila scolded me. She sounded sincere. “I hate leaving you to the Cross family.”

“I can’t help that I know this family. We grew up together. Valentina and I used to be best friends. I’ll ask Ryan, and I’ll walk back home. I won’t do anything stupid,” I assured my own personal princess.

Kamila wasn’t entirely satisfied, but she gave in.



THE CROSS PARENTS WEREN’T AT HOME WHEN I KNOCKED ON their door. From what I remembered, they didn’t have any staff like Kamila. I waited on somebody to respond to my knocking.

A couple of moments later, Ryan appeared.

“Mandy?” he asked. His hair was disheveled. His eyes were sleepy. He looked like he had got out of bed. He wore shorts without a T-shirt, but I didn’t glance at him that way. He didn’t interest me like that. “What are you doing here? Come in.”

I stepped inside. Ryan led me into the kitchen, where he started making his morning coffee. “Do you want some?”

My stomach started to ache, so I declined. I was fine with water.

“I’m surprised that you’re still here,” Ryan revealed. His hand reached for the sugar. I lost count of how much sugar he poured into his cup. “I thought you’d leave after one night.”

“I’m more resilient than people make me out to be,” I replied, keeping my distance from him. I stuck by the doorframe.

“You should leave this country. It’s not for you,” Ryan told me. His gaze was fixed on me, studying me for whatever reason. “You’re living the good life here. If you only took a step outside, you’d see how wicked this place is.”

Confident, I responded, “Trust me, I already know. I see how all of you behave, turning a blind eye to what Aram does to your mom and to Kamila.”

“We all do things we’re not proud of.”

That I was sure of. Weston found his way into my thoughts. I wondered what he’d think of Ryan being my date to the engagement party. “I came here to ask you for a favor.”

He poured his coffee into the cup full of sugar. Then he stirred it. “Go ahead.”

“I don’t know if you’ve heard—”

“Yes, I have. I live right next to the palace,” he interrupted me. “What favor do you want?”

“I have a fiancé at home. I don’t want to be bothered at the event. I need a date. Could you please accompany me?” I asked, my heart pounding right out of my chest. I didn’t want him to be my date. I wanted Weston.

“Okay.” His reply was curt and calm.

“That’s all?”

“If we’re going to do this, I want you to agree to one thing,” he said. He kept stirring his coffee.

“I’m all ears.”

“I won’t touch you.” He inhaled. “But I think you need to see the real Katantia. I’ll take you out of here. You need an outfit for the engagement party. We’ll go through it all as if you were my object. If that doesn’t make you leave now that you can, I don’t know what will.”

“It’s not that easy. I made a commitment. I have a contract. My visa was paid for,” I told him. I considered his request. It didn’t seem like an activity I’d enjoy, but it would help my research. I had to think about my future. If there was a baby inside of me, I had to provide for it. Writing an article about Katantia was the first step in that direction. “I’ll do what you ask of me. Don’t take it too far, though.”

“There’s no safeword on Katantia, Mandy.” The grin on his face was harsh. “You’d do well to remember that.”

CHAPTER 22

WESTON



MY OLDER BROTHER HAD A LOOK OF ASTONISHMENT IN HIS tired eyes. “So you really went and did it?”

I nodded. Aris had found me in my office at the palace on the fourth floor. My brother and I rarely worked from here. We went to meetings outside. Our offices could have been inhabited by any of the king’s employees. They were that impersonal.

Aris kept yawning. He looked exhausted. His fatigue might have resulted from his sudden return to Katantia or of the meaningless sex he had back in America that had him up all night.

There was no tie in his outfit, and he was wearing jeans. A royal had come out of the airport wearing jeans. I was absolutely sure that Aram forced him to come back this morning. Aris could barely keep his head straight.

“How did it go?” I asked my brother. I sipped on my coffee carefully. There were lists of names on the desk. I was already bored at the thought of having to go through them.

Rubbing his eyes, Aris replied, “Not as disastrous as here. I secured seventy-five percent of the investments. I would have got the other twenty-five percent, but you announced your engagement to the king, and all hell broke loose. ”

“It was the right time,” I defended myself.

“You’re taking away his most prized piece, brother,” Aris reminded me. There was a tiny moment in which I believed he

genuinely cared for something other than his dick. “There’s never a right time for that.”

We planned a quick wedding. We would prefer to do it right away, but Aram disagreed. He demanded a public announcement and an engagement party.

The guest list had to be ready soon. The invitations would go out today. Tomorrow, the palace would host the engagement party.

So far, it didn’t look like Aram was going to step in between and ruin everything. He had his requirements. He almost had his guards beat me up every time we faced each other, but he hadn’t yet sent me to a punishment sex house.

Even if he tried to get me away from Kamila and Mandy now, he would fail. I would find my way back and end it all.

My phone vibrated in my pocket, but I kept it hidden. Aris didn’t notice I had received a message. I loved my brother, but some secrets weren’t his to know.

“Are you thinking about the hell he’s going to give you once you two are married?” Aris asked, amused at my thoughtfulness.

“It can’t be worse than what you got after your wedding,” I responded. If Aram planned to work us to death with publicity stunts, he could do it, for all I cared. That would mean Kamila would be distracted and away from his presence.

“At least I wasn’t idiotic enough to announce my wedding. I just did it.” Kamila wasn’t the only one who he infuriated with the wedding to Valentina. The king had had plans concerning Aris’s future object. Valentina smashed them all. Aris hated remembering that time past his wedding because he suffered a lot. Aram had made sure of it. Aris didn’t get any pussy for three entire months. My brother changed the subject. “I met with Mandy’s dad.”

I sat back in my desk chair, letting the information sink in. “Why?”

“It was on the agenda,” Aris revealed. Before I could ask more questions, he continued on his own. “It’s not like we

talked on the phone while I was out there. I wasn't supposed to tell you."

"And what did you talk to him about?"

"Investments, of course," my brother responded. I wanted to punch his goddamn nose. "He also had a couple of words about my wife. I did my best to ignore them. However, there was something else that he said that animated my interest."

I rolled my eyes. Aris was a dick today with his secrecy.

"He said that you impregnated his daughter," my brother informed me, causing me to think about every encounter I'd had with the new girl.

"What the fuck is that about? I haven't even touched her. She's barely been here for two weeks." I wasn't panicking. This was my anger speaking. We knew that Mandy's father resembled ours in many ways, both evil motherfuckers with the worst intentions. I hadn't expected him to think so low of his engaged daughter.

Aris revealed, "He said that you tainted his daughter. He doesn't want her back."

"She sure as hell can't stay here if she's really pregnant." I was halfway failing Kamila. I didn't need to add Mandy to the list. My mind ran through scenarios. "She needs to leave before Aram finds out."

"I doubt that Spencer Rawlins kept it a secret from the king," Aris pointed out. "They're the best of buddies. What I want to know is why he hasn't said anything about it."

"He's trying to play it cool. He wants us to feel safe." Fuck. We were anything but safe at any point in our lives. We were surrounded by people who could poison us if the king demanded it. I continued, "This stays between us. Not even Valentina is allowed to know. Aris, I fucking mean it."

"I get it," Aris responded. He ran a hand through his hair. "Now that I've seen her father face-to-face, I get why she is the way she is, all shy and shit. He's worse than Aram, minus the Kamila part. The type of work he's involved with... It's slavery. He doesn't provide for anyone but himself. He's a

criminal, but everything he does is legal. It's disgusting how much power he has. It makes Katantia look like a playground. He has twenty bodyguards around him everywhere he goes. I'm surprised he sent his daughter out here alone."

I exhaled. Mandy didn't behave like the pampered daughter of a megalomaniac criminal. She was down to earth, innocent, and, most of all, liked by Kamila. They had formed their own sort of sisterhood.

"Get Valentina in line," I demanded from my brother. "We need to be united, now more than ever. This engagement party needs to provide the best distraction for us to find a way to get Mandy out of here. She isn't local. She won't accept it when Aram takes away her baby for the greater good of Katantia."

We sat there in silence, hearing the wind blow outside. A storm was coming. We didn't have many of those on this land. Usually, our seasons went by without any extremes. The wind growled outside, keeping me on edge.

"Who is coming to the festivities?" Aris asked after a while.

"People we do business with," I told my brother, setting aside my coffee. We had no family. Everyone was dead. That was what Aram advocated.

Half a million people lived here, but we, of course, only knew the top one percent. It was impossible to invite around five thousand people to the wedding. Not even the British Royals pulled that off.

"I think you shouldn't invite the Jamesons," Aris suggested. He was reading one of the lists on the desk. My brother had grabbed the one with the least favorable guests. "Do you remember that stunt they pulled last year?"

We were perfect at ignoring the storm that was brewing. You could kill somebody in our presence. We wouldn't flinch.

"I do," I told my brother. One of the Jameson daughters attended a public party that we co-hosted. She slept with Aris and faked a pregnancy. Babies were worth more when they

were real. Aram still held a grudge against them for embarrassing us publicly. “How many are there on your list?”

“The king has a thousand people he doesn’t want at your wedding,” Aris informed me, after turning the document around and seeing the other half of the list. The family names and the number of family members were printed out. “That gives us another four thousand to look at.”

Aram could have given this job to one of his advisors, but he preferred punishing his sons with this nonsense.

Two hours later, Aris’s eyes were red. He was ready to go to bed. “You should have an after-party, man. Your engagement party is going to be full of social shit. It’ll be boring.”

I had a couple of ideas. “I’ll tell Travis to prepare a standard after party for the boring people and a masks-only nude after-party for the likes of you. Does that sound good to your dick? Will that keep your wife in check?”

A smile appeared on Aris’s face. His eyes gleamed. “Fuck, yeah. Valentina and I will celebrate your engagement by fucking in front of everybody. You’ll notice us. We’ll be the center of all the attention.”

“You should save your energy,” I suggested, thinking of the schedule ahead.

Aris couldn’t disagree. But he would still fuck Valentina publicly. He was in for the sex.



CAMERAS AND LIGHTS WERE SET UP IN THE ENTRANCE HALL. Behind us, the impressive two-sided staircase shone in diamonds and gold. Everything was polished and shiny, from the chandelier to the staff’s shoes. It was time for our engagement announcement. The speech had been carefully crafted by the king’s closest advisors.

My entire family was here, pampered by stylists and makeup artists. We were about to unleash the greatest scandal

ever since Kamila and the king... *Don't even go there.*

The king was in the middle of it all, sitting on one of his majestic thrones. Kamila stood by his left side with me. Valentina and Aris were on his right.

It was a miracle that they were still fully clothed.

Aram grabbed Kamila's butt possessively. My nerves were on edge. I had studied our guest list for hours. I had no patience left for bullshit. Kamila signaled me to calm down.

I hated what Aram did to Kamila.

Our appearances were perfected, so the staff removed itself from our fake stage. The cameras started rolling. We read the speech from a teleprompter like a script. I noticed the awe in the staff's faces while we spoke.

When our announcement was over, Valentina and Aris started making out. The camera crew packed up their set and gradually left the hall. They hadn't expected our engagement. I felt their eyes on my back as they left. They were gossiping amongst each other about Kamila and me.

Aram addressed me. "You two will pay for what you did."

"We know," Kamila uttered, crossing her arms in front of her chest. Aram stared at her chest like it was the most normal thing to do. I wanted to punch the king. Scandalous.

"I'm disappointed in you," Aram revealed. What a shocker. "My eldest and my youngest are the greatest disgraces I have ever faced."

"Valentina is on your dick-hopping list now, isn't she?" Kamila uttered sassily. I felt uncomfortable when she talked to him like that. I enjoyed it, but I was still worried about Kamila. She never budged.

"Aris's wife has proven herself right," Aram lied. Valentina was nowhere near 'right.' She was a slut. That was all Valentina was. The only work she ever did was extract semen from my brother's cock.

"Are you talking about me?" Valentina jumped into our conversation. She was grinning from ear to ear. She knew that

her time as the lowest of the low was over. Kamila and I were about to replace her.

Aris's wife stepped close to the king, and he caressed her head. Valentina allowed it. Aram's hand went lower when he said, "Yes, we were. Where have you left your lovely friend?"

Aris balled his fists, but he knew we couldn't do anything.

"She's with my brother, sir," Valentina announced. I felt a lump in my throat. Mandy had done it. She found a date for my engagement party. I was grateful, somehow. It meant I wouldn't constantly think of fucking her. Maybe I would, for the sake of it.

I could get her alone and fuck her after my engagement party... Could virgins have sex like that? I should ask somebody who knew. Fuck. I couldn't even crack a virgin joke anymore. There was a possibility of her having another man's baby growing inside of her.

That bolted me awake.

Aris joined in. Makeup was covering his tired face, but his eyes were still red. "Ryan's probably trying to fuck the poor girl as we speak."

"He better not," Aram said. The king hadn't moved from his seat. Travis was discussing money with one of the cameramen. "My name's on that girl. Ryan isn't royal. He will get punished if he steps out of line with her."

Travis interrupted our informative conversation, addressing the king, "There are more than twenty people on the line to talk to you. We better get going."

Aram nodded, gracefully departing his throne without saying goodbye. The king was genuinely furious, but I was done caring.

Kamila observed Aris and Valentina with disgust. "What did you do in America?"

Kamila loved setting traps for Aris. He had learned not to fall for them. Valentina was his object, but she still held the key to her cookie jar. How retro did that sound?

“This and that. A little bit of everything,” Aris replied.

The tall red-haired woman scoffed. “You do look like you did everything and everyone. I hope your girl can keep up. She’s certainly been keeping her options open while you were gone.”

Aris laughed like he knew precisely what Kamila meant. “It would’ve been incredible to get Mandy to have sex with us. The little bitch declined. Vale says she’ll stay a virgin forever.”

This charade was growing old.

The two lovers embraced, locking lips. Kamila wore her pouting face. She was thoroughly disgusted. Mandy was her friend.

Mandy was... the girl I wanted to fuck. I knew that. It was nothing more. Just a fuck. Right?

“Let’s go. I can’t take this,” Kamila uttered, offering her hand. “If I wanted to watch cheap amateur porn, I’d go to OnlyFans, dammit.”

She stomped away. I followed her.

Now I was one step closer to the end.

CHAPTER 23

MANDY



AFTER RYAN ASKED ME TO TAKE OFF MY RING, HE AND I HIT the stores. The absence of my ring hurt me, but Manuel's lack of contact hurt me more. He had abandoned me.

It was overwhelming to feel so alone. Ryan wasn't helping. When Kamila had taken me shopping, we were treated with respect. With Ryan? Only the man was treated with respect. They assumed I was his object. We visited less luxurious stores than the ones I had seen with Kamila. The ones Ryan took me to were more subtle, cheap, and less flashy. We entered a boutique that had everything, from shoes to jackets and panties.

"What are you looking for, sir?" A short-haired blond woman approached us. She scanned my body with a judging look on her face. She was one of many. The other employees studied me as well.

"Kamila has invited us to her engagement party," Ryan bragged. I really didn't like his attitude. He was playing his role too well. I was acting like a spoiled kid. "I want your help with her outfit."

"Sir, of course! You're Mrs. Valentina Wraith's brother, aren't you? You look even more handsome up close. My name is Tatiana, by the way," she said, offering her hand for a handshake. He declined. She was flirting with Ryan, but he wasn't getting the signs.

"I want something to show off her ass and tits," Ryan instructed Tatiana. I gasped. The woman didn't flinch at the

crude remark. I almost lost it, but both of them were fine. “Something my sister would wear but even sluttier. Dress, shoes, and jewelry. Everybody is going to be watching us. She’s the foreigner the palace has been hosting.”

Ryan was taking his role in this game seriously. Tatiana nodded. “I know your sister so well. She used to shop all of her clothes from our store, but now she only gets her stripper heels from here. I’ll find you the perfect outfit!”

No wonder Kamila avoided coming here with me. I interrupted their conversation. “I’d like a say if you don’t mind.”

“You don’t get a say,” Tatiana told me. She snapped real fast. “Mr. Cross chooses. He knows what’s best for your filthy fat body.”

I swallowed. I felt numb. I had to stay professional. I couldn’t help the flashing images of all the times my father had called me fat in my mind. They were the clearest childhood memories after my mother’s death. Of course, Ryan didn’t say a word. That hurt.

Tatiana disappeared into another room that we, as customers, didn’t have access to.

Ryan leaned into me. “Get used to it if you want to stay on this island.”

I shook my head, attempting to free myself from the miserable thoughts, but it wasn’t working. I felt suffocated.

Before we could have a decent conversation, the employees turned up the volume of a TV that I hadn’t even registered. The women who worked here were glued to either their phones or the TV. The announcement was being made. I swallowed.

Ryan’s eyes were fixated on me. He wasn’t seeing me through like Weston did. There was more in his expression, a dark sense of jealousy.

His sister and the entire royal family were live on the TV screen, but he stared at my chest like he had never seen a woman before in his life. I felt repulsed by him.

Unlike his sister, honey-haired Ryan was thin as a bone. Valentina looked like her dad with dark eyes and dark hair, but Ryan seemed like he had jumped out of a Hollister ad. He didn't have a Mediterranean touch to him.

His looks were the least of my worries. I kept asking myself why I was even here.

I should have been behind the scenes of the announcement set. Everybody was there. But no, I decided to go on a date with Ryan, to prepare my cover for the engagement party.

Kamila stole the show with her beautiful red hair and extravagant raven black dress. Valentina wore nude, but she was so far in the background of the shot that only her curves were really showing.

I avoided the hideous show Kamila and Weston gave to their audience. I couldn't stomach seeing them be this close to each other. Weston's appearance never ceased to be polished, but he had upped the scale for his engagement.

Before the drool could come down my chin, Ryan said, "Do you mind wiping that expression off your face? Tatiana will think you're a whore for the royals if she comes back and finds you gawking at the television like this."

"You're the man. Why is her opinion relevant?" I replied, caught up in the images on the television. Kamila and Weston were hand in hand, entertaining each other and making their engagement look real. Something twisted in my stomach.

I had a fiancé back home who hadn't talked to me in days. Manuel's absence was messing with my head. After my father, he'd been my anchor. He'd done his best to drown me in the ocean.

Not having him in my life would destroy me. I was nothing... That was precisely what my father had taught me. Depending on a man to take care of me was my goal because I was a nobody. There was nothing remotely interesting about me except for my father's money.

The royals were nothing new. They were like everybody else, using me for their benefit.

Tilting my head, I took in Ryan. He stood there, leaning against black leather jackets and observing me while I gawked at the royals on the television.

“I hate my father,” I blurted out, sighing.

He smirked. “I hate him, too. How he managed to produce you as his daughter, I don’t know.”

I was taken aback by his comment, my eyes widening.

“Don’t look at me like that. I have nothing to gain from you. I’m just stating facts. There’s nothing remotely evil about you.” His eyes wandered over my body. I didn’t feel an inch of what I felt when Weston’s eyes were on me. “You’re a little lost, that’s all. He’s fucked with your head like Aram’s fucked with Kamila’s.”

“I think our situations are a little different,” I replied swiftly. I shivered at the thought of Spencer touching me like Aram touched and abused Kamila. That hadn’t happened. You wouldn’t get away with that sort of thing back home.

“I hope that being in Katantia has opened up your eyes as to what you need to change in your life,” he said, waving at the staff. One of the women noticed, nodding.

We didn’t have all day was what his gesture said. “I don’t mean sex. You know that.”

“Why does everyone think you’re—”

He interrupted me, “A pussy? Because I let them. I’ve got no interest in entertaining friendship with the royals. They have fucked up my family.” He cleared his throat, stepping forward. He was a little too close to me.

Out of breath, Tatiana returned. She carried high heels, fake diamond earrings, and a faux diamond-covered necklace. No underwear and a piece of fabric, the outfit was more similar to a summer scarf than an actual dress.

Everything was in black. I supposed that Tatiana had chosen that color so that I could hide my filthy fat. Hideous woman.

She accompanied me to the changing room, where she helped me put on the outfit. It was a miracle that my own clothes survived her hands. She tore at it like she was mad at something.

When I stepped outside of the booth, and I got the chance to look at myself, I found that I resembled a street hooker, the ones who were doped up and there without their own consent. My dress ended right below the junction of my thighs. It had a deep plunge décolleté that displayed almost the entirety of my breasts. Finally, my back was untouched. Only my behind had some type of fabric above it.

All of that while I wasn't wearing underwear.

Ryan licked his lips. "She looks perfect, Tatiana."

"Sir, thank you!" Tatiana gleamed. "Would you like anything else?"

Ryan shook his head. "Just the bill."

He paid for the atrocious outfit, then we made our way back to his car. He carried a plastic bag with my old clothes.

"You could've let me put the outfit on back home," I told him. My hands tried to stretch the fabrics to cover more of my skin. When I heard a crack, I pretended as if it didn't happen. I stopped tearing at the outfit.

"WE AGREED ON A FULL KATANTIAN OBJECT EXPERIENCE. A good doting husband wouldn't let his object walk around in clothes that she chose to wear." Ryan was more excited about this than I was. "Now, we only need to do your hair and makeup. You'll look brand-new."



WE WERE ALL DRESSED UP FOR THE ENGAGEMENT PARTY. WE discussed object expectations in the presence of her man while we made our way to the festivities. I felt uncomfortable. There was no denying it. I could hear my father make nasty

comments about my look. He was everywhere, even if I hadn't seen him in weeks. There was so much makeup on my face that I could feel my skin sweat underneath it all.

I wondered what Manuel would think of my outfit. When I asked Ryan to take a picture with me, he agreed instantaneously. We took a couple of shots. Occasionally, he was playfully kissing my cheek. I sent the images to Manuel the moment I connected with Ryan's car's Wi-Fi.

I felt dirty. Manuel wasn't leaving me any other choice. I rubbed my belly when Ryan wasn't looking. What if I genuinely was pregnant?

I'd move away from Chicago. They wouldn't have a hold on me if I left the city. I'd drive to a small town in the Midwest where nobody even knew what the name Rawlins was worth.

An hour had passed since I sent the pictures. Manuel hadn't shown a reaction to the pictures I'd send him.

Gates had been installed in front of the palace for the engagement party, so security scanned us like we were about to embark on a flight. They confiscated our phones, promising to have them returned at the end of the festivities. It astounded me that there wasn't a single gun in sight.

The palace was lit up with decorations and flowers. The staff was running around. Guests had already begun arriving.

Ryan wasn't wrong when he said everybody would be watching us. As we walked into the main hall for Weston and Kamila's event, I started to feel like we were part of the main attraction.

Once we stepped inside, I immediately noticed Kamila. She stood circled by two couples, mastering the conversation. She was incredibly beautiful in her lengthy, light dress with a deep plunge décolleté. Her arms were covered in sleeves of lace. Her back was covered in lace, too. She was wearing white, sampling what her wedding do would look like. It was too hot for a puffed up and plush gown. Kamila had told me she wasn't even wearing shapewear underneath her dress. She

didn't want to sweat and stink in front of the esteemed guests. I almost told her that out of all people, she was the person who didn't need shapewear. The heels under her heels gave her even more height, making her tower over the women. She was eye to eye with some of the men. All the women watched her. They took in every detail so they could copy her style.

I was only gazed at by horny old men. Ryan was proud to parade his street hooker around, but I elbowed him every now and then to wipe that smirk off his face.

"Mandy! Ryan!" I heard Valentina's voice. "What did you do to her, Ryan?"

I turned around. My ex-best friend looked like a lamb next to me. She continued, "You look like straight-up sex! My God. I want to take you to my bed, Mandy!"

Valentina sounded tipsy. If this had been two days ago, I would've felt wet at her offer. I was starting to see what Katantia was really like. To an outsider like me, it didn't make me horny anymore. That was what I told myself.

To my misfortune, Aris and Weston appeared right behind her. Valentina's husband stared at my body eagerly. I hoped that Valentina had delivered the message about the threesome I didn't want to have.

I avoided Weston because I felt ashamed. I didn't want to see him lust after me in this state. Not that he would.

"I was told to show you off to some higher-ups," Weston addressed me. I was momentarily baffled. Then I remembered. "We'll be back in a minute."

I followed Weston away from the hall. He kept walking. My feet were beginning to hurt already because I wasn't used to wearing high heels. But it did me well to watch him walk in front of me. My eyes were up for a feast.

We ended up outside in the open. I could see Kamila's house from here.

"Who dressed you up like that?" Weston asked. I still hadn't looked into his eyes. He sounded terribly dismissive. At least he knew I would never voluntarily wear such things.

Butterflies flooded my stomach. I mumbled, “Ryan.”

Weston was disappointed. “And you let him?”

“It’s an experiment,” I told him. He stood too far away from me. I wanted him closer. “Call it research.”

“You’re not from here. You don’t deserve that treatment.” I didn’t reply. I had been humiliated enough today.

I lifted my gaze to meet his. His fingers cupped my chin. I felt tingles in all the wrong places. We were friends. I thought so, at least. This wasn’t right by any means.

“There’s an after-party in three hours,” Weston informed me. His tux looked custom-made for him. “Attendees are required to be naked. Women wear masks. Come to the west wing of the palace. I’ll see you there.”

I couldn’t speak. If I did, I’d say the wrong thing.

“I don’t want to see these clothes on you ever again. Ryan needs to shove them up his ass,” Weston cursed. I couldn’t resist looking up to meet his eyes.

My mouth curved into a smile. “I don’t need you to tell me what to wear.”

I was growing a backbone after all.

The prince stepped closer to me. He was close enough to kiss me, but he did not. His fingers trailed a line across my jaw. “You wear what you want to wear. If you want to dress like a slut, go for it. Do it on your own account. You’re not Ryan’s object. You’re nobody’s object.”

The words came out too soon. “Would you want to own me?”

I wanted to slap myself for my neediness. It wasn’t my brain talking. It was my pussy. I needed to distract myself from this ache on the inside.

A corner of Weston’s mouth lifted, but he didn’t respond verbally.

I didn’t feel amused. “So, I’m not worthy of being your object?”

I wanted to slap myself for asking that question. There was a thin line between being a guest and indulging in the Katantian lifestyle.

“Come to the after-party naked. You’ll find out.”

No other word was spoken amongst us during the entire engagement party.



WHEN RYAN LEFT LATER, I WAS TOO SCARED TO BE ALONE IN A crowd. I rushed into one of the lavish bathrooms.

Time passed, and women came in here to change for the after-parties. They turned the women’s bathroom into dressing rooms. It was relatively easy to accomplish because the bathroom was full of mirrors.

There was no smell. One could almost forget that there were toilets in the cabins.

Some women changed into sexier dresses, others simply disrobed. They carried their clothes in their hands, leaving the bathrooms.

I decided to follow one of the naked women and see how she entered the party. At the door, her clothes were secured in a bag, and a mask was handed to her. She put it on, entering. To my dismay, she still wore shoes.

I hurried into the closest bathroom, changing. Once I was naked, I felt tickled by the sensation. There were a lot of nude women around me. I felt like I was the ugliest one.

Deciding to take it like a champ, I stormed out of the bathroom and toward the after-party. I was handed a mask, so I put it on. They took my clothes away, allowing me to enter.

Red lights lit the room. Candles were adding to the moody atmosphere. There was no food, just drinks. The only clothed people were the staff that served the guests.

I recognized a lot of men. Women were difficult to identify because they wore masks. I only managed to see Valentina,

who stood next to Aris with her hand on his dick while talking to two other men.

“What’s it like to fuck Valentina?” one of the men asked. I turned away, uncomfortable at the question. My eyes searched the crowd. Couples were kissing. Women were fondling each other. Soon the men’s erections were put to use. I witnessed sex happening around me. Some people had conversations. Others moaned because they were being penetrated.

I should have been talking to people. This nude after-party would flourish in my article. I had a job to do, but I was frozen. I didn’t want to talk to anyone but Weston.

Weston, however, wasn’t here.

CHAPTER 24

WESTON

SIXTEEN YEARS OLD



“BOY, STOP WEARING THOSE BAGGY PANTS!” GRAN SHOUTED. I’d tiptoed around the house Aris, and I shared in hopes of escaping my gran’s prying eyes. Of course, nothing escaped that woman. “Turn around!”

I did as told, caught in the act by the older lady in her flowery dress. She’d started wearing color again, years after Grandpa’s assassination. It annoyed most Katantians because they hated on Gran.

Grandma shook her head, eyeing my choice of clothes. Disdain graced her features. “You’re the Prince of Katantia! You dress like a clown! Go change into what I got you for Christmas.”

I rolled my eyes, definitely not intending to change my outfit last minute.

“Don’t roll your eyes at me, or I’ll take you boys back to my house!” she warned me, scrunching her eyebrows. She was worse than the guards at the palace. “Or better yet, I’ll move in with you two scoundrels!”

“Gran, we don’t want you dying of heart attack, so please. Don’t,” I begged her. She was a fierce woman, even in her sixty-two years of age. Everyone was absolutely confident that she’d survive us all. She was the wicked witch who had killed Grandpa; rumors claimed.

Of course, I didn’t believe that. I loved her with all of my heart. She’d been a constant after Mom died.

“Why do you wear such clothes? They won’t make your peers respect you,” Gran asked, sighing in desperation. She crossed her arms in front of her chest, lowering her gaze. She was trying hard to make my brother and me into little princes who could take over the throne one day. “You have a name. Wear it.”

“Everyone wears this now,” I argued, gesturing at my sports jersey, cap, and baggy pants. My sneakers cost a fortune to import, but the king gave us credit cards last summer. We’d been importing all sorts of shit from the States ever since.

“You’re not everyone. You’re Weston Wraith. When you grow older, you’ll have power over this place you call home. People will kneel at your feet for an audience,” she said. Her gray hair was cut short and combed back. Gran didn’t eat much, weighing very little. Her tiny frame could fool you, but she wasn’t fragile. She kicked, and she slapped when she needed to. “Your grandpa didn’t want to realize it at first either, but when his grandparents didn’t birth another heir, he had to step up.”

“Gran, you must be forgetting something.”

The smile she gave me was hollow. “Kamila isn’t fit to be queen. She’s...” Drunk. High. Partying all the time. Uninhibited. She did so without any limitations whatsoever. The king hadn’t only been lenient on us. He gave Kamila anything she asked for. She never finished high school because Mom had been the one homeschooling her. When Gran tried to hire another teacher for her, the king intervened, blocking the action.

“And Aris is an airhead.”

“I’ll tell him you said that,” I said.

“Kings aren’t snitches, boy,” Gran told me. She sighed. “Kamila and Aris are practically gifting you the throne on a platter. You need to be the serious one. All the responsibility lies in your hands. You have to care for your family because the king won’t.”

“But he’s paying for everything,” I said. Aris and I lived in our own house. No other student had our luxuries even if their dad was worth a billion dollars more than the king. We did anything and everything in here.

“Let me explain one thing to you, Weston.” Gran stepped closer to me. It had taken me longer to hit puberty than my brother, but I was there now. I towered over my gran, but I still felt her wrath. She could twist the knife with a word. “Money? It doesn’t mean anything. Money comes and goes. Material things come and go. You know what’ll stay?”

She pressed a hand against my chest. “Your grandpa was fully aware of that. He had plans for Katantia. He had a wonderful vision. We had our two sons. We were more than ready to take on the world. When your great-grandpa resigned, and my husband took over, Katantia was growing fast. The seventies brought so many people to our shores. The young Prince of Katantia was going to change it all. For nine years, Katantia was a utopia for everyone except your great-grandparents and Aram. They’d turned Aram against his family. My own son despises me to this day. They wanted to enable human trafficking of all kinds, to lure more millionaires to Katantia. Your grandpa didn’t care about wealthy tourists. He built the economy by cutting imports. He gave the population business opportunities. That’s where the healthy food mania stems from, your grandpa. We never caught on to fast food and hamburgers because he blocked all of these Western things.”

Gran didn’t often open up about Grandpa. He’d died before Aris’s birth. His ghost haunted the family. The mystery around his death would never be resolved. When she talked about him, I felt his presence in the room. Everyone said he was a generous man, kinder than his father. Gone too soon. So much potential. Married the wrong woman.

“Your grandpa had two sons, but Katantia was his home. He did what was best for everyone, not just his own pockets. I don’t want you to grow up and be a self-absorbed, spoiled brat, Weston. Your mother would be disappointed. I’d be disappointed. You have all the good in you that Aris and

Kamila are missing. You need to show the world that you're the best fit for Katantia." Gran gestured at my clothes. She didn't really like Kamila for whatever reason, but I didn't comment on it. The women of the palace had a complicated relationship. "It's up to you to make your grandpa's vision come true. Put your family first. Your blood and your people."

"DICKHEAD, we're late for school! I'm meeting that babe with the fake tits later on. Where's the aftershave?" Aris shouted from upstairs. "My balls are waiting to be emptied. She's been teasing me for a week! An entire fucking week. Fucking bitch..."

Gran flinched at Aris's voice, retreating back into her thoughts.

"Gran's here, idiot!" I responded.

We left for school a little later, catching the waiting bus at the palace's security gates.



NINETEEN YEARS OLD

I DIDN'T BELIEVE IN gods or superstition.

While Aris was fucking a harem of girls in the city, I stayed behind, studying. I wasn't interested in distractions. If Aris wanted to fuck himself to death before he could get the throne, he could do it. I wouldn't stop him.

The king eyed me as his heir anyway. The deal was as solid as stone.

Aris and I studied at British universities, but we did it through online courses, which my brother was already failing. I was one step closer to graduation while he still struggled with the introduction courses.

During all of that work, I had one thing on my mind. The king's corrupt government would find its end once I graduated from college. He'd promised that I'd be king by my mid-twenties.

After another endless night of books and math, I decided against going to bed. I wanted to see what Kamila was up to. She was worse than my brother and far less easy to talk to. She used to have close friends, but now, she got drunk and high with random people every night.

The king didn't do anything about it because... I didn't fucking know. He let us do as we pleased. Pity that Kamila decided to become an addict.

I rolled my eyes at the missed potential. Grandma might have died three years ago, and a family of filth moved into her home next to ours, but her words still rang true. Now, I dressed up appropriately. Gone were the baggy pants I only wore because I was obsessed with Eminem. I had a plan for the country. I was on the verge of getting everything I ever wanted. The king thought I was playing along with his charade, but he was fooled.

I left my house, jogging across the street to Kamila's place. It was a hot day, one of the hottest ever on Katantia. The old

and dirty car on the other end of the opposite side of the street soured my day. The Cross family drove a second-hand BMW, older than Kamila's car, that she didn't want to separate from. Mom had got it for her when she turned sixteen.

Thankfully, the Cross offspring were nowhere to be found. Occasionally, their son and their daughter played catch in their front yard, much to my miserable dismay.

I knocked on Kamila's door, but there wasn't any response. No problem. Privacy was a foreign concept in the palace, so Aris and I had access to every space. Even the pathetic Cross' family house, which was formerly inhabited by our gran.

I found my palace ID card in my back pocket. This security system had been installed recently, the most up to date the palace had ever been. No more keys. I swiped it to unlock Kamila's door. I was inside her house without any hassle. I kicked off my shoes at the entrance because even as a junkie, she still cared about cleanliness.

"It's me!" I called out. "Weston. What are you up to today?"

As always, her place was spotless. I had no idea how Kamila managed to clean better than the cleaning staff who got paid for their job. She lived here alone without any help or guards.

Kamila didn't respond. I searched the entire ground floor and the garden. I found some dogs' images on her coffee table, but other than that, there was nothing there. I decided to climb up the stairs.

That's where I saw it.

The water.

It was overflowing, seeping into the hallway from the slightly ajar bathroom door.

Everything stopped inside of me. I went cold. Images that I'd created about my mother's death flooded my brain, but I washed them away. The king hadn't allowed us to see the site of mom's death. Or her body afterward. Her funeral had been a closed casket affair.

I took a deep breath and hurried into the bathroom. Turning off the water before it caused more damage, I picked up Kamila, whose head had been hanging out of the bathtub, carrying her to her bed. She was paler than she'd ever been. Her red hair was a thorn in my eye. Her blue lips were scaring the fuck out of me. She was barely breathing. From her bedroom phone, I dialed the number of emergencies. I didn't need to remind them to hurry up. They'd be here in three minutes.

I shook her. No response. I yelled her name. Nothing.

“Kamila, don't leave. You're not supposed to leave. Please...”

She stopped breathing.

CHAPTER 25

MANDY



I GAVE UP ON THE NAKED PARTY AN HOUR AFTER I HAD entered it.

On my way to my bedroom in Kamila's house, I heard a knock on the entrance door. If I had stayed in the bathroom a little longer, I would have missed it. It piqued my interest.

I struggled to decide whether it was wise to open the door at this time at night. Kamila was still gone on royal duties.

The next knock was louder. I heard a voice, but I was too far away to decipher what the person was saying. I decided to carefully step down the stairs, holding on to the rail.

"It's me. Are you in there?"

Where had he been? A wave of worry hit me.

He couldn't have chosen a more unfitting time. I looked down at myself. I was freshly showered but unpresentable. No makeup. No appropriate clothes. Hell, I was wearing the slippers I had worn for the past five years. Why did my looks matter so much all of a sudden? I wasn't trying to seduce him. Not at all. After the positive pregnancy test...

"I don't want to see you," I told him loud enough so he could hear from the other side of the door.

Weston replied, "There was an emergency. I came to the party as soon as I could. I was told you had already left."

"Well, yeah. I left. There was nothing for me to do there. You stood me up," I said, sounding awfully disappointed. I crossed my hands in front of my chest. Weston didn't owe

me anything. He was the prince of a sex country; he had other things to do like to be gorgeous on television.

“Let me in. I missed you at the party, but you were there.” There was something in his voice. I didn’t have a good feeling about it. Was he in trouble?

“I’m tired, so you need to leave.” The ordeal with Manuel exhausted me. The pain in my womb strained me. I was a walking mess.

“I have unrestricted access to this place. You know that.”

I rolled my eyes, letting out a sharp breath. I turned the doorknob, opening the door. Weston seemed disheveled. His tie wasn’t around his neck. He held it in his hand. The upper buttons of his white shirt were open.

I knew there was something wrong from his voice. Now the visual in front of me proved it.

Weston wandered into the living room. I followed him. His scent was different today. He reeked of alcohol. I watched him take a seat on the couch. He inclined his head to the side, studying my outfit with a smirk.

I had to sit down, rubbing my hands on my thighs. The royal prince’s shoulders were tense. I wanted to ask what was wrong, but I sort of got the sense that he wasn’t going to reveal anything. He took his jacket off. He adjusted his cuffs, taking off the cufflinks. He rolled up his sleeves.

I leaned away from the couch. “What’s wrong? Where were you? You don’t look well.”

Weston spoke in a low tone. “I had things to handle.”

“It doesn’t seem like you handled them.” I moved a bit closer to him. “Do you want to talk about it?”

The aggravation was still lurking around his body. His jaw was set. “What do you want, Mandy?”

I didn’t like him like this. He was beginning to scare me. Ryan had been enough of a Katantian man today. I didn’t need another round, so I stood up. “We can talk once you feel better.”

Weston followed me to the doorway with his jacket in hand. I opened the door for him. I turned around, expecting to move aside for him to leave Kamila's house. He had other plans. He pinned me against the door by cupping my chin. His thumb was on my jaw. His other hand was on my ribcage.

The anger in his eyes had been replaced with lust. My gaze drifted between his lips and eyes. He was so close to me now. I could feel the darkness in his eyes draw me in.

"I want you to be happy, Weston. That's what I want," I revealed breathlessly, answering his previous question. I couldn't resist arching my head back when his hand moved from my ribcage to my spine. "You don't seem very happy right now."

When a smirk appeared on his face, I almost lost it. He pulled me in closer to him. Mind you, I was still in my pajamas. The man was in a tux.

"Expose yourself to me."

"I don't have anything to expose. I'm pretty boring," I told Weston. My heart lit up. I trailed my fingers around his collar. My fingers traveled down along the buttons of his shirt. They trembled. I didn't know what I was doing.

The engagement ring on my finger reminded me that I'd made a promise to myself.

I removed my fingers from him. Tatiana's rude comments about my filthy fat body roamed around in my head. My father. Manuel. "I need to tell you the truth. My fiancé... He's not good for me. I want to teach him a lesson. I came here to get fucked by someone. I think that someone should be you."

I felt relieved, revealing this to him. Then, the shame crept into my thoughts. I wanted to avoid his eyes. He held on to my chin, not allowing me to move away. "I knew something was going on inside of that mischievous head of yours. But I'm not going to fuck you today, Mandy."

I wanted to ask why, but that would make it sound like I asked him to 'fuck' me.

He leaned closer to say his following words into my ear. “I don’t fuck pregnant women. That’s not me.”

I gasped. Who had told Weston? I wasn’t even sure I was pregnant. “Weston, you don’t understand...”

I swore I felt his lips brush my cheekbone. His face was back in front of me.

The hand on my spine returned to the front of my stomach. Weston’s fingers pushed their way down to my panties. My breathing was slowly getting out of my control.

I looked into his eyes. He looked right back.

“You say the word, and we’ll stop,” Weston told me. I swallowed. He swallowed.

I nodded. “I’ll say the word, and we’ll stop.”

His rare smile overwhelmed me. The testing kiss that followed got the best out of me. His lips brushed against mine until they settled for good.

I moaned against his open mouth when his fingers reached below the waistband of my panties. I loved being able to wear them after a long day without them, but Weston had the clearance to burn them if he desired to.

He had barely touched me, but I was out of breath. I felt embarrassed.

My fingers went on their own journey, exploring his chest. I wanted him out of his jacket. He looked so much better without it. When his fingers left my skin, I shivered at the loss. His jacket fell to the floor.

We rushed into Kamila’s living room. He laid me down where we were sitting down a moment ago.

I could hear nothing but our breathing and the thuds of my heart in my chest. My fingers explored Weston’s shoulders.

His hands were on me. He cupped my pussy with his fingers. There was a small amount of hair on my pubic region. His fingers traced lines on my needy skin.

Weston's mouth dived upon me. He kissed my ear, my jawline, and my neck before returning to my mouth. Against my lips, he said, "We're both cheating right now, aren't we?"

I nodded slowly. Weston cupped my neck with his free hand. I felt his other hand dip into more dangerous territory. I admitted, "I don't think I care."

"Whoever hurt you deserves what's coming for him," he said, sounding sincere. "Are you still in pain? You looked beautiful today."

The pain never left, but he was successfully distracting me from it.

"It's not a joke." Was he playing a game? "You were brave tonight, and you continue to be."

I felt him at my clit. He masterfully transitioned from clit to my wet lips, and from there on, he played with my entrance.

Weston didn't enter me right away. He asked, "Do you trust me?"

"I do."

"You shouldn't."

I gasped when one of his fingertips steadily entered me with his thumb still on my clit.

I touched Weston's jawline as his finger plunged into me. He checked my reaction as he penetrated me. His lips were slightly parted as I nodded for him to continue.

Another finger slipped inside easily. Weston played with my clit, testing my focus.

Weston kissed me, taking possession of my mouth. It felt like it was just him and me. We weren't even in Kamila's home. We were somewhere in a city, being two consenting adults who were making out in an apartment. I wasn't wearing a ring. He was nobody's fiancé.

Weston observed me while he made me come, making me blush even harder. Before I could come down from my high and start feeling regrets, I dared to touch Weston. I sneaked

my hand into his pants. He was as aroused as I was. His erection felt exquisite in my hand.

He opened up the necessary buttons, and I was able to move my hand up and down his shaft freely. I heard his heavy breathing. It spurred me on.

“You’re going to make me come in my pants,” Weston whispered onto my lips. I shut him up by taking back his mouth. “That’s not a regular occurrence.”

“That’s what everybody says,” I remarked, and he chuckled. I registered the sound, grinning to myself.

He took his fingers out of my pool of moisture, serving them to my mouth. I took them in, sucking on them while my hands touched on every part of his cock. I stroked him.

Tasting myself on his fingers was something I hadn’t expected.

I licked at his fingers and caressed his cock until I felt him going still. His erection throbbed. I palmed him in hopes of catching some of his come.

Eventually, I fed myself the results of his pleasure.

Weston was as speechless as I was surprised. It all came together easily with him. I didn’t have to linger on my thoughts.

His free hand traveled across my curves.

CHAPTER 26

WESTON



MANDY SAT ACROSS MY LAP. HER HEAD WAS ON MY shoulder. My arm held her waist. The wetness on my fingers had dried up. I caressed her knees and occasionally drifted away to her thighs. “I regret standing you up at the party,” I told her.

She sighed. “You’re important to people here. I understand...”

Mandy couldn’t understand. I doubted it.

“There aren’t enough women in Katantia,” I told her. I was betraying my country. We didn’t talk about these things with outsiders or foreigners.

“I’ve seen plenty,” Mandy responded. Her mouth curved into a smile. As much as I wanted my cock between her lips and down her throat, I called upon my patience. “And they’re all terribly proud to be Katantian.”

“If you’re really pregnant and you’re expecting a girl, I need to get you out of here,” I said, running scenarios on how to successfully remove the new girl from my country in my head.

“You don’t need to do anything. What is it with everyone trying to kick me out of the country? My father will fly me back home when my time here is done.”

She noticed the change in my demeanor. She tilted her head to the side. “Weston, what’s wrong?”

“When are you getting an exam to find out if you’re pregnant?” I asked her, swerving the conversation away from her father.

She bit her lip. “Kamila said she’d take me to do one once the festivities were over. Maybe tomorrow or the next day.”

I nodded. “Good.”

I expected her to distance herself from me, but she drew closer to me. Her hand touched one of my shoulder blades. With her eyebrows slightly raised, her eyes were open wide. When she spoke, her voice was breathy. “I wish I had the power to eradicate my father’s money, his status, or his name. Then I’m reminded that if it wasn’t him, there’d be another set of monsters waiting to take over. It’s how the world works. I can’t change that there are bad people in the world.”

In a surprising gesture, I kissed her forehead. I was startled at myself for doing that. It was an emotional gesture that I didn’t understand.

“I know exactly what you mean.” I did. I lived through it every day.

“What are we going to do about Kamila?” she asked, absent-mindedly sighing. “I don’t want to know what she’s up to right now.”

Kamila’s windows rattled, making creaking sounds. The wind was strong outside.

It pained me that I wasn’t able to tell Kamila what I had just found out. I felt guilty for hiding something that crucial from her. For her own protection, she needed to hate the Cross family.

I decided to tell her. “When Aram began having sex with Kamila, there was an event that changed the course of her life. My brother and I were absentminded. Most of our university courses were online, but we also lived there for our third years. The entire staff got wind of the fight. Felicita and Aram were fighting. What I’m about to tell you happened late at night. Only a few people witnessed it. They were paid off. I had a difficult time getting to this information.”

My stomach churned at the memory of finding out what had happened. “Aram made Felicita choose between her daughter and Kamila.”

Mandy straightened up, accidentally pushing her tits right into my face. “Wait... what?”

“Felicita started the fight that the staff noticed. She didn’t want to choose, but Aram forced her. He’s always been ferocious. Felicita chose Kamila because she wanted to protect her daughter.” I didn’t want to feel empathy for the Cross scum, but I saw Felicita in a new light when I was told what happened.

“Valentina wasn’t even of age when Kamila and Aram...” It dawned on her. I felt like a disgrace, but I kept my mask on. I didn’t allow Mandy to see me weak.

Mandy went inward, not sharing her thoughts. I gave her time to process things.

She lay her head on the crevice between my neck and shoulder. We didn’t speak, so eventually, she fell asleep.

IT WAS PERPLEXING, TO SAY THE LEAST.



THERE WAS A TIMID KNOCK ON THE BATHROOM DOOR THAT I’D locked myself in after a sleepless night next to Mandy. A sleepy voice said my name.

For a moment, I felt irritated. What did Mandy expect? Did she think I had left? Did she want to come in here and see what I was doing? Was she into morning sex in the shower?

Of course, she didn’t know that shower sex was literally the worst thing to do. Kamila told me that even Aram, known for his violent-tending tastes, never touched her in the shower or bath. He showed an ounce of decency there.

I was finished with the bathroom, so I exited it and almost crashed into her. Her eyes were open wide. “I thought you had

left.”

“I may be from Katantia, but I still have basic human needs,” I told her, attempting to loosen up the mood. I didn’t need to start a working day worked up.

“You do? No golden showers for you today?” she asked, teasing the fuck out of me. There was the slightest grin on her tired face.

“You want a golden shower?”

Her eyes widened in curiosity. “Am I going to be sick afterward?”

I tilted my head to the right. She’d woken up funny. “If you swallow it, then perhaps. I haven’t had a girl swallow my pee before...”

She stood there, seriously considering it. “I won’t be accused of turning you into a freak.”

Mandy licked her lips like she was enjoying this. Her tired eyes were glistening in excitement. What had her fuck up of a fiancé done? She wasn’t his anymore. Mandy had moved on, but that ring on her finger held her back.

“Why do you want to do this again?”

“I want to try new things,” Mandy commented, livelier than before.

“New things.” My dick was acting up, but I calmed myself down. I wasn’t about to disappoint the new girl. She wanted a golden shower, not a boner in her face.

“You’re my friend. Who better to experiment with? I trust you,” she said. Was she trying to tempt me to shove a dick down her throat? “You have this vibe about you.” Dazed, she gazed at me. “You seem bored at everything, but you’re actually very sweet at the same time.”

Sweet? “I’d suggest you shut your mouth now unless you do want to swallow.”

The last girl I’d done this with was an old friend from high school a couple of months ago. It hadn’t been anything like

this. Lost in the moment, I prepared myself. She'd have a moment post golden shower. I'd have to comfort her...

"Wow, you bought it, didn't you?"

"Sorry, what?" I asked, baffled by what she'd allow me to do to her.

"I was just joking," Mandy said, grinning from ear to ear. "I'm only twenty. If I start having golden showers now, what will I do when I'm fifty? I've got to have something to look forward to."

"Are you pleased?" I asked, willing my dick to calm the fuck down.

Mandy nodded, pouting. "I'm sorry for teasing you."

"Take off your ring," I demanded, startling myself. Her eyes widened. "It's cheap. It doesn't belong on your finger."

Lowering her gaze, she hesitated. Then she lifted her hand, removing the cheap engagement ring from her finger. I felt a wave of relief once it was gone. She placed it on the floor where it belonged.

I gestured at the ring on the floor. "That just solidified that you've become my pretty little whore."

Mandy twitched, pressing her thighs together. She croaked, "What if I'm pregnant?"

"If you're carrying a baby in that tortured womb of yours, you'll push it out. Then we'll fill it up with my come. Nine months later, we'll have two demons to care about," I explained, making very little sense to my own ears. "Baby momma of a prince. Sounds like the title of your next book, doesn't it?"

She rolled her eyes.

Kamila's bathroom was a place of bad memories. I'd grown into my role here. I realized I didn't want to be king. I acknowledged I had to take care of my family first.

We showered together, and I caught every flushed moment on Mandy's cheeks. She'd taken off her panties for me,

revealing the prettiest pussy I'd ever seen. I couldn't wait to dive into her again. By the end of our joined shower, the blackberry shampoo invaded my nostrils.

We cleaned up after ourselves because Kamila would surely freak if she found her bathroom a mess.

“Do you have something to do today?” I was starting to believe she thought we gazed at stars all day long. We had work to do, people to meet, and all of that daily.

I needed to speak with Kamila. “Kamila, Aris, I, and Valentina are supposed to visit a high school today to inspire teenagers to form relationships and get married. It's basically propaganda to populate Katantia.”

Mandy followed me to Kamila's room. I knocked. She opened the door when there was no response. Kamila hadn't returned home.

Immediately, I checked my phone. A message appeared that was sent to me after I arrived at Kamila's home. I had been too busy to acknowledge it. I read it out loud. “I'm staying at the palace tonight. I won't come tomorrow. Aram gave me a day off.”

It was clipped for a message from Kamila, but I accepted it. She could have been tired.

“Should we go find her?”

CHAPTER 27

KAMILA

THE NIGHT BEFORE



THE AFTER-PARTIES HAD BEGUN, BUT I WOULD GIVE ANYTHING to leave the palace. I had distanced myself, taking a small break from the shiny madness downstairs. I was on the roof of the palace, viewing the well-guarded beginning of the peninsula. I could hear the commotion from downstairs. It was giving me anxiety.

The wind was surprisingly cold and cruel. I froze in my outfit. I should have worn my boots, but the stylists said that boots weren't classy enough. I was stupid enough to listen.

My head was spinning from all the meaningless conversations I endured the entire day.

Our guest list was endless. I wanted to metaphorically kill Aris and Weston for creating it. I hadn't seen that many pretentious Katantians in a while.

In the back of my head, I was itching for pills and other potions, but Weston had thought ahead. The guards weren't letting anyone past the gates without a thorough security check. I wondered if I could waltz to the gates and leave.

Would they stop me? I had friends in the city. They'd take care of my needs.

Night clouded my vision. The front of the palace was filled with carefully parked cars and older guests leaving. The decorations were spectacular. The staff had filled the lawn with flowers and lights, doing a dazzling job.

The road I lived on was an entirely different story. Since nobody was allowed to cross that path, nobody had bothered to

decorate it.

I closed my eyes, feeling the nightly breeze. Up here, there was silence, finally.

When I heard the creak of the trapdoor that led up here, I jolted. This was my spot. Any unwanted guest would have to leave.

“Kamila? Why aren’t you downstairs?” a familiar voice asked. He stepped closer, but I had already recognized Travis. He joined me at the edge of the roof. If he was exhausted, it didn’t show. His salt and pepper hair was gelled back, making him look older than he was. His skin was free of any form of sweat. His suit was impeccable.

“I’ve been downstairs all day,” I told him. My eyes caught the border of Katantia again. It was visible from almost everywhere in Katantia, except behind the mountain. “I needed a break.”

“I don’t understand why you two are doing this,” Travis said. I heard the skepticism in his voice. “Why didn’t you ask me for advice?”

I couldn’t help but laugh dryly. “You already have one fake marriage. You don’t need another one.”

Travis swallowed.

“I wouldn’t have allowed you to leave your family behind, as fake as your relationship with Felicita is,” I told him. I pitied the man. Aram treated him with indifference and superiority. However, Travis had been a good friend to

me. He warned me about Aram’s moods. I could talk to Travis whenever I needed a person to tell Aram’s depravities to.

“I know I don’t love Felicita sexually, but she is my wife. I have a responsibility for my family and Felicita’s brother. I care, Kamila,” Travis said. He made me miss my old father, the one before the depravities.

But wait, Felicita had a brother? Why didn’t I know about that?

“I know you do.” To change the topic before I started sobbing in front of him, I added, “Are you okay? Do you want to go back to Adonis’s house? He liked you. You’ve never mentioned Felicita’s brother before.”

“Her brother doesn’t want to be talked about. Your father knows of him, but... It’s complicated. I hope you never have to hear that story.” He sighed. “About Adonis...”

The corner of Travis’s mouth lifted. If Aram heard us, he would punish us both. Being gay wasn’t a well-esteemed thing in Katantia. If you were in the top percent, you could screw both sexes, and nobody cared as long as you kept it private. The rich didn’t have problems raising taxpaying babies, so the palace simply monitored them without interfering. They could simply purchase babies, providing a solution.

The rest of Katantia wasn’t allowed to be in a relationship with the same gender because, in Aram’s opinion, it lessened the chance of reproduction. It was appalling, to say the least. We preached sex and humiliation by men calling women objects, but men were above the degradation. So what if Travis wanted a man to call him an object or vice versa?

Travis couldn’t help that he liked men. He had entrusted his secret to me years ago. I attempted to make life easier for him as much as he did for me.

Recently, the younger generation of Katantia had begun rewriting the rules of the king right under his nose. Young women and men expressed their sexuality precisely the way they wanted to.

People like Adonis were part of small groups that celebrated being their unapologetic selves. Adonis was the twenty-year-old grandson of the local condom manufacturers. His family owned a bunch of houses in Katantia, and in one of them, he often housed private parties.

I sneaked Travis into one of them through the back door. We were both somewhat known, so we had to watch out. I introduced Travis to Adonis because Travis had to talk to someone who felt the same way he did.

I hadn't expected that they would fuck, but they did. Their age difference was humongous, but they were interested in each other, and that was all that mattered. Whenever I saw Adonis through work, he asked me about Travis.

"He's my daughter's age," Travis emitted. He rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm not sure whether I'm made for this type of shame. Aram is too powerful. My family already has enough trouble."

All I heard was that he wanted to meet Adonis, but he couldn't because of Aram. Fuck him. I defied him. I would set up another secret meeting.

"I'll talk to you tomorrow after our tour, okay?" I told him. I took his hand, leaning in for a hug. We gave each other strength. "It'll be fine. A little age gap never hurt nobody."

"Go rest. Aris and Weston will handle the rest. You need your sleep," Travis uttered with a smile.

I stepped down the trap door first. Travis followed. We walked down to the hall together. Then we separated. He would return to the parties.

The exit toward our road was locked. There were no guards present. I had forgotten to take my palace ID card with me.

I decided to wait it out, yawning as I leaned against the fence. Taking my phone out, I looked through the hundreds of messages I had received. More Katantians were sending their congratulations. A couple of emails came from people who were apologizing for their absence. They reassured me that they would definitely come to our wedding, though.

I read and read.

One guard appeared. The silver emblem on his cufflinks blinded me. His clothes were impeccably ironed. He took his position. Before I could ask him to open the gates for me, he told me, "The king asked for you. I can't let you leave."

"I'm tired. I want to sleep. Can't it wait?" I pleaded. My body wasn't in a condition for Aram to experiment on. My feet hurt, and I had a headache.

The guard shook his head, correcting the lapels of his black shirt. “These are immediate orders from the king. There are people in the palace looking for you, so go to the king’s quarters.”

The guard wordlessly handed me a temporary palace ID card. I gave in, stomping toward the elevators. Swiping the card, I punched in Aram’s floor’s number. The king’s quarters were quiet at this time of the day. Nobody had access to the top floor of the palace anyway, but the staff that usually roamed around wasn’t here. They were downstairs, working their asses off for my pretense engagement party.

Without knocking, I entered the king’s bedroom, finding Felicita on Aram’s lap. They sat on his bedroom throne, a replica of the one found downstairs in the main hall. There was a forced smile plastered on Felicita’s face while Aram cupped her clothed mound, teasing her. That wasn’t the biggest surprise.

Another man was present. I had never seen him before, but he looked almost as old as Travis in his fifties. Gray hair, black eyes, and a gaze that checked out every little detail of my body would usually ring bells, but I didn’t give a fuck tonight. He could fist himself as much as he wanted to. I even heard him spit on his cock while I approached Aram.

“Nice of you to join us. Take out your phone, Kamila,” Aram ordered. He dictated a message that I had to send to Weston. It read, “I’m staying at the palace tonight. I won’t come tomorrow. Aram gave me a day off.”

“Can’t this wait?” I asked, pointing at whatever they were doing. The other man sat on the bed, not far from the fake throne Aram occupied. I had things to do tomorrow. Weston and I were building our public relationship. I couldn’t bother getting fucked tonight.

“No, it can’t wait. You’re getting punished for your engagement, did you forget? You went behind my back,” Aram said. The smirk on his face was devilish, tugging at my insides. “This friend of mine will take your ass while I fuck your pussy, so take off your clothes.”

Felicita's face was frozen as she rose from Aram's lap. She blushed.

I had never endured a double penetration before.

Done with the bullshit, I removed my dress. *Go to work, Kamila.* After I kicked off my heels, I stood there naked as the day I was born. Coincidentally, Aram hadn't been there. On my day of birth, he'd been in Singapore, sucking some magnate's dick for investments. That was what the people of Katantia had told me at a party once.

Aram sat on his bedroom-sized throne, slash armchair, and freed his cock. He began stroking it while the other man followed Aram's example. I heard the zipper of his pants. Felicita muttered things below her breath, but nobody listened. I wasn't in the mood to fight, so I decided to do as told.

"How does this work?" I asked, crossing my hands in front of my tits. This would be fun if he weren't the King of Katantia. I didn't mind the orders. I had an issue with the man who gave them.

"You sit on my cock, and then he takes your ass." That sounded easy. One look at Felicita, and it didn't look easy anymore. She was shaking just by looking at us, and her eyes were red. Had she done this before? Her fear frustrated me. *It's just another assignment.*

Taking a deep breath, I stepped forward. After I sat on the king's fat cock, he let out a groan. He slid right into me.

I heard a strange clicking. Aram explained, "I told him to put on some lube. I don't want your ass ruined again. I'll be fucking your ass a lot from now on."

I swallowed. I straddled the king, counting the Katantian emblems around the room.

"Aram, don't do this. It'll hurt her!" Felicita urged her lover. She was so thirsty for attention. I fucking despised her. What was her deal? She never spoke up for me. Was this a new tactic to get his attention? Was she that desperate?

Aram ordered, "Shut up, Felicita."

“Fuck,” I whimpered, my core clenching around his hard cock. “More.”

“You want more?” Another slap on my breast and I felt tingles. My stomach was empty from a busy day of event preparations, but I wouldn’t mind throwing up all over the king. “It’s time to fuck her ass. Loosen up. We don’t want your hole torn up again, don’t we?”

The other man lined up behind me, the crown of his cock nudging at the tight ring of my muscles. Aram and I stopped moving to accommodate the new dick. My back entrance wasn’t ready for the taking, not by a long shot. I required more touching, licking, playing. He was trying to fuck me without any preparation. This was how Aram had previously fucked my hole up. I’d grown all tense, and he’d broken me.

It took the other man a couple of attempts until he fully entered me, filling me up with his lengthy cock. I saw stars from the pain, sinking in it. *One star. Two stars. Three stars.* I felt the pain run down my spine, pulling at me from all directions. A couple of hasty breaths later and a load of curse words, the pain had died down. Meanwhile, Aram had started thrusting into me again, fucking me with all of his strength from underneath. Didn’t he ever get tired? What sort of an old man was this piece of shit?

When both cocks found their places inside of me, I screamed, not giving a shit anymore.

I felt incredibly wet, possibly squirting. What was happening to me? *The usual, Kamila. Aram’s manipulating your body.* It didn’t feel like squirting, though... Too hot.

Then, all hell broke loose.

Felicita screeched another complaint, and things moved fast. I was lost in limbo, not realizing what was happening around me. I found myself shoved to the floor, without any cocks to fill me. Had I been saved? I didn’t want to be saved. I wanted to crawl my way out of this hellhole.

I was gone, numbed out.

I barely noticed that Felicita took my place. The men slid their erect cocks into her holes, taking her ruthlessly. Harder than they fucked me, they penetrated her body, and I felt ways. I scowled at them.

Then, Travis came to mind.

Fuck.

I doubted that Felicita was even wet. She'd be sore as hell tomorrow. Her screams were genuine.

Until I could get a hold of myself from hitting the floor, Felicita's eyes had closed.

She had lost consciousness from the pain. The blood all over the men's clothes startled me. I looked down and saw drops of blood between my own thighs.

The next thing I knew, I woke in the hospital.

CHAPTER 28

MANDY



KAMILA'S HOME WAS DESERTED WITHOUT HER. I HADN'T SEEN her in an entire day, and Weston was making me suspicious. I didn't like the look on his face. He never seemed particularly happy, but these days he dragged it out.

He kept saying everything was all right, but his eyes were full of worry. We sat in Kamila's kitchen. I had made him a coffee, but he hadn't touched it.

When Weston's phone started ringing, he answered it quicker than lightning. The number was unknown. I was surprised that he was willing to answer that quickly.

"Where are you, Kamila? I've been trying to get in touch with you since yesterday morning!" he answered the phone call.

I touched his arm. Weston glanced at me knowingly. He put Kamila on speaker. He informed her that I could hear her, too.

Her voice sounded dry. "I'm in the hospital. Felicita is here, too. Tell Valentina and Ryan and come over here. Mandy, I'm sorry that I couldn't contact you earlier."

"What the hell happened?" Weston asked. He balled his free fist.

"Aram and another man double penetrated me. I didn't feel much pain, but Felicita panicked. She saw blood on my thighs and complained." Kamila required

water. I hugged myself. I didn't like what I heard at all. "Aram got mad, throwing me on the floor. Felicita got it next, but she got hurt. She was too tight for both of them. They didn't prepare her at all."

"What about the blood on your thighs?" I asked. I panicked. "Are you okay?"

"I didn't feel well, so I wanted to go home before the after-parties. Aram summoned me. When we started having sex, I started bleeding. I got my period. I feel terrible. It was a misunderstanding," Kamila uttered. She was close to tears. I could hear it in her voice. "Felicita saw drops of my period, not blood from their penetration. Now she's unconscious and in treatment. I haven't been able to escape to find a phone until now."

"Fucking Aram didn't tell us anything, of course," Weston cursed. His eyebrows were lowered, and the look on his face was mean. "We're coming. Don't move."

"Do you want fresh clothes from home?" I asked her.

"Yes, please. Thank you. I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize," I told her.



WE HUNG UP AND MADE OUR WAY TO THE CROSS family. Weston and I had come here in a separate car from the Cross family.

Valentina's worried expression startled me. For some reason, I had expected her horny self to keep up the cold shoulder to anything of substance. I had been proven wrong.

Felicita's daughter didn't look anyone in the eyes. Out of the Cross offspring, she was the only one who seemed affected. It was the first time I had experienced her like that in Katantia. She hadn't spoken a word ever since we had arrived. She hadn't even changed into a racy outfit to leave the house.

Weston had told me that Aris and Travis were held up at work. I frowned. This was the type of situation where you proved your priorities, but who was I to judge. I didn't even have a proper job at the moment.

The fully functioning private Queen I hospital hadn't been shut down at the arrival of a royal. Brief whispers notified everyone of Weston's arrival. We still had to wait to be allowed inside the rooms where Kamila and Felicita were being treated.

I didn't know exactly what I had expected when going into a hospital in this country. Still, I certainly hadn't expected it to be this clean and bright. It wasn't as cramped as a public hospital. Except for the people who lusted after Weston as we walked by, the staff was very welcoming. Some even scowled at Weston, which surprised me.

At the sight of a royal, the Katantians went into a frenzy. The men greeted him respectfully. The women flirted with him endlessly.

I couldn't help but feel insecure about what was going on between us.

On our way to the hospital earlier, I had checked my feed with Manuel. Apparently, he had seen the messages. Half an hour later, there still was no response.

We didn't have to wait long.

Since they were family, only Felicita's children were allowed to visit her one after the other. Kamila had already woken up, so Weston and I went inside her private room.

The tall redhead seemed fine on the outside. She only had a couple of bruises on her arm. She looked lightheaded. She hugged Weston first. Then she grabbed me.

"You worried us to death," I told her, inhaling her scent. She smelled clinical and devoid of any substance. Usually, we shared a blackberry shampoo. The entire house drowned in it. "I really can't believe Aram. I don't know what to say."

"This is normal," Kamila pointed out. She was fiddling with her bruised skin. I wondered why she was pressing on the

wound.

Weston shook his head. “It isn’t. It needs to stop.”

“Relax. These are my last days. It’ll be over soon.” Her tone was soft and angelic. She didn’t appear like a woman who had been abused.

“He’ll kill you if he continues,” Weston stated harshly. “I won’t allow that.”

“It’s Felicita who got hurt, not me,” Kamila argued, drawing her eyebrows together. She hadn’t washed off her makeup properly yet. How long had it been?

“I swear on Mom’s grave. If he touches you again, it’s over for him,” Weston warned her. The look on his face was unlike anything I had seen before. There was nothing soft in his features. He was furious. “First, you had the drugs. Now, he’s become your addiction. If you want to be dominated when you’re fucking, say the word. We’ll get you a guy. The days where Aram fucked you are over.”

Kamila’s face fell. I stood there uncomfortably, not knowing what to do.

Abruptly, a nurse entered. She didn’t seem happy to find us inside Kamila’s room. We must have alerted her.

Weston had raised his voice. She said, “The girl needs to leave. She’s not your family.”

“She’s my friend,” Kamila told the nurse.

The nurse didn’t back down. In fact, she was the first one who defied the royals in my presence. “It’s our policy. She has to leave.”

I exited the room against everybody’s wishes. I was left alone with Ryan outside in the hallway. Valentina was still inside her mother’s room.

We didn’t talk. Ryan hadn’t seemed happy to see me with Weston earlier.

Sitting next to each other, we gazed at every nurse who walked by. They didn’t pay any attention to us. We weren’t in

the presence of royals. We weren't interesting.

I couldn't hear what Weston and Kamila were discussing inside. He had lowered his voice now. I was worried. He meant what he said. I would, too, if I were him. Kamila was in danger. They had angered a beast. Now, it was time to pay the price. I feared that this was only the beginning.

When a man approached us, I scooted closer to Ryan. I didn't know him. Ryan didn't flinch at the man's presence. The man leaned forward, addressing me. "Ms. Rawlins? Your father is waiting for your call. You can call him from the palace."



"HOW'S EVERYTHING OVER THERE?" MY FATHER ASKED. I SAT across from the king in his office quarters on the fifth floor, cold and unwelcoming. Guards with their navy blue ties watched the exit.

"Interesting. It's worse than I imagined. No man has taken full advantage of me yet, so that's good. One tried, though. The royals sent him to Katantian prison," I explained, wanting to end this conversation sooner rather than later. Aram's eyes burned me.

Aram sat at his majestic desk, going through documents. Occasionally, he looked up at me. Not for one second did I buy that he was giving me privacy.

"Of course, no man would touch you. Mandy, your existence makes me wish I was dead because you're so embarrassing. I can see the cellulite on your skin from miles away. Your body's too fat to be in a swimsuit. It's the perfect defense against male gazes."

I flinched. I was used to his cruel words, but it had been a long time since he'd spoken them directly at me.

"Have you heard from Manuel? I've been trying to reach him. He isn't responding to any of my messages," I told my

father in an attempt to distract him from my hideous appearance.

“Yeah, I’ve heard from him, silly girl. He comes to work every day like he should.” My pulse quickened.

“And?”

“And what? Don’t waste my fucking time.”

Tears formed in my eyes. “Why is he ignoring me?”

“You’re too silly to figure it out. Okay. Let me spell it out for you, you ungrateful disappointment. Manuel’s tired of you. You went to Katantia. You spread your legs like the whore that you are for God knows who. I don’t even know what man in his right mind would touch somebody as ugly as you,” Father spat at me. “He’s called off the engagement. He doesn’t want you back.”

“Why can’t he tell me himself?” I couldn’t hold back my sobs.

“You’re pregnant with another man’s child, silly girl.”

I froze. After all this time, I thought Manuel and I had moved past this situation. When I was sixteen, I met him, working as a secretary’s assistant in the PR department in one of my father’s Chicago companies. He had been twenty-four at the time, finishing an internship at the same company. I didn’t pay him a lot of attention. He went out of my way until one day, he asked me out on his final day at the company. We went on a date. We spent time together. Suddenly, he was back at the company with a new contract and an esteemed title. I had a crush on him, and I wanted to be his girlfriend publicly, but he refused to show any affection outside of the privacy of his home.

After he took my virginity, he revealed that Spencer had paid him to court me because my father was aware of my appalling looks and manners. He said that he couldn’t take the pretense anymore. He hurt me with his words, but he soothed me when he revealed that he was now interested in me for real.

After I graduated high school, I moved in with him. My father forbade me from having a job. He declined to pay for

my college, so I had to stay at home and be Manuel's housewife of some sort. I took the chance to educate myself on writing. I took online courses that fit the budget of my weekly allowance. Since I stayed home, Manuel thought it was best if I didn't take any contraception. We started trying for a baby when I turned eighteen without success. A year ago, he proposed. He vowed to take me to the best doctors so we could fix this fertility issue.

My father had promised to pay for the treatment after the wedding.

Now, it seemed like there would be no wedding.

"The pregnancy isn't confirmed," I informed him, eyeing Aram to make sure he heard.

"You'll confirm it soon, I'm sure." His tone was demeaning. "I bet you're proud of yourself for fucking a prince. The Wraiths are all unhinged. You deserve each other. Have fun getting fatter while carrying his filthy baby."

"What are you saying? I'm not pregnant with his baby! It's Manuel's," I yelled into the phone.

My father's snicker sounded like venom to my ears. Something snapped in him. "Manuel can't have any children. He only dated you because we made a deal. I'd pay for his fertility treatment if he kept you in his home in a controlled environment."

"That's not true," I countered. My father's words didn't register. I knew that the first months of our relationship had been fake, but he'd changed later.

If he was infertile, then I wasn't pregnant. The tests had been wrong.

"You went to Katantia. You got knocked up. I'll soon be removing Manuel from my business. I don't want to see either of you again," my father revealed. He took pleasure in ruining my life.

I didn't know what to say. "I can't afford to stay here. I need to come back."

“Good luck getting out of there.” He cleared his throat. “I suggest you get your holes ready for penetration. You’ll have to become a whore to make ends meet over there.”

“But—”

He hung up on me.

I put the phone down. Aram was my final hope. He didn’t want me here. He’d kick me out soon enough, for sure.

I didn’t notice how hard I’d been crying until Aram addressed me, “Stop crying.”

“I don’t...”

“Stop crying, or I’ll find you a good reason to cry. I’m sure you saw Kamila in the hospital. I doubt that you want to end up like that.” His words were harsh. I sobbed, but I nodded. I wiped the tears from my cheeks.

I hugged myself. “I don’t feel very well.”

Spencer had gone and did it again.

“Guess what? I don’t care.”

“Why are you so mean?” I swallowed, taking a step back. “I want to leave Katantia.”

“Well, you can’t.” There was a smirk on his face that I was sure I’d see in my nightmares.

“I don’t belong here,” I argued.

“You do now. Your father says my son impregnated you, but I don’t think that’s true. My son is too busy marrying Kamila right now. I think you fucked little Ryan. I heard that he paraded you around the city the other day.” His hand reached out, touching my belly. I twitched away from the touch, but he grabbed my arm and kept me in place. “This baby is ours. Once it’s out, it’ll be sold. You’ll be sent away to live in the inner city streets along with the other whores. You singlehandedly destroyed the plans I had with Spencer. He doesn’t want to invest in the country anymore. He’s withdrawing any currently active investments. He’s cutting all ties with us. It’s all because you’ve embarrassed him. He calls

you a whore. In this country, we can work with that. Whores make for the best lay.”

“That’s not true. I didn’t... I’m engaged. I didn’t sleep with anyone...” A lump formed in my dry throat.

He slapped my cheek. I almost lost my footing.

“Stop lying.” He closed his eyes. “I’ll only keep you on the premises because your father might have a change of heart. He has time until your baby is out of your pathetic body. Then, it’s over. You’ll be in our system.”

With half a beating heart, I replied, “I can’t live here. I’m not made for this.”

“Katantians aren’t born. They’re made.”

CHAPTER 29

KAMILA



MY HEAD HURT.

I felt terrible. It was like a ton-heavy stone had dropped on my body and crushed me.

Felicita and I had pushed our limits for Aram before. I was convinced that she had sold me out to Aram. She had never attempted to protect me before. How did I repay her when she did? By lying on the floor and allowing the men to do whatever they wanted to her.

I wanted to slap myself.

I hated them. I despised the Cross family, but it was still Travis's family. I didn't want him to lose his closest people. I didn't mean to hurt her.

My behavior led to Felicita's pain.

Mandy had left early for the palace. Her father had called in.

Weston left soon after that. He had work to do. I assured him I'd manage just fine on my own.

I kept myself busy for a couple of hours.

I watched Felicita's door, observing that Valentina had stayed. I saw her freak out when her mother woke up. I didn't know where Ryan was.

Stepping outside of my room, I noticed two nurses, one male, and one female, walking by me to get to Felicita. They left the door open, so I stepped into the doorway, staying there.

I kept my distance as they asked her subtle and calm questions. Eventually, they left. I approached mother and daughter.

Moments like these, I had to admit to myself that I envied Valentina. She had a loving father and mother. Her family was set up right. That was the surface. Then I remembered what I truly knew about the Cross family. Travis was gay in an unhappy straight marriage. His wife was cheating on him right in front of his face. I should be wary of what I was jealous of.

“Why are you standing there like that?” Valentina asked, jaded. She didn’t let her mother out of her vision. “Sit down. You’re making me nervous.”

There was no fabrication in her voice. Her sincerity was scary. It was like she was an entirely new person. I took a seat near the wall, away from daughter and mother. Felicita didn’t have any apparent bruises, but I had heard that she needed stitches down there. I’d been lucky; I didn’t need stitches. I’d passed out because of exhaustion and low blood sugar.

When I had last seen Valentina, Aris was all she had cared about. Right now, she seemed protective of her mother.

Felicita didn’t speak much. She observed as her daughter and I conversed.

“Did they tell you what happened?” I asked Valentina. She nodded. “Do you hate me now?”

“More than I did before?” Valentina glanced at me. Her eyes were sincere for once. “No, my amount of hate for you is the same. I’m still a cockroach in your eyes.”

I didn’t want to apologize, having been taught to never apologize by the king. I was a royal. I had a free pass, he could say. However, my mom would tell me to right my wrongs. One day, I’d pay for my cruel behavior toward Valentina.

I turned to Felicita. “I apologize for my behavior. We’re in this together. I’m sorry. It was only my period, and you—”

Felicita’s voice was weak and dry when she interrupted me, “I’m sorry, too, for not standing up for you earlier.”

Valentina's eyes teared up. She turned away, quietly sobbing. What the hell was happening? She held on to her mother's hand like she was never going to let her go.

"Dad says you're a nice person," Valentina revealed. Travis shouldn't say those things. Our friendship was a secret. "You're sexual and free. I envied you. I watched you when I was younger. You were an idol for me, doing whatever the fuck you wanted to do. You garden, for fuck's sake. That's so boring, but you make it cool. Honestly, I wish I could have your strength. Like Aram, Aris surely makes me test my limits every day."

The first sign that this wasn't a joke. Valentina talked about sexuality. She was honest. There was no distraction in the form of a sexy dress or a lustful undertone in her voice. Bare and emotional, she had come to visit her mother.

My heart broke. I began, "We bring so much trouble..."

I didn't know who that was directed at, but when Felicita saw my tears fall and my sobbing begin, she urged her daughter to comfort me in a whisper.

If this was a typical day, I would push Valentina off my body. I would call her a cockroach and curse her out. Today, I embraced Felicita's daughter. For once, I was able to forget my hatred.

The relaxing moment didn't last long.

Aram and Travis barged in on us. The looks on their faces showed anger, curiosity, and bewilderment, but each had different reasons.

After the initial shock of seeing two mortal enemies embracing, Travis hurried to his wife. They spoke to each other in loving whispers. Felicita was barely audible.

The king didn't show any remorse. "I came to pick you up. We're going home."

Valentina attempted to speak, but I cut her off. Enough people had gotten into danger because they spoke up for me. I said, "The doctor said I need to check in with her before I leave."

Aram agreed.

Valentina held my hand in awe. She seemed lost. I was confused about her idolizing me. I shouldn't be anyone's idol. I was a dirty slut with nasty desires. There was nothing about me that was valuable.

"You should go and rest," Felicita suggested with a smile. She hadn't glanced at Aram once. I wanted to cry again. I was too old for this shit. I still couldn't control my emotions. I missed my mother.

Deep inside, Felicita knew that Aram would never willingly allow me to rest in his presence. If he wanted me to rest, he wouldn't have picked me up.



WHEN WE ENTERED THE ELEVATOR TO LEAVE THE HOSPITAL, I felt the tension. I had a tampon in. He wouldn't, not after yesterday. Lies. Of course, he would.

"I spoke to your friend Adonis's father today," Aram revealed. I shivered. "He gave me a box of condoms. He said that they are a new breed. They are so thin that you don't feel the difference."

"Uh-huh." I looked at the floor numbers. Why was the elevator so slow? I had to leave the king's presence. ASAP.

In a swift move, Aram stopped the elevator right between floor two and three. My heart almost jumped out of my chest when he claimed me.

Aram took off my pants and panties. "Take it out."

I reached between my legs and found the blue cord. Aram had a tissue ready for me. He had come prepared. I pulled on the blue cord. Everything was working against me, conspiring to drive me crazy.

And I was going straight to hell for giving in. My mom would hate me for not standing up for myself.

I wrapped the tampon in the tissue and watched as Aram stroked his cock to an erection. He dressed his cock with the new condom.

“Come here.”

I nodded, stepping closer to him. Aram grabbed my thighs, holding me up.

Aram pressed his back against the elevator wall. The king was fit. He would carry me for now. The fucker was never tired.

I moved my hips back and forth, ready for this shit to be over with. *Work. Work. Work.*

Aram settled inside me, and I allowed myself a break. I closed my eyes, feeling the king’s cock inside of me. I forgot my inner hate and pretended that this was a man closer to my age and that he cared for me. I acted like I wanted to love him because he was my man, not my... I thought of the years we could spend with each other, evolving.

I stopped before I could start crying again. I couldn’t do this anymore.

Aram kissed my neck while I rode his cock, making me hate his every fiber. The condom manufacturers deserved a bit of praise. I almost didn’t feel the condom around Aram’s cock.

He came while inside of me.

I faked my orgasm. Of course, Aram bought it. He only cared about his empty balls anyway. After he was done, he discarded me to the side while he straightened his clothes.

“Get another tampon. Wash your face. We’re leaving in five. The car’s downstairs,” Aram ordered, sending me upstairs to the nurses. Sighing and shaking, I left the elevator. I found the nurses quickly, asking them for directions and more tampons.

Soon, Aram and I left the hospital. Thankfully, the traffic was light. The driver dropped the king off at the palace. Then I was taken to my home.

When the car was out of sight, I decided to take a walk. The wind was strong. I was in the mood to feel it mess up my hair. I wanted to feel the cold breeze on my skin. I wasn't ready to face the four walls of my home.

CHAPTER 30

WESTON



WHEN I CAME OVER TO KAMILA'S HOME AFTER WORK, I didn't have many expectations. Perhaps a blowjob, here and there, who was counting. As soon as Mandy opened the door, I realized this would be an entirely different type of hangout.

She let me in, but she fled to her room right away, hiding her face from me.

I climbed up the stairs behind her, trying to catch hold of her. She was too quick. She mumbled, "Go away. Wait downstairs."

I didn't budge. We reached Mandy's room. She crept under her covers while I stood at the doorway. Her whimpers were uncomfortable and loud.

Through the open window, I could see the roof of the palace, hidden amongst tall trees. Darkness was taking over Katantia. The breeze blowing through the window was fresh but not that cold.

Mandy had her arms placed in front of her body like she was trying to form a shield. She didn't want me to look at her.

"What happened?" I asked her.

The brunette girl hesitated.

"Answer when I ask you a question," I added, running a hand through my hair. "It's a fairly simple concept."

She scowled. "I don't want to see you right now."

All the lights were turned off in Kamila's house. The palace's lighting ruined a perfect night sky.

"My pretty little whore, you don't get to dismiss me." She let out a painful small sob. I added, "Tell me who made you cry."

"Our fathers think that you or Ryan impregnated me. Therefore, my father doesn't want me back. My engagement is over. Aram blames me for the deals that will never happen with Spencer. I can stay here until the alleged baby is born. Then they're sending me away to become a whore in the city center," she explained, sobbing all the way through the statement.

I stepped inside her room. "We need to see if you're pregnant then."

"What happens then, huh?" She seemed exhausted. "I don't think I'm pregnant. Spencer let it slip that Manuel's infertile and that he only dated me because Spencer promised him something in exchange."

"That's a severe invasion of privacy."

"Says the guy whose father rapes his..."

"Well, you're right. I'll give you that." I added, "You don't have to worry about your safety. I'll keep you by my side..."

I interrupted him, "I want you to leave. I can't stand the sight of anyone right now. I need some time to process..."

"There are a couple of things I have to tell you. You're going to hate me for keeping this from you," I blurted out.

Her glance turned to me. I couldn't define the look on her face. It bewildered me.

Mandy's eyes were big. She was afraid again, or that was what I thought. Her voice was strained. I would love to be doing her instead of telling her this secret right now. I had no idea how she was going to react. "Tell me."

"You know that Spencer Rawlins has investments in Katantia. Over the last couple of years, when we were close to bankruptcy, Spencer helped Aram out." Of course, she rose

from the bed. Her mouth was open in shock. “I’ve not yet found out why he was willing to help us, but I will soon. I doubt that he did it out of the kindness of his heart.”

“Why didn’t you tell me earlier?” she asked me. I hated the disappointment in her voice. She ran her hand through her hair and started pacing around her room. “I can see my father sending me here as a punishment for you guys. Once again, I’m another pawn in his stupid and pathetic game. Here I thought I was playing a game—”

“Shut up. Stop belittling yourself like that,” I intervened. Mandy despised her father. I got that message loud and clear.

Watching her pace around made my dick hard. Her body was alive. She was taken aback by what I had told her, so she didn’t worry about hiding her skin from me.

I had to tell her the final piece. “Travis and his family didn’t come here voluntarily. Travis owed your father money. Spencer decided to send him here to pay his debts by working for Aram. I don’t know what connects these two and why they work so closely. If you’ve really managed to make Spencer remove himself from Katantia...”

She stopped and gazed at me, covering her pretty mouth with her hand. I foresaw tears, and a moment later, they became a reality.

“Why did he never tell me?” she asked when I put my arms around her. She was shaking. “I’m his daughter. Does Valentina know? Ryan? They must hate me...”

“Only a number of people know.”

“How can you know?”

“I have a source.”



WHILE WE WAITED FOR THE HOMEMADE PIZZA TO BAKE downstairs in the kitchen, Mandy scrolled through her phone

messages. She was in a better mood than earlier, but her crankiness wasn't entirely gone.

"I can't believe this guy," she exclaimed, fuming.

"What is it?"

She read out loud, "I'm sorry for not contacting you any sooner. Life in Chicago's been different since you left. I think your father called you. He told you some things that I'm not proud of. However, I don't know if I can forgive you for cheating on me, so I guess we're square. Our relationship is real. Please, believe me. I know Spencer claims that you'll stay there, but I don't think you should stay there. I'll let you stay the promised three months. I'll pay for your flight back home. You're mine. I won't let him leave you in Katantia to become a nobody's whore."

She scoffed.

I said, "He sounds like a model boyfriend."

"I know, right?"

"At least, he'll pay for your flight back," I pointed out.

"He's playing games. I can't take it any longer. He can't be trusted." She sounded determined. She asked, "When's your wedding?"

"Soon. We don't have an exact date yet. There's a couple of guests that we have to accommodate, but it'll most likely happen on Kamila's birthday..." I rambled.

"I'll stay until after the wedding. You'll help me with that," Mandy stated.

"What do I get out of that? I'll be risking my family's safety by helping you," I countered playfully.

"Payment will be determined at a later date."

PART III



CHAPTER 31

MANDY



I DIDN'T WANT TO RETURN TO MANUEL. IF HE PAID FOR MY flight, I owed him something. Now, I knew what owing him something meant.

Demonstrating what a solid girl I was, I preferred owing Weston.

"I want to know now. What do I get out of flying you out of here?" Weston asked. The smirk on his face was unquestionably attractive, but I was too distraught to pay it any attention.

"You get eleven hours to do what you want with me, nothing more. We go back to being platonic friends after that," I suggested, exhilarated at what that entailed. "The flight's approximately eleven hours long. I don't have money to pay you, so that's all I can do for you."

I agreed to have sex with him. That was Katantia for you. Spiking Manuel would be nice, but I didn't care about his reaction anymore. If they all thought I fucked Weston, I might as well do it and see what the fuss was all about.

"Let's set some rules, shall we?" Weston offered. I sat down on the edge of the bed. He joined me. "Being a

whore isn't all that easy as you make it out to be right now."

His tone was humorous. It soothed me. "Now, do you know what your offer means to a guy like me?"

“Nothing,” I swiftly responded. “You can have any girl you want.”

“Any girl but that new girl prime pussy, you know what I’m saying?” Weston admitted, sounding like a guy from those cliché New York City movies. He didn’t speak in an accent I could define. When he spoke, I was reminded of all the influences Katantians had. “I didn’t ask you to offer yourself up to me. You did that voluntarily in case anyone’s wondering.”

“But you would’ve, eventually,” I commented.

He placed his hand on my thigh. I didn’t flinch at the touch. I leaned into it. He raised his eyebrows. “I didn’t. In fact, Kamila would kill me if I made you that kind of offer. I would’ve done it for free.”

“That’s what everybody says.” I rolled my eyes.

He rubbed my thigh with his right hand. I felt tingles all over, comfortable ones. “If you want to have sex with me to anger some people, all you need to do is to say so. You don’t want to be mine for eleven hours. That’s a risky deal. I’m saying that to protect you.”

“What a gentleman you are,” I responded, glaring at him. I crossed my arms in front of my chest. I didn’t want to admit that he affected me. He didn’t need to know that I didn’t miss Manuel at all.

“Words matter. I’m not going to sit here and let you play ping-pong with your words.” He removed his hand from my thigh. “I’m not a gentleman. I don’t claim to be. I live in Katantia.”

I suddenly felt like a child. Probably because I was one in comparison to him.

“I’ve only ever had sex with Manuel,” I confessed, rubbing my wrists. “I’m not as mature about these things as you seem to be. I can’t stand on a stage and have sex with people spontaneously. That’s not me.”

I cleared my throat. I needed to be better than that if I wanted to get out of this country. “Anyway, I’m sorry for

teasing you.”

“That’s not my issue. You can tease me all you want. I need you to know whether you want to fuck me or not. Hiding behind a payment isn’t going to work. You aren’t acclimated to these things.”

I swallowed. “What if I wanted to be?”

I couldn’t look him in the eyes. My gaze was lowered, ashamed that I had confessed such a thing. He took my chin in with his hands, slightly lifting it. “Do you want to be?”

Being forced to face the challenge, I felt turmoil inside of me. The type of turmoil that resembled butterflies with a mixture of anxiety. I wasn’t pretty enough. I wasn’t enough, period.

“I think so,” I replied.

“Mandy,” he warned me.

“I know so.”

“Good.”

He let my chin go. “I’ll pick you up tomorrow.”

I nodded.

I could still smell him on me after he left Kamila’s house.



AFTER A SECRETIVE VISIT TO A MUTE WOMAN WHO APPEARED to be a gynecologist, it was confirmed that I wasn’t pregnant. She hadn’t asked about my period or the reappearing pain in my lower abdomen. I hadn’t mentioned it voluntarily either. Kamila drove us home, making me keep a vow of secrecy over what had happened.

A couple of hours later, when the sun was setting on Katantia, I found myself in an empty Italian restaurant with Weston. He had asked the staff to set our table outside, but they had refused to do so, stating that the weather was risky. I had picked up on that, too. Throughout my stay here, the wind

had become chillier when we were supposed to be in a climate that didn't experience this sort of temperature drops. "A storm is coming," the staff had told us.

They sat us close to the windows so we'd have a perfect view of the city nevertheless. Weston had taken me to the Italian rooftop restaurant of one of the highest buildings in the country. It had been emptied before our arrival.

An hour out of our eleven-hour deal had passed. We had only driven here, ordering our food. The fear Weston induced upon me earlier seemed irrelevant, but I was aware that the night was young. I couldn't trust him yet. I was unsure if I ever could.

Kamila had once again helped me with my outfit. Reluctantly, but she had. I didn't feel comfortable in a dress, so I put on jeans, boots, and one of Kamila's see-through proper shirts. Kamila agreed that I shouldn't wear a dress in public in this country. It would send the wrong message. Her exact words had been, "I know what sort of message we convey to you. I don't want you to fall victim to it. Dress like you want to. He doesn't own you."

You are fortunate not to be a permanent resident of this country."

I'd be leaving Katantia after the wedding. My heart plummeted at the thought of returning to Chicago. I'd have to move quietly.

"What's on your mind?" Weston asked, taking a sip of his pre-dinner bourbon. His gaze was on Katantia, yet he still noticed my absent mind.

The city's view fascinated me. It drew you in from up here. It made me want to stay and discover every corner of the country. Up here, I forgot what went on down there in the streets. The neighborhood was nice around this building. It resembled the financial districts from back home with all of its modern infrastructures.

As Weston had parked his car in an underground car park, he had told me I shouldn't wander off without him. A couple

of blocks down from this building, one of the roughest neighborhoods of Katantia was ready to eat me alive.

“I’m scared of home,” I confessed.

He put his bourbon on the table, glancing over at me. “You’ll be leaving soon, don’t worry. Aram isn’t the type to walk into Kamila’s home...”

I shook my head. I interrupted him, “I mean Chicago. I don’t know what I’ll find when I return.”

“You can do anything over there, can’t you?” he asked with a genuine smile. “It’s way better than here. I’m sure.”

I inclined my head to the left. “The outside world is similar, less on the nose than Katantia. I don’t think I’ve ever made a major decision in my life outside of the one where I wanted to visit Valentina to invite her to my wedding.”

“So what did you do in Chicago then? Your file revealed very little.” His tone was inquisitive with a gentle touch. He didn’t look at Katantia anymore. It was titillating to steal his attention from his precious home. I had to admit that it took away my breath a little bit.

“What do you mean?” Baffled, I couldn’t really think of a response.

“Shouldn’t American girls go to college? Join sororities? Date a football player during senior year?” He listed those things with a smile on his face as if he was reminiscing something from his past.

“I never went to college. I had the grades and the will to go, but I couldn’t finance it. My dad was blocking any loans I wanted access to. Plus, Manuel wasn’t fond of the idea,” I explained. “I moved in with Manuel. He became the sole breadwinner. I took over the housewife role.”

“That’s why you want to get married so young, then. You feel indebted to Manuel because he took you in,” Weston commented. “That sounds so Katantian. I would’ve thought Americans are more modern than that.”

I sighed. “It’s complicated. We feel indebted to each other. When I could’ve let Manuel go, I took him back after he hurt me.”

“What did he do to hurt you?” Weston asked, lifting the bourbon to his lips.

“He fabricated a relationship with me before I was eighteen, taking my virginity at seventeen because my father had promised him a job in one of his companies.”

Weston raised his eyebrows, obviously stunned at my statement.

“I know. I’m silly for letting him do the same thing all over again.”

“History repeats itself,” Weston added. I nodded. “Do you think you’re over him?”

“If Katantia has taught me something, ironically, it’s that I can make it on my own. It’s the first time that I’m somewhere alone, without the supervision of my father or Manuel. Yes, my father paid for my stay, but... I don’t know. I feel free.”

Weston smirked, putting his bourbon down. “Freedom is so fragile.”

“Indeed.” I added, “Who would’ve thought I’d feel free here out of all places?”

“You’re not free right now.” He pointed at his watch. “You’re mine to do with as I please, remember?”

“So far, your intentions seem pure.”

“I’m buttering you up.”

“I thought so.”

We gazed at each other dreamily like we were reading each other’s minds. Weston said, “You know, we have the strangest thing in common.”

“What’s that?” I asked, sipping my water.

“Both of our mothers are dead.”

“Oh.” Bewildered, I put my water down. I hadn’t thought about it that way.

“We’ve never talked about it,” Weston pointed out. I heard a song in my head, one of those playing in Kamila’s car. I felt a chill run down my spine.

“I don’t make a habit of discussing it.” It was the most remarkable memory of my childhood. I had been ten years old, with my birthday coming up soon. My eleventh birthday was still the worst birthday I ever had.

“These houses that we live in were built on my mother’s insistence. She wanted her children to have homes outside of the palace,” Weston told me. His eyes were warm, but the rest of his body stood frozen. “I moved out of the palace when she died. Aris and I moved into the house we live in together now.”

“How old were you?”

“Kamila was sixteen, Aris was fifteen, and I was thirteen, almost fourteen.” He must have sensed the pity in my face when he added, “It was a long time ago. We managed.”

“How would you describe her? Was she like the other Katantians?” I asked. I gulped down another sip of my water. It wasn’t cold, but it wasn’t warm either. I was this close to asking the staff for a couple of ice cubes.

“My mother was a strong-minded woman.” He picked up his bourbon, but he didn’t raise the glass to his lips. “I remember her clearly. In her final years in our life, she was present. She spent so much time with us, taking us to the vacation home. She wanted us away from the palace as much as she could. I’ve never been able to understand why my mother married and had the King’s children. I remember her vividly despising the palace and what it stood for.”

“Perhaps she wasn’t always like that,” I added.

“She wasn’t.” He cleared his throat. “Just because I’m a Katantian that doesn’t mean I want to discuss this. If you ask anyone on this island, they’ll tell you that she was a prime example for Katantian women. She was the most socially and

sexually engaged queen the country had ever seen. That explains why she and my father were together, but it doesn't explain her later change."

"We'll never understand some mysteries." My water was empty now. Our eyes were connected. I heard the music again, old rock with heavy guitars. It didn't freak me out. I remained calm throughout. It didn't cause me a panic attack. Then, I started seeing the car again, the one my mother had been driving on the night of her death. I wasn't there when it happened, but I could hear the engine. My father had lots of fast cars at his disposal. All of them sounded the same to me. I heard the deadly screeches of the tires as she rode into her death. "I'll never understand why Mom killed herself although she had it all. She didn't seem like she wanted more out of life. She wasn't like your mom. Mine was more secluded. She almost seemed calculating. She was rich and pretty, everything the women in her circles wanted to be. I never saw her happy, but that wasn't an emotion she ever showed. Taking her life seemed so unlike her."

"Mine did, too."

"What?"

"My mother killed herself."

I gasped. "But..."

"Yeah, Aram didn't let the information out. He said she was killed in a plane accident to maintain the public image of Katantia," Weston explained. Now he took a generous sip of his bourbon. This wasn't something I was supposed to know. My heartbeat raced. "Just like with yours, it was nothing I had ever suspected she'd do."

He quieted at the sight of something moving behind me.

The food was served. We laid off the touchy subjects for a while.



I FELT INCREDIBLY FULL AFTER THE DINNER WE HAD consumed. Weston didn't seem affected by the bourbon at all. His eyes were clear. He was ready to drive us somewhere new.

“What have you always wanted to do but never got the chance to?”

The engine of the Wraith was on. Weston's hands were on the steering wheel and the stick shift. I shifted in the passenger's seat. “I want to honor my mom.”

“Wow. I didn't expect that,” Weston deadpanned. He knew the sentiment, though. I knew he did. “I was thinking more along the edges of bungee jumping, eating the hottest chili that doesn't kill you or scuba diving. Go ahead, make me look like a heartless person.”

“I want a tattoo of my mother's name, but I've always been afraid of needles,” I told him, feeling warmth engulf me. Manuel hated the idea of tattoos. He forbade me from getting one. Silly as I was, I allowed him to get away with it.

“It's time to test your limits then.” His playfulness left the car when he asked, “Where?”

I drew lines across my wrists.

“Okay, then.” The motor howled. Weston continued, “I know the perfect place for us to visit next.”

“Your eleven hours are ticking away, friend,” I reminded him. We had become friends in this short amount of time. I didn't understand what Katantia stood for, but I understood the man sitting next to me.

“I'm perfectly aware.”

“Why are you taking me to get a tattoo then?”

“Because that's what you want to do.” He left the underground car park smoothly. We didn't even pay for a ticket.

“The eleven hours are for you, though. They're your payment,” I pointed out. I glanced at the financial district as we passed it by. These were the only tall buildings in the country. I counted five. They weren't that high by American

standards, barely thirty floors. They had their own distinctive style, though. Kept plain and simple, they were painted in white without overusing glass or fancy designs.

“I peed on you the other day,” he responded, sounding awfully confident. I felt like giggling. The experience had been intriguing. “I don’t need eleven hours to get between your legs, Mandy.”

“You’re right. You need way more, somewhere around two weeks and counting,” I told Weston.

“We’ll see about that.”

CHAPTER 32

WESTON



“I WOULDN’T SAY NO TO NIPPLE PIERCINGS NOW THAT I’VE GOT the hang of needles,” Mandy revealed, examining the lilac-colored body piercing with curiosity. My cock twitched at her words. I fought an internal battle not to walk around with a visible hard-on in public. The royal family had been taught better than that even if my brother kept waving his dick around.

Mandy was high. I was sure of it. We had spent three hours in the best tattoo shop Katantia had to offer. I had called Lee, the shop’s best artist. I had told him to open up the shop for us.

“The recovery is long. It’s sporadic for Katantians to get them unless the husband is a major masochistic douchebag,” Lee explained, getting the bill ready for us at the cashier’s desk.

“Aren’t most Katantians douchebags, though?” Mandy asked, taking a playful jab.

“You’re right about that. Sorry,” Lee said, unapologetically glancing up at me. I shrugged without a care in the world. “This is the first tattoo on a girl that I’ve done in years where I’m not tattooing the husband’s name on her genitals and whatnot. If it weren’t for my girl, I would’ve left this country a long time ago. She enjoys the kink too much.”

Mandy put down the jewelry, inspecting her new tattoo. She had branded herself with her mother’s name. It wasn’t anything extravagant, but she and Lee had sat down, taking

their time to choose the font, size, and color. They'd gone for black and a formal font, nothing experimental after all.

"How can you talk so freely in front of Weston?" Mandy asked Lee.

I smirked when Lee handed me the bill. I gave him my card. He swiped it. I signed his copy of the bill. I could've let my name pay for it, but I decided against it. He responded, "Weston helped me out with my girl. I met her in... Can I say that in front of her?"

"Go ahead," I assured him. I didn't care at this point. I had seen through Mandy. The knowledge I gained told me she was trustworthy. Okay. Perhaps it was my cock who felt that way, but who was judging?

"She worked for one of the worst whorehouses. Her boss wanted to tattoo a number on her like she was his cattle. The prince and the princess, who, by the way, has promised me exclusive piercing and tattoo rights to her body, got my girl out. I..."

"You're treating her like an object, of course," I added with humor, but we knew there wasn't anything funny about pretending to own a woman. Lee was one of the men who had recently moved to Katantia and still couldn't wrap their heads around how serious people took the lifestyle. This wasn't your average BDSM sex club. "And we need to leave. I have approximately two hours left with this girl. I won't waste them by discussing your sex life."

We shook hands. Mandy thanked us both for her new tattoo, then we left the shop.

"I didn't know there were those types of men on Katantia," she commented, flabbergasted.

"What type are you referring to?" I turned my car's engine on, the final destination of our eleven-hour trip vivid in my mind. We drove away. "The savior types? We have a whole bunch of them. Some men come here to satisfy that exact need. It makes them feel powerful. There's something intricately satisfying when you save a girl from her dark fate.

For some, it's better than getting their cocks sucked every day."

"And for you?" she dared to ask, watching the buildings speed buy.

"Can't you see?" I replied, sighing. "I can't even save Kamila properly. What makes you think I have a savior complex? I'm a simple guy. I live with what my reputation earns me."

"You're marrying Kamila, for God's sake," she countered, crossing her arms in front of her chest.

"But I don't get off on it."



THE SMALL BEACH TOWN ON THE SOUTH SIDE OF KATANTIA was a quiet place at this time at night. The motor of the Wraith didn't announce our arrival because I wasn't in the mood to make it howl and draw attention to us.

The windows in the car were down. We heard the waves as we passed several beach houses to reach the family vacation home. Mandy studied every sidewalk and every corner with her curious eyes. She breathed in the ocean. It relaxed her.

"What are we doing here?" she asked when we pulled over at my vacation home, the one with the bigger fences and the wider distance to the next houses. I didn't park the car in the garage yet, enjoying the cold and eerie ocean night. "What is this place?"

"You could use a break from the palace," I told her. Honestly, I needed it, too. After the engagement party, Aram had his minions fill all of our schedules with wedding meetings. We needed sponsors because he wouldn't finance the wedding with the palace's money. Aram hadn't done so for Aris. He wouldn't do that for me either.

Clothes. Food. Guests. Flowers. Cameras. Interviews.

I was sick and tired of it. I would only relax the moment Kamila became my wife.

“Time’s running out,” I reminded her, gesturing at my watch. There was less than an hour left in our deal. I had managed to hold back thus far. I wouldn’t change now.

“Will you take me back to the palace once it’s over?” she asked. Her longing tone didn’t help the situation.

“Do you want me to?” I needed her to say yes. Actually, it’d be perfect if she urged me to return her to the palace right this moment. Us having a little vacation like we had something going on wouldn’t do anyone any good.

“I’d like to explore more of this house. It’s a part of you that I don’t know much about,” she said.

I was giving her the wrong signs. Fuck. Did I care? I cared. We had shared intimate words earlier. This amount of intimacy overwhelmed me. I didn’t like that with any woman other than Kamila. From her perspective, that must have seemed sick. I was one of the Katantian bad guys, the worst of them all, a prince. I approved of all of this.

I parked the car in the garage, in hopes that we hadn’t been seen by too many neighbors. Katantians weren’t curious by nature. We were arrogant and too mixed up in our own worlds to gawk at the neighbor who brought home a foreigner.

We entered the three-story house through an indoor entrance from the garage. I’d told the cleaners to make sure the temperatures were moderate for our stay here. They’d done an excellent job with it.

“I’ll show you to your room. I’m sure you’re exhausted,” I told Mandy, kicking off my shoes in the hall. She did the same, although she had a habit of wearing outdoor shoes inside the house.

“Don’t you want me to stay in one room with you?” she asked.

What else did I need to do? Should I yell Katantia in her face? She was asking a lot of me. I was up for the challenge.

“That wouldn’t be a good idea.” My brother would laugh at me for being so lenient with the new girl, but I had it in me. With her mother’s name on her wrist, I had a visual of mine. There was something unearthly about hurting Mandy now.

“You’re awfully gentlemanly tonight. It’s scaring the hell out of me,” she admitted, tilting her head to the side to study me. She wouldn’t come to any new conclusions. I wore the mask of the prince well.

“I’m trying to lure you into my trap.” That was one of many truths.

“We’re outside of the palace. I don’t feel safe alone,” she explained. Suddenly, tucking her away in my bed didn’t seem like such a bad idea.

I nodded. Mandy was indeed playing with fire tonight.

“What am I sleeping in?” Mandy asked, gazing at the stairs that led upstairs.

“You can pick something from Kamila’s closet. I’m sure she won’t mind.” I made my way around the ground floor of the house, shutting all the windows and letting the blinds down. I hadn’t brought any guards. If we were to be harmed, I’d be hung in the city center by the balls. Kamila would make sure of that. Following that, it’d be our fathers’ turns.

Mandy quietly followed me to every room I checked on the ground floor, but she didn’t enter. She leaned against the doorframe, her eyes taking me in.

“How often do you come here?” she asked me when we reached the living room. This home hadn’t been built with the royals in mind. My mother had urged the King to purchase it in the nineties. If the King had had any say in this house, he would’ve tripled it in size. When Mom was still alive, and we came here with Grandma, we barely had enough room, but it felt like home.

“I come here quite often. It helps me clear the noise. My brother hasn’t stepped foot here since my mom died. As for Kamila, I don’t know. When she takes her car to drive around, nobody bothers her,” I explained.

We grabbed some water for Mandy from the kitchen. Then I led her upstairs. I showed her my brother's room decorated in his teen phase fantasies of fast cars, police, and *Star Wars*. Next up was Kamila's room. She had the biggest room of all. Her walk-in closet didn't fit all of her clothes. She had them sorted all around her room. The shelves and racks were covered in protective bags. She had oversize windows, overlooking the ocean beautifully.

Mandy carefully walked into her closet, taking a minute to pick up her sleeping outfit. We left the room with her carrying two very light pieces of clothing. She asked, "Who's that?"

Too distracted by her choice of clothing, I hadn't noticed that Mandy held a picture in her hand. She explained, "I found it hidden underneath a basketball jersey."

Inspecting the picture, I viewed a pink-haired Kamila and one of her teenage friends. The boy in the picture wasn't a teenager. She'd been sixteen, and he looked older. Observing the two, embracing like friends who knew each other too well, I felt a need to protect Kamila from the older blond boy. I'd been twelve or so when this guy hung around Kamila. One day, he was gone. Fuck.

This was Colton Richmond. His sister... Her suicide had caused the first scandal of the 2000s on Katantia. Many people never looked at the king the same after he kept being friends with that poor girl's rapist. Thankfully, he had a heart attack nine years ago. The same couldn't be said about the king.

"It's probably his basketball jersey in the closet. I don't know his name, though," Mandy guessed, her eyes going over the picture. "They looked cute together."

"He must be retired now," I told her. Kamila never talked about him. I placed the picture on one of the cupboards. If she'd let go of the past, I wouldn't remind her of it. "Kamila had pink hair when mom died. He left Katantia right around that time. I don't think they've ever seen each other again."

After Mandy took one last look at the image, we left Kamila's room, stalking toward my space at the end of the hallway.

When we entered, the first thing Mandy said was, “There’s nothing here.”

“That’s how I prefer it.” I lived around people. Being alone was one of my biggest fears, and sometimes, I came here to remind myself of how that would be. I enjoyed that pain. I didn’t distract myself with useless decorations. I had a bed, a small closet, and a bathroom.

We didn’t talk much more.

She went into the bathroom first. When she came out, she’d changed into the borrowed clothes. She chuckled. “I think Kamila wore this when she was a teen. It’s tight all over.”

It was tight, indeed. I didn’t recall ever seeing Kamila in this particular combination. That made it easier for me to focus on the person in front of me. Her dark hair loosely fell over her shoulder, trying to hide her juicy tits underneath. She’d taken off her bra, and the white shirt she’d chosen was short-sleeved and skin-tight. The popstar’s name on her chest didn’t distract me from her nipples poking through the fabric. I could see a future in which she got nipple piercings. It would be fun to tease her with them.

That wasn’t all. The gray cotton shorts she sported outlined the junction between her thighs. I knew that somewhere in Katantia, my grave was being prepared. Honestly, with Aram as the king, you never knew. When she turned to place her clothes on the only cupboard in the room, I felt every movement her ass made.

This would be an interesting night.



I DIDN’T SLEEP.

Our eleven hours had passed. Mandy was soundly sleeping next to me with her tattooed arm stretched out over her side of the bed. I observed as she inhaled and exhaled slowly.

It dawned on me that I was playing with fire as much as she was. I had failed my mother. For years, I'd neglected Kamila. I was on the right path now, marrying her. I should think ahead. Perhaps, Mandy could help us out with a honeymoon destination. Maybe we could stay at our honeymoon destination forever, away from Aram's claws. Kamila wouldn't find drugs exciting out there in the real world. Her options would be endless. Drugs would lose their interest.

Mandy squirmed next to me. She scooped closer to me, resting her leg over my thigh. Mandy murmured my name in her sleep. I wondered how she wanted me to sit here next to her, all still and observing, while she almost moaned my name. I didn't even need to touch her.

We could help each other out. Perhaps... I shook my head. This wasn't happening. I didn't even know whether Kamila and I would survive the wedding ceremony. Violence wasn't esteemed in our country, but Aram could still hire someone to murder us. He was a cold-blooded animal. He had the powers of a king.

"Mandy, get up," I said, losing my patience. She rubbed her leg over my crotch as if she hadn't heard me. "This is wrong. You need to go to Kamila's room. I'll take you home tomorrow..."

"Stop talking..." She snuggled herself even closer to me, with her head on my chest. It didn't feel heavy. It felt warm and right. "We're sleeping. Sleep. Talk tomorrow."

"I can't. This is wrong..."

"Everybody thinks we're fucking anyway, and nobody's dead yet. Relax." She fucking planted a kiss on my chest. It was the strangest feeling. Kisses were too personal; usually, shared between husbands and objects. I didn't understand the concept. I almost threw up anytime Aris and Valentina kissed.

"Mandy..." Her hand reached for my crotch, where an erection was up and ready for her. "Don't."

“Why?” She didn’t go underneath the fabric yet. She stroked my cock excruciatingly slow. The fucker grew hard as if to make sure I was majorly annoyed. Other girls needed ten times more touching and purring to get me this hard. New girl was forbidden fruit. I, ever the spoiled prince, didn’t react well to that.

“We don’t know each other well. We should get to know one another. Be friends. I’ve been told that’s what girls from out there like,” I offered, swallowing back a groan that would’ve been all hers if I was an amateur. I’d had too much sex in my lifetime. I wasn’t fazed by a couple of strokes above the fucking fabric of my boxer briefs.

Shifting on top of me, her warmth was all over me. I could barely string a coherent thought outside of the realization of her pussy against my thigh and her hand on my cock.

This wasn’t right by any means.

My eyes fell on her tattooed wrist. I’d never intentionally hurt this girl. My brother had grown up with this need to own a woman. He wanted an object. That had been his goal in life. When Valentina came to our shores, Aris changed. She became his goal in life. Their relationship was all shades of fucked up, but, in a way, they owned each other.

I never wanted an object or a family. I’d always been the blank canvas of my family.

I didn’t want to be a savior like Lee. I didn’t require anything but a warm pussy and a blowjob. Here I was, though, testing all my theories and exploring all of my limitations, all for a new girl. All my past girls would hate me, go figure.

It was almost an uncomfortable hiss when I warned her, “Be careful, my pretty little whore. You don’t want to challenge me.”

I couldn’t get over her warm body plastered all over mine. I didn’t get close to other people. I was a prince. I was above intimacy. People wanted to get to me, but not letting them was my job.

“Manuel never let me hover all over him like this,” Mandy mumbled.

“Keep talking about Manuel,” I urged her. Her fingers picked up a rhythm against my cock. She gripped me harder than before. “It kills the erection you’re so proudly holding.”

“Well, then, who the fuck is Manuel?” She lifted herself from my body. “Because I don’t know him.”

I groaned.

“You’ve got your little whore horny now,” she confessed. All from rubbing my member? Katantia. It did something to those girls. It was in the water. “I want what I signed up for. Our eleven hours were not what I had expected.”

“I’m glad not to live up to expectations. That’s my trademark,” I responded, grinning from ear to ear. “Your name’s pretty little whore. Never forget how beautiful you are to me.”

“You’re very hard to read these days. All nice and courteous, full of compliments.”

Now that she had removed her warmth from my body, I missed it. “Someone has to be, or else you’ll taint our image.”

“See? You’re a savior after all,” she replied, the corners of her mouth lifting. She stretched her arms above her head, letting her head fall back. The lifted tight white shirt revealed her lower stomach, almost her belly button. I was dying to reach out and remove that fucking shirt from her body.

“Do you like playing the hero, Mandy?” I asked, rubbing the back of my neck when I’d prefer to rub something much harder. “Do you feel like you can save me?”

“I’ve never been a hero. I’m curious to know what it’s like,” she responded confidently. Her arms plumped next to her. She almost jumped me in response. “I couldn’t make my dad or Manuel better men. Third time’s a charm.”

“There’s no charm or luck on Katantia. You’re either me, or you’re not,” I told her. “Unfortunately, I can’t erase myself.

I have responsibilities. I'm the bad guy in this scenario. You'd despise me if you saw me in my element."

"You've been in your element since I stepped foot into this place," she rebutted. I shook my head. She crossed her arms in front of her chest. Naturally, I fought an internal war not to gawk at her squeezed tits. She wasn't an object. That wasn't what you did as a respectful man on the outside world, I'd been told. "I want to know."

"I can't show you. I wasn't born to own an object. That's not me."

"What's you then?" she inquired. Her fucking curiosity would be the end of me.

"I want a wife," I humored her. That wasn't necessarily a lie.

"You sure know how to charm a girl, Weston." She tilted her head to the side. "I wasn't joking. I want to know what you like."

"You don't."

"Fuck me, or I'm never talking to you again."

I smirked. "You aren't supposed to be begging, remember? You aren't one of us yet, Mandy. Your pussy hasn't been properly fucked yet. You haven't felt taken. You should stop poking the bear."

Tired of words, she leaned forward. My eyes were distracted by the sight of her ass when she pulled me out of my boxer briefs and started licking me. I rolled my eyes in annoyance and pleasure. "That's it."

I grabbed her by her hair, pulling her off my body. I had an idea. Standing up, I readjusted myself. This was something Aris would do. I shouldn't publicly disrespect my future wife, but Mandy was busting my balls, quite literally. I dragged her down the stairs and out of the house. She squirmed and shuffled, but she didn't move to remove herself from my hold entirely.

"Where are we going?"

“To a neighboring whorehouse. You’ll enjoy it. That’s where pretty little whores like you find themselves in their element.”

She gasped. A smile hovered in her expression.

No cars were riding around yet since the sun was only about to rise now. The whorehouse down the street wasn’t as bad as the ones in the city. This establishment was crown-approved. It was a couple of houses on the right from my vacation home. It wasn’t built on the beachside because nobody gave a fuck about the views in there.

When I knocked on the door, I told Mandy, “Get on your knees. Don’t look at anyone.”

“But—”

“Do as I say, or the fun is over.”

She hesitated but eventually asked, “What about a safe word?”

“This is Katantia. There are no safe words.”



AN HOUR LATER, THE NEIGHBORING WHOREHOUSE WAS ON ITS feet, putting on a show for the prince and the new girl. Mandy’s clothes had been removed. She was now in handcuffs, actual metal ones that hurt when shut tight around her wrists. She didn’t flinch. She wore a mask like the whores of the house, protecting her identity from the rest of the bunch.

Couples were fucking all around us. Some girls were using sex toys on their pussies and their asses. Mandy observed the nipple clamps with curiosity. The air was thick, clouded with lust. I liked the fact that there was no music. To me, what was happening all around us was an ordinary commodity. Having Mandy kneel between my legs, watching everyone with wide eyes, was the new part.

My hand was on the top of her head, caressing her hair. She leaned back on my crotch, making it very difficult to stay

sane. I hadn't fully taken her body in when she'd crawled to me naked earlier. I didn't want to give anyone the idea that I cared much about the girl. I had to take a page out of Aris's book and pretend like I didn't give a fuck about anyone.

I was failing miserably. I couldn't keep my eyes away from Mandy as she sat in front of me.

"They get paid to do this?" Mandy asked in a whisper, showing me the side of her face.

I gave her a quick nod. "It's not a dream job. They're on the hunt for a husband to become an object and get out of here."

"If we're honest, having sex for money isn't all that bad," she said, turning her lips upside down. Her brows were drawn together as if she was genuinely considering her statement.

"Somebody's poisoning you. It's not me," I told Mandy, amused. Her hair was soft, plush almost. I had never taken the time to appreciate a woman's hair. "I wash my hands off this madness."

I added, "Ask them if they feel that way tonight after a long shift of endless sex. Tomorrow, they do it all over again. There's really no time to recover. You either fuck or get fired."

"So, they're forced to fuck with sore pussies?" Mandy wasn't drunk. She was actually asking that question soberly.

"Try the other two holes as well."

She gasped. "Wow."

"Indeed."

"Do they have a union for that sort of thing here?"

I almost broke into wholehearted laughter. Then I remembered that Mandy wasn't funny. Creating unions for sex workers came up in the political discussions every year, but Aram vetoed them. "Once Aram's dead, they will."

"That thought makes me horny as hell."

"Stop saying that you're horny," I warned her.

“You’ve brought me here to watch a sex show with you. How am I not supposed to be affected?” Mandy asked, pouting her lips.

I grabbed that lovely dark hair of hers. I pulled at it, lifting Mandy from the floor. She liked me messing with her hair; I noted that. I sat her down on my lap. “First of all, it’s not a sex show.”

She shifted on my lap. I realized how wet she was from what we were witnessing. She asked, “What is it then? We’re not participating.”

I shook my head. She was unbelievable. “You won’t pin this on me tomorrow.”

“I won’t.”

“And you realize that there are no safe words?”

She gave me a quick nod, biting her lip. It was game time. I hadn’t looked at her naked form before, but now she was giving me a free pass.

Mandy leaned into me. She whispered, “Are we really going to do this in front of everyone?”

I tucked her hair away from her neck. I kissed a spot below her ear. She writhed on my lap, reacting to every single movement of my hand. I trailed a line from her collarbone to her tits, testing how her flesh felt against my fingertips. Her tits were the fullest, smoothest, and most perfect addition to her appearance. I could get lost in them. I rolled her nipples. I pinched each one, making her squirm on top of me.

I didn’t kiss her again. Kissing felt too intimate. We weren’t involved. We were curious friends. There was nothing I could offer her.

When I reached between us, where her naked pussy met with my clothed crotch, I cupped her for good measure. She rubbed herself against my hand. I used the friction to play with her. Small moans escaped her, barely audible to anyone but me. Her handcuffed hands were wrapped around my neck, holding me close to her as if I were to escape anytime soon.

“Did they give you the shot when you entered the country?” I asked her. My fingers manipulated her clit. I didn’t go near her hole. I had a reputation to live up to.

“I refused it,” she answered. I grew harder at the three words than at some prime Hole Store employee’s blowjob. I allowed myself a single moment of silence. I envisioned a future in which I decorated her womb with my seed. I could have a family.

I took a deep breath. And another.

Her wet pussy was taunting me, begging to fill her up without protection, but I wasn’t that guy in my most private thoughts. That guy had his life under control. I was crumbling, day by day, barely making it to my own wedding.

“Weston?”

I didn’t frequent the establishment, but they knew the royals. An employee walked by us discreetly, setting a bowl of condoms down on the coffee table next to me.

I grabbed one before I could make the mistake of fucking her raw.

“Are you sure?” I asked her. I stopped fondling her wet folds to give her a moment to think.

“For the first time in my life, yes. I’m absolutely sure.”

That sounded like the sickest declaration of love to my ears.

CHAPTER 33

KAMILA

A WEEK LATER



MANDY AND WESTON WERE ABSENT FOR THE SEVENTH DAY IN a row. Last night, I'd been called in by Aram, so I stayed the night in my room at the palace. I woke up too late to leave unnoticed by the king, so I stayed inside the room. I wanted to be unbothered for the day.

I observed the guards in the freshly groomed garden. The gardeners were trying out styles for the wedding. I had discussed flower arrangements with the responsible team. It was one of the many things I had been given power over while Weston took a spontaneous vacation.

Of course, Aram wasn't pleased. At all.

The time I had to kill didn't pass easily. Guilt was eating me up. Valentina's face didn't leave my mind for a second. It had been days, but I couldn't forget the Cross women. The image of Felicita on the floor, bleeding out, haunted me. It had never affected me before, but I had been rattled awake now. In the past two days, we had started brainstorming wedding dates. Aram would prefer something in late

December, but I disagreed. If I could convince the sponsors to host a wedding in October and preferably on the date of my birthday, I'd be able to overrule Aram's vetoes. Now that we had announced the wedding, it had to happen at some point. If I made sure that the sponsors rejected the idea of a December wedding, I'd be pleased. The fourteenth of October would be a perfect start to my newfound freedom.

I had never dreamed of a wedding, knowing that no man on Katantia would want me. At the same time, no man on Katantia was a perfect fit for me anyway. They were kinky, yes, but the lack of rules rubbed me the wrong way.

I stayed in a small room throughout the day without leaving once. I didn't feel hungry at all. Once night hit, I exited the room I had been staying in, stumbling upon Travis. He was lurking around the offices like a ghost.

"Where were you today?" Travis sounded abrupt and cold. I didn't blame him. There was a sky-high amount of guilt inside of me that was unforgettable.

"I was in the palace."

"Aram looked for you. He doesn't like being ignored," Travis told me. He sounded like a stranger. We had had that conversation before.

"Like I don't know." I added, "I took a day off to plan my wedding. It'll happen on my birthday. I'd appreciate it if you informed the staff. I'll tell Aram myself if you don't want to."

"Fine."

He walked off.

Travis Cross just up and left me standing there like a silly bitch.



THE HOUSE WAS EMPTY. I DIDN'T FEEL LIKE EATING ANYTHING, but suddenly, my eyes got heavy. I wanted to sleep.

So I went to bed.

I woke up to somebody banging on my door. I rubbed my eyes on the way downstairs. When I opened the front door of my house, I was astounded to find Aris waiting there for me. He didn't visit me often.

"Where's everyone? I feel like I'm in the *Walking Dead*," Aris said, bursting into my hallway with energy I couldn't

handle without a cup of coffee.

“I don’t know where your wife is. Hopefully fucking some random dude with a bigger dick than you. Weston and Mandy are at our vacation home.” I went into the kitchen, preparing the coffee machine.

Aris followed me, ignoring my sharp remark about his wife. “Do you think he fucked her?”

“How would I know?” I lied. I knew. Weston had taken Mandy to a whorehouse, multiple times. He didn’t have to tell me with words. They were fucking.

“They’ve been gone for days. I miss him. If he didn’t at least get his dick sucked, he’s a loser,” Aris commented jokingly. Officially, he was one year younger than me. Sometimes, or most of the time, I felt like he had the brain of a fifteen-year-old.

“Can you take your sex talk elsewhere, please?” I was disinterested in what he had to say. He was talking to the wall for all I knew.

“I wanted to check on you,” he said, his eyes reminding me of the king.

“You don’t need to. I’m doing fine on my own,” I reminded him.

He rubbed the back of his neck. He wanted to say something. I could see it in his expression.

But he stayed quiet. After a moment, he left.

CHAPTER 34

WESTON

A WEEK BEFORE



I TEASED HER SLIT WITH MY COCK. I'D PUT ON THE CONDOM. I could sense that eyes were upon us, but I couldn't see past Mandy. Her eyes were hooded as she bit her lip. I watched her expression as it jumped from doubt to lust. I could hear her heartbeat. It made me smirk.

She was overwhelmed, but she didn't urge me to stop.

“Do you want to sit on me and ride me like this?” I asked her. The gasps around the room reminded me that we were in a public Katantian place. Asking questions wasn't at the forefront of sexual activities. There were no consequences for people like me. With Mandy on top of me, that felt wrong. “Or would you prefer to face your audience?”

Mandy swallowed. She rocked back and forth, coating my erection with her wetness. If it were anybody else, they would've shoved themselves inside of her tight pussy already. I exercised the masterful control I'd gained from years and years of endless sex. I couldn't be fazed.

“I don't know...” Her former confidence was dwindling away. One hand was on my cock, but the other was on her ass. I could barely contain her with five fingers. Her plump and soft cheeks mesmerized me. I couldn't wait to fuck her from behind.

In my mind, I had the strangest image of Mandy walking ahead of me on a deserted beach in a long summer dress, laughing and enjoying herself. Gazing into her eyes as she sat

right in front of me, I could get lost in them and the future they held.

That wasn't my future. Mandy would return to the States soon. She'd move on with her life. We were a pit stop in her bigger picture.

"Are you being shy, my pretty little whore?" I asked her, giving her cheeks a squeeze with my hand. Her mouth fell open. She almost rolled her eyes back. She liked her ass getting played with. Noted.

"Shouldn't we go somewhere private? I don't think they want to see me..." she mumbled away.

I interrupted her. "You're the attraction, my pretty little whore. They all want to see what it is that you've got. You've made the private prince come out and play."

I leaned forward, planting another kiss on her neck. "You're doing great. Don't let anyone get to you."

She was pressed against me, making me feel her heart going crazy. Her breathing was rushed. I could hear each tremor. I didn't feel like speeding up. I wanted to treasure this moment, even if it happened in public, and it seemed impersonal to her.

Her pussy had waited long enough. I could hear the wetness as I toyed with her folds. I told her, "Sit on me. Take your time. Get yourself comfortable."

Obedying, she positioned herself on top of my erection. I was letting her take control because she needed it. I didn't want her to shut down on me. This was a pivotal moment in our new friendship, proving our respect and trust for one another.

The fact of the matter was that I wasn't even fully inside of her yet, and she was making me analyze every detail of her breathtaking frame. I wanted to knock her father out for bullying her. She was beautiful. She shouldn't rely on me to tell her. She needed to know the fact.

In one slide, she sat on my cock. She emitted a gasp that almost killed me. She was tighter than any pussy I had ever

fucked. For a moment, I forgot how to breathe. My balls connected with her ass. “You good?”

She gave me a quick nod, then whispered in my ear, “I’ve never done it like this.”

“The position?”

“Usually, I just lie there.”

Introspectively, I rolled my eyes at her dumbass ex who should rot away somewhere with his dick cut off.

Mandy took a deep breath, starting to move. I felt her thick thighs tense as she began to discover how she could use her power best. I helped her with my hands, supporting her ass. When she picked up her pace a notch, I moved one hand to her clit. I rubbed her. She rewarded me with the most delicious moans I’d ever heard.

I had lots of things to think about to keep me from busting a nut the minute I felt her walls suck me in. When she came around me for the first time, I withheld it with all of my strength.

I chose to ignore the fact that the room had gone quiet. I doubted Mandy even noticed. I whispered encouraging words into her ear, knowing she needed them for now. She was programmed to hate her body when everyone in the room was in awe of her, me the most out of everyone. I got to fuck this beautiful creature. I had the pleasure of watching her unfold on top of me, using me to satisfy the urge between her thighs.

Fuck. I controlled my breathing while I let my hands wander. At some point, Mandy glided back. My eyes feasted on her upper body. Her tits were driving me fucking mad. They tempted me to lick or slap them, preferably both. When I met her eyes, I was done for. I didn’t know that eyes could have that sort of effect on me while I was fucking a girl. I usually focused on their other body parts. Mandy sensed it, too. This look we were giving each other knew something we both weren’t ready to admit yet.

If she kept looking at me like this, I’d do something insane like chain her to my bed a couple of houses away and never let

her go.

“My pretty little whore deserves to be seen, don’t you think?” Her eyes never left mine. The response around the room resonated with an overwhelming yes. “Turn around. Let them see you.”

She wasn’t that athletic of a person, but she obeyed my command swiftly when I’d expected her to say no. After lifting her handcuffed wrists, she unseated herself. I saw a moment of hesitation when she stood naked and dripping in the middle of a crowded room, but that faded soon.

I didn’t need to touch my clothes to know they were ruined by her juices. She was into this.

When she sat back down on my lap, I spread my legs to give her more room. She put her handcuffed hands on her thigh. She started riding me like she hadn’t missed a beat.

I slid my hands to one of her tits and to her pussy. Five seconds after I touched her clit, she came again. I hoped her eyes saw the amazement in the crowd. She was the most electrifying presence I had ever seen, damaged, but brave.

I took my hand away from her dripping pussy. I considered my options. There were so many things I could do. I could grab her hair. I could spank her ass... I went with pushing her boundaries. Her ass was too enticing to be ignored. Spreading her cheeks, my index pressed against the tight ring of muscles. Cursing underneath her breath, she let out an uncontrolled moan for me.

Alarms went off in my head. I’d fuck this girl’s ass before she left the country, even if it was the last thing I did on this earth. “My pretty little whore likes her ass to be played with.”

She nodded.

So I played with her ass. She came for me to the point where I lost count. She had become a panting little mess of juices on top of me. With three fingers in her ass and one hand gripping the juiciest tits I ever had the pleasure of touching, I spilled my seed into her. I had this need inside of me to remove the condom and fuck her bare, but I held back.

We weren't together. Mandy was leaving soon.

This wasn't happening.

The noise around me was canceled out for a moment. I relished the slow movements Mandy gave my cock right after I came. At that moment, I regretted telling her to turn around. I wanted to see that look in her eyes again.

When she fell back into my lap, my dick almost slid out of her pussy. I was momentarily lost until I realized she was intimidated by the crowd who had begun cheering for us. I stroked her back. I grabbed her legs, drawing her closer to me. I whispered to her, "They're all clapping for my pretty little whore."

We remained in that position until I heard her stomach growl, announcing that it was time for breakfast.



"THE GIRL'S UPSTAIRS?"

I gave him a quick nod. The cellar was cold and dusty, but it was the only place we could safely conduct this conversation. Nobody came here except my associates and me when we had to discuss something intricate. "Now, tell me what the fuck's so urgent that I got to fuck my girl to sleep?"

"I can't keep this from you any longer."

"Don't make me slap some sense into you," I warned my associate. I didn't have time to analyze his hieroglyphs. "Does this have to do with my mother?"

The quick nod I was given didn't convince me.

"Queen Wraith III was murdered on the king's orders," my source blurted out, feeling relieved. All I felt was a brick crashing into my head. I knew the king was a sick bastard, but I hadn't believed he had played a part in my mother's murder.

The only words I managed to get out were, "Why?"

"She knew too much about his family."

“They were married. How was my mom not supposed to know? Are you trying to tell me Aram killed Mom because she was too curious?” I was physically exhausted. I’d given my all to make sure Mandy stayed asleep tonight. Now, all I wanted was to forget this shit ever happened. Why did I start digging into my family’s past?

“You know Aram.”

“That doesn’t excuse his behavior. How am I supposed to tell this to Kamila? If I told my brother, he’d throw a fit,” I said, not in the mental state to process the fact that the king had killed my mother because of her curiosity. What was there for her to know that she didn’t already?

“Tell me who the fuck did it,” I urged my source. I couldn’t hold it together. I wanted to punch a wall, but all there was down here was stone-cold bricks. I had a wedding coming up sometime soon. I needed all of my limbs in one piece.

“I can’t. I don’t...”

“Quit bullshitting me. You could tell me right now. What are you waiting for? You want me to lose my patience?” I felt a weight on my chest, drowning me.

“Just give me some time.”

“There’s been enough time. Mom’s been gone for fifteen years now.”



WE’D BEEN AT MY MOTHER’S VACATION HOME FOR FOUR DAYS now. After my associate left last night, I couldn’t sleep. I never went back to bed. I paced the entire house in hopes of finding new evidence to cling to. I felt like something was screaming at me, but I was purposefully ignoring it.

Around eight, I’d made Mandy pancakes with the recipe she’d taught me on our first morning here. She hated shutting the blinds, waking up early as a consequence. The sun wasn’t that blatant today, so she took her time.

When she eventually walked into the kitchen, she froze at the sight of me. The only thing she wore was one of my shirts and a pair of my boxer shorts. They weren't too loose on her body because I was a lot taller than her but built slimmer. We had to look through every item in my closet to find something that fit her deadly curves comfortably. Did I care? Yes. Now, her scent was all over my wardrobe. I enjoyed the fuck out of that.

“What’s wrong?” She studied me, ignoring the pancakes in front of me on the counter. “Are you hurt? You look like you haven’t slept. Is Kamila okay?”

“Please, sit down,” I told her.

She didn’t listen. Instead, she pulled me into a hug like it was a thing we did. At first, it felt strange to have another human being wrap their arms around me. She rubbed my back. I almost felt soothed at the motion. Her head was nudged against my chest. After a long moment of no movement on my part, I embraced her as well.

“My mother was murdered.”

She stopped moving. It took her a moment to process. She shifted out of the embrace. “I’m sorry. That’s... I don’t know what to say. How did you find out?”

“I can’t tell you.” I added, “It’s not safe.”

“Do Kamila and Aris know?”

I shook my head.

“How will you tell them?”

“I’m still figuring out that part.”

She grabbed my hand, holding it to support me. “I’m here for you.”

I ignored her statement. It wasn’t doing me any good to lead her on. I cleared my throat. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m sore,” she responded. She wasn’t sad about it. Quite the contrary, her eyes lit up at the memory. She didn’t give me one of her genuine smiles, though. She was too stunned by my

previous revelation. “And I think I won’t be able to sit down for a while.”

“You can always sit on my lap.” I wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her closer.

“Is that what you need right now?” Her voice was gentle.

“What?”

“Will you feel better if we have sex? Will that help you process what you’ve discovered?”

I exhaled. “I’d feel better if I knew who did it, so I could hang the motherfucker.”

Her eyes widened, her insecurities taking over. I added, “My pretty little whore’s pussy will do for now.”

“I didn’t mean... I know how you feel right now. I want to help you. I don’t know what we’re doing exactly. I don’t know if I’ll regret this when I’m back home, but it feels right to be here for you.” She lowered her gaze. My fingers lifted her chin. I didn’t want her cowering around me.

She added, “Weston, I don’t have a good feeling about this.”

I heard the concern in her voice. “Whatever happened to your mom... We need to protect Kamila.”

“I know.”

CHAPTER 35

MANDY



IT WAS MY FIRST MORNING BACK IN KAMILA'S HOME. I already missed waking up to Weston. We'd found a small routine. We ate together. We went for swims. We fucked. He took me to the whorehouse three times in our one-week stay at the vacation home.

He called me his pretty little whore. I felt pathetic for letting him make me feel pretty.

At first, I'd felt out of place, but as time passed, I finally found my footing. This was their culture. I was just another spectator.

After he told me that his mom had been murdered, the mood changed. He hadn't smirked for me ever since. There was something eerie at work. I had no idea where the next blow would come from.

My wrist itched. I glanced at the black ink on my skin. I was proud to bear my mother's name. She'd tried her best. In the end, she couldn't take it anymore. I understood that. I knew what my father was capable of. If I were his wife, I wouldn't want to live either.

Kamila wasn't home yet. She was still at the palace, working long shifts in the absence of Felicita. I didn't want to know what that entailed. All I could do was wish she was safe.

I wanted to make up for my absence, so I decided to cook. Thus far, Kamila and I had always cooked together, with her taking the lead, or we had eaten out.

I found the ideal ingredients for a Bolognese. She had spare ground meat in her freezer. I had to wait a little while until I could fry it. Kamila's kitchen was out of spaghetti, so I used the farfalle.

Outside, I noticed that a large truck was parked right in front of Weston's house. It seemed to be a moving company. I made a mental note to ask him what that was about when we saw each other again.

From the day I had arrived, the food had tasted similar to home. Kamila explained there were only a few things Katantia manufactured on the peninsula. For example, all sex-related products like condoms and sex toys were produced in Katantia.

Some freaks outside of Katantia saw the products as special and priceless like they were collector's items.

Next to milk products and all sorts of meat, Katantia was lucky enough to sit on oil. They barely used the oil because selling it created a major income for Katantia. Kamila told me that she convinced the male members of her family to look into renewable energies.

Katantia had deals with companies in all sorts of countries. Most of the people weren't aware of that. The press remained silent on that subject.

My pasta was ready, so now I had to finish off the sauce.

I was about to add spices to my sauce when the doorbell rang. It took me out of my haze of peace. I wished for two people, either Weston or Kamila, but my gut told me their time hadn't come yet.

Walking over to the door, I treaded carefully. I wouldn't open the door if it were a stranger. I would have to call the palace guards. I peeped through the tiny opening in Kamila's front door. I made up my mind immediately.

I stepped back, opening the door. I blinked once. I blinked twice. "What are you guys doing here?"

Valentina stood in between Ryan and Aris. She stepped forward, entering Kamila's home without waiting for an

invitation. She closed her eyelids, sniffing around in thin air. “That smells delicious.”

“We’ve come to have a chat with you,” Ryan said, offering me a warm smile.

I stepped back, and the men entered. Since this wasn’t my place, I didn’t know how to behave. I took a deep breath. “I’m cooking. Do you feel like joining me for dinner? I don’t know when Kamila will be back.”

“She’s substituting for my mother, who’s still recovering in the hospital,” Valentina blurted out. “That means Kamila doesn’t really have time to play hostess for you.”

“Val,” Aris addressed his wife. I couldn’t decode his tone. He had never spoken to her like this in front of me before. There was a hint of love in his voice, the type of twisted love only these two could share. “Remember what we said. Dial the bitchiness down, will you? She’s not your enemy.”

“Thanks, Aris. I didn’t think you’d stand up for me like that. That’s very otherworldly of you,” I commented, laying my sarcasm on thick.

He lifted his eyebrows. He raised his hands in innocence. “You’re the first girl Weston’s being secretive about. I need an in. You two seem to be in your own little world, leaving us out here for a week to deal with Aram’s BS.”

“Anyway,” Ryan interfered. I led them to Kamila’s small dining room. They all took their seats. I started setting the table. “We’re here to see how you’re doing after being gone for so long.”

I was busy balancing the glasses in my hands, but I answered, “I’m okay.”

I wasn’t really. I kept thinking about Weston and how much I craved his touch. It had never been like that with Manuel. Sometimes, I wanted to disappear in Manuel’s presence. With Weston, I wanted more.

“What did you two do in Mom’s vacation home?” Aris asked. Valentina placed her hand on his thigh. Her gaze was directed at him. I saw a hint of worry coating her eyes.

“Nothing.” Everything.

Valentina smirked. She kissed her husband’s cheek, being civilized in front of me for once.

Ryan didn’t look at them. His attention was on me. He observed, “He brought you back the moment Kamila announced the wedding date.”

I gave him a quick nod while setting the glasses on the table. To my surprise, Aris hadn’t taken the top seat. He sat next to his wife. Weston’s brother had managed to surprise me.

“Being a mistress isn’t all that fun,” Valentina commented, letting out a soft chuckle.

I winced. I didn’t intend to become a mistress. “That’s not what this is about. Weston and I are good friends.”

“Last time I wanted to take a friend on a honeymoon, I made her my object,” Aris pointed out. His wife snuggled up to him. He placed his arm over her shoulders.

I rolled my eyes, wandering back into the kitchen. The three continued their light banter while I prepared the plates. I hoped I’d cooked well for their standards. Manuel critiqued my cooking skills, claiming that the rich girl in me popped out whenever I had to do something simple like cook or clean.

When I returned to the dining room with two plates in hand, I put them in front of Valentina and Ryan. She gave me a strange look. I shrugged. I was serving. If I wanted to keep up ladies’ first, I would.

“So, what’s that moving truck doing in front of your house?” I asked when I came back with Aris’s and my plate. “It’s been there all day today.”

Aris’s features darkened. Valentina lowered her gaze.

Ryan was the only one willing to answer my question. “Weston and Aris had a fight last night when you guys returned.”

“About what?” I asked Valentina. She didn’t react.

“She was visiting Mom at the hospital with Dad,” Ryan responded. Nobody touched their food. “I called her to let her know. The fight was over once she came back. Matter of the fact is, their house needs new furniture.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, directing it at Valentina and Aris but mostly Aris. I could guess why the fight had erupted. Weston hadn’t been the same after he found out that his mother had been murdered. He turned colder than before. When he fucked, he went a little further, taking more liberties. There were bruises, but I wasn’t mortified by them. He kissed them better. He gave me questionable massages... I was spiraling again.

Aris stated, “You know.”

“What?” I was startled.

“He told you.”

I stayed mum, staring ahead.

“What did he tell her?” Valentina asked, crossing her arms in front of her chest.

“Nothing. Let’s eat.” Aris’s tone was curt and snappy. Ryan had a lot to say, but he didn’t utter a single word.

There was no conversation during dinner. I could hear the wind blow against the shut windows. If I opened it up, it’d get cold. I still hadn’t figured out how to set the right temperature in Kamila’s house. The heating system was far more complicated than the one I had in my shared home with Manuel. Kamila’s appliances were all a tad bit too modern for me. They reminded me of my childhood when I lived in my father’s mansion, and my mom had her bodyguards run errands for her. She never lifted a finger. We had an employee for everything.

When we finished dinner, Valentina commented, “That tasted far better than anything our cook makes us.”

I raised my eyebrows in astonishment.

“I mean it! Thank you for letting us barge in on you like that,” she added, tucking a lock of her dark hair behind her ear.

She cleared her throat. “Look, I also wanted to apologize to you.”

“Me too. We pushed you too hard in your first days. We should’ve been more attentive. You’re not from around here. We acted like we didn’t know what that meant,” Aris said. The most surprising thing about this situation was the fact that they sounded sincere. “I apologize. We’re Katantian, but we accept that the world out there lives under different rules.”

Their apology overwhelmed me. I nodded appreciatively.

“Now, you need to tell me what Weston had to do to get between your legs. I need to know. Like. Now,” Valentina urged us, lighting up the table with her humorous tone. Her eyes studied me, and when they fell on my wrist, she gasped. “You didn’t.”

“I did.”

“That’s stunning.” Her fingers found my tattoo, moving over it smoothly. I saw something raw in her eyes while she inspected my inked skin. She sniffled. Her eyes grew watery. “I’m sure she’s proud of you for overcoming your fears. She was a cool mom. I still have the children’s Chanel bags she gifted us for your tenth birthday.”

I swallowed back the sadness that threatened to emerge.

“Every single one of your birthdays was like a sweet sixteen,” Valentina reminisced. Suddenly, we weren’t that distant anymore. I remembered she’d been there before my mother died. Valentina had been there with me back when my life was a dream. Luxury had been my norm. I’d forgotten that a couple of months after Mom died, Dad took it all away from me. I remembered when I came to this palace, and Weston drove me around in his Wraith. I remembered that my father had similar cars at his disposal and dressed in custom suits. I remembered that at some point in my life, my clothes were also custom-made. The funny thing was I didn’t miss the material things. I missed the security of having a family that seemingly loved me.

“Momma Rawlins knew how to ball,” Ryan added. “She was a MILF if I had ever seen one.”

“Don’t disrespect my mother like that,” I warned him. A barely audible sob escaped my body. I inhaled sharply.

“Mandy, she was a gorgeous woman. Amalia walked into a room, and ninety percent of the crowd fell in love with her on the fucking spot,” Ryan explained. “The entire neighborhood wanted to either be your family or fuck your family.”

“Thanks for that visual,” I responded in a raspy voice. I felt uncomfortable in my own skin again.

“Then you know what it’s like to be a Wraith!” Aris remarked, sounding awfully excited.

I shook my head. “I don’t think so. I’m the fat daughter who didn’t live up to my father’s expectations.”

I needed to be alone. I felt bloated. “I need to clean up the kitchen before Kamila returns.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Valentina asked. Her brows were furrowed. She wanted to soothe me by holding my hand, but I removed myself from her touch. “Fuck your father, Mandy. He’s a dickhead.”

I pushed back my chair, ready for them to leave.

“No offense, babe,” Aris addressed his wife. Then, he turned to me. “You’re the hottest piece of ass this country has seen in years. Plus, you’re foreign. Exotic. And after today, we know you make a good housewife, too. If that’s not a package, I don’t know what is.”

“Can you please go back to your houses?” I asked, having officially run out of patience for whatever twisted game they were playing.

CHAPTER 36

WESTON



I WASN'T IN THE MOOD TO HANDLE KATANTIA'S SHIT.

The weather was terrible, my mood was cranky. My cock was in the mood for one thing only; the thing that was tucked away in Kamila's house.

My associate was busy today, so I forced myself to work with my brother like everything was normal. When it definitely wasn't. We both knew it. We both felt it.

There was tension in this meeting room. It wasn't sexual.

"Man, don't do this," Aris uttered. He screwed up his face like he was disgusted by the prospect of fucking the woman sitting across from us. She had been sent by an alliance of team owners interested in expanding their ventures on our land. They wanted to build two arenas and a league of a sport of our choice. Aram and the rest of the palace felt that our amateur teams were enough.

Fuck the girls if our answer was positive and fuck the girls if we weren't interested. This was Aris's favorite thing to do. My brother loved to fuck. I looked at him, confirming his forced smile. He felt uncomfortable. Who? Aris.

"What's wrong with her?" I asked, gesturing at the well-dressed lady who was starting to look insulted. "We don't want to make money with sports at the moment. It'll cost more than it'll gain us. Fuck her. Let's get going."

The woman crossed her arms in front of her chest, seemingly frustrated at this development.

“Why don’t you fuck her?” Aris inquired, challenging me.

I cocked my head to the side. Why wasn’t he fucking her?

“Valentina isn’t into this anymore,” Aris answered. He sounded sincere. My eyes scanned his head for injury. Who was he, and what had been done to my brother?

“Since when do you care?”

“Can I leave?” the woman asked. Both Aris and I turned toward her, giving her a quick nod. Her job was done here. She hadn’t managed to convince us. She was leaving with an empty stomach, too.

“We talked.”

“What a major step,” I responded, leaning back on my chair.

“No, I mean, we really talked. No sex. No yelling. We didn’t even argue. Vale just stated a bunch of things.” I looked at my brother. He seemed younger, relaxed, and content for the first time in forever. We had both changed after we found out mom had been murdered, but I had never thought he’d go this route. “After what you told me about Aram, I owed her a listen.”

“What did Valentina say?” I asked, full of curiosity. She had him and his dick under complete control. I truly desired to hear what she had told him.

“If God forbid, something happens to any of her family members, in particular her mother or even me, she doesn’t see a point in life anymore,” Aris revealed. That statement hit me severely. A dark cloud hovered above us. “Living in Katantia isn’t an option for her if she can’t have a guarantee that we’re going to be there with her.”

“She’s threatened you with suicide? Is that why you’re acting strange? I got that correctly?” I was perplexed. Valentina didn’t seem like she bowed to anyone but my brother. Suicide was the last thing you’d think when you saw her parade her body around like it was the ninth wonder of the world.

Once you were registered as a Katantian woman, you weren't allowed to leave this world unless the man who owned you gave you permission to or left with you.

Yearly, we had up to a thousand suicides, predominantly females. Every year sexual diseases, illnesses, and homicide battled suicide for the highest death rate.

"We do what we do, but I don't want to lose her. We lost Mom. They don't need to lose their mother to Aram, too," Aris uttered, making complete sense.

I hated that I understood exactly what he meant. "I get where Valentina's coming from. It wouldn't be safe for her if she lost her closest people."

We made our way back to the palace, leaving the inner city and the big crowds. The traffic was light at this time of day. Everybody else had already gone home.

As the car rode by the trees that led to the king's home, I thought of the unspeakable things he was capable of.

We waited. We spent our entire life waiting on Aram to slip, so we could finally make adjustments.

Katantia didn't have to be hell when it could be a sexual paradise for everyone.

We had a state-sized property with logistics and factories. Our human right laws were crippled, but sexually speaking, we were top-notch. There was an exceeding amount of growth and development we could reach. Yet, Aram insisted on treating women like dirt.

Valentina and Aris snapped me out of my thoughts. We had arrived home. The moving truck had left a couple of hours ago after replacing the furniture my brother had destroyed the other night when I told him about our mother.

Valentina had opened the door for us.

"I'm here for you," I told my sister-in-law. She gasped. Her eyes went wide. She wasn't used to these words from me. "If you ever need me, I'll help you out. You're not alone. I've

watched you grow up. We don't admit it, but your family was like family even before you two married."

Instead of calming down, Valentina seemed distraught. "I haven't seen Kamila around at all, but I need to speak to her. I'm sorry for being such a bitch to you. And to Mandy."

"You should tell her that," I suggested.

"We did, but I think we might have insulted her. We had lunch at Kamila's earlier," she told me. I glanced at my brother, judging him for leaving out that information.

"We were having a good moment," Aris snapped apologetically. "She had you for an entire week, brother. I needed some bro-time, too."

Valentina approached her husband, wrapping her arms around his big frame. They fit together. The world wouldn't turn right if these two were somehow separated.

"We only told her she could cook and that she's mouthwatering to Katantians," Valentina confessed. She sounded muffled because she said those things with her mouth pressed against my brother's body. "She took it the wrong way."

"It doesn't take a genius to know what Mandy's problem is. You obviously don't get it because you've been sexualized ever since you stepped foot on this island," I responded. My brother straightened up, drawing his eyebrows together. He was the bigger man out of both of us. Now that he was on obviously good terms with his object, I figured he expected me to watch my mouth when I talked about his girl.

"What do you mean?" Valentina asked, jerking her head in my direction.

"She's got low self-esteem. Her father and her ex-boyfriend treated her like shit. They made her feel ugly and worthless. Whenever you give her compliments, she's conditioned to think you're ridiculing her," I explained. She needed a push in the right direction.

"And you're her confidence trainer now?" Aris inquired. "She won't do well in our world if she needs you to make her

feel like she's the shit, bro. Val told me she grew up like a princess, but she doesn't feel like one to me."

One glance at his wife, and you knew why the fucker thought that.

"That's some foreign girl issue, babe," Valentina, recently renamed Val, explained. Their cuddling was getting to me. "Girls out there can be bullied into thinking they're ugly. Weston's right. I've got you, so I've forgotten how that feels."

"Stop playing games with her. Go see her. Maybe you should marry her and get it over with," Aris suggested, caressing his object's hair. I was used to him grabbing her ass. The hair was... new territory.

"Babe, that's the best idea," Valentina agreed, a grin covering her face. "Maybe we can have a foursome. I'm dying to know what she's like in bed. She must be amazing to keep a guy like Weston."

"Okay." I went on, "Let's stop with the 'babe.' And no, we're not having a foursome. I'm not Aram. We're not getting married. My wife's going to be Kamila."

Valentina tsked. "Perhaps you're too pussy to try and get her to marry you. Fresh foreign girls aren't easy to convince, big bro."

I stood there, astonished that my brother and his wife were taking a piss at me. I shook my head in disbelief. Speechless, I left the house.

Still dressed from work, hungry and un-showered, I went to check on the new girl. I hadn't talked to her since I brought her back. I had done so intentionally. It was better to keep a low profile now that we were back at the palace.

All eyes were directed at us since the wedding was less than one and a half weeks away.

Kamila had been and was still preoccupied at the palace, doing things I didn't want to think about, so I knew Mandy had spent another day alone.

I knocked, knowing that my palace ID card opened up all the doors in the houses on this street.

As expected, she didn't answer.

I took a couple of moments to study Kamila's front yard from her porch. Then I entered the house. It was quiet. When Kamila wasn't here, the place died down. Mandy wasn't a loud person, so you could barely acknowledge her presence if you didn't specifically look for her.

I climbed up the stairs, approaching her bedroom. I didn't hear whimpers or sobs, so I felt relief. She had the windows wide-open because all my ears registered were the storms from outside.

Knocking at her door, I prepared myself to enter without her permission.

"Come in," Mandy said, surprising me. She didn't sound delighted to see me, though.

I entered. My eyes searched for Mandy right away, finding her tucked underneath the plush covers. It was cold in here. I moved to shut the window. The palace seemed so close from here, just a couple of steps away.

"I had a little bit of a meltdown earlier," she explained without me having to ask. "I needed some time alone."

"You've had plenty," I pointed out. When I reached Mandy's bed, she shifted to give me space. "I need a shower. Do you want to join me?"

"Is that code for a blowjob in the bathroom?" she asked, stretching her arms.

"As astonishing as that sounds, I don't feel like stuffing your mouth right now," I told her. If she were my object, I'd stuff her mouth every day and at any time. I wanted her on her knees for me. I didn't want her to underestimate herself, though, so I needed to help her find her inner strength. If there was one thing she could learn from her time here, it was the effect she had on people. Because she didn't have a clue. "We had a deal, my pretty little whore. Do you want me to take you

back to the whorehouse? Do you want another demonstration of how breathtaking you are?"

"I don't want to talk about it," she murmured, hiding underneath her blanket. "Let's go take a shower."

A couple of moments later, we found ourselves in the bathroom. I couldn't wait to get out of my clothes. I'd been in and out of air-conditioned rooms all day. Meanwhile, outside, it had been raining and getting windier by the minute. On top of it all, the humidity came around full circle.

"Would you mind a bath?" Mandy asked in a voice I barely heard.

I heard her. "Say that again."

She cleared her throat. Louder, she repeated, "I want to take a bath. Would that be okay?"

When I took a moment to respond, she immediately interpreted my hesitation as rejection. "Shower it is..."

"No," I interferred. I had pressured Kamila into getting a new bathtub after the time that she passed out in it, almost killing herself. I wasn't fond of bathrooms. At all. I felt the walls caving in on me when inside of one. It was a weird thing to be fearful of, but that was my phobia.

"What's wrong?" Mandy inquired, reading my expression. She didn't approach me, keeping her distance.

"Nothing."



HALF AN HOUR LATER, KAMILA'S FREESTANDING BATHTUB WAS crowded. The water was almost scorching, but I tolerated it. The room smelled like Mandy now; her blackberry shampoo being the only scent my nostrils picked up. It was hard to keep my hands off her, especially when her skin was plastered all over mine.

Kamila's new bathtub wasn't that spacious, but it worked in my favor. That way, Mandy couldn't hide from me. She was

stuck with me, between my legs and all over my shaft. I had imagined my evening going a different route, a dryer one. This was as good. Perhaps even better.

My arms were on the rim of the tub, away from the girl in front of me.

We'd washed each other's hair earlier, making a little mess of the bathroom floor. Then Mandy gave me a good scrubbing down to kill all the bacteria I supposedly brought into the house after work. She also asked if I fucked anyone before coming home. I told her the honest truth. I hadn't. When it'd been my turn to soap her up, I rediscovered how ticklish she was around her curves.

To cleanse her intimate spots, I turned to Kamila's variety of hygiene products. She had them all. Sex being the main focus in our country, we had advanced soaps and cremes without odors. The ingredients didn't disrupt the natural pH of vaginas. The palace had entire campaigns and research facilities for that precise cause.

When Mandy had moved in, she'd been given her own set of hygiene products. She directed me to what was hers. I went to work. I had never touched a girl's pussy like this, without shady intentions. Mandy gasped when my fingers lingered, or when I gave her pussy a little slap. She was a reactive girl, flourishing under every ounce of devotion. She didn't take any of this for granted. Neither did I.

We were lucky that Aram was allowing us to spend time together. A part of me was furious about needing his permission.

Now we'd been lying still in the freestanding bathtub for a couple of minutes.

"Why did you freeze when I asked you about the bath?" Mandy asked, tracing lines on my knees. *There are far more fascinating parts of my anatomy*, I wanted to tell her.

"They found my mother dead in her bathtub. I don't want to talk about my mother right now," I told her, gazing at Kamila's ceiling. She'd redecorated the entire house. Nothing

in here bore a resemblance to the rest of the houses on the street. Katantia existed in Kamila's four walls, but it was twisted into her own version of it.

Mandy shifted in the tub, the water splashing around us. She gave me a kiss on the cheek. She wrapped her arms around my upper chest, resting her head on my shoulder. I was tall for this tub. I wondered how Kamila fit in here with her tall physique.

"I'm worried about Kamila. She's not responding to any of my messages. I never see her around. What's happening to her?" Mandy asked, sighing. We were still in the water, but I felt like I was sweating. The heat of the water and Mandy's warmth combined with mine made me question her body temperature. How could she not be affected?

"She's busy preparing for the wedding," I told her. I needed to convince Mandy as much as I needed to convince myself. "There isn't much time left. It's going to be a spectacle, so coordination's required."

"I'm going to be leaving soon," she replied. The sadness in her tone didn't escape me. "I'm going to miss her when I'm back in the States. I appreciated living with her. I felt at home."

"Is that all you're going to miss?" I inquired. Nudity didn't faze me. I'd got used to the feel of Mandy's body. I couldn't get enough of her skin on mine.

"I might miss you, too," she confessed, closing her eyes. "I'm not sure if a friend is supposed to miss you like that, though."

"I know." I couldn't say anything else. I couldn't bring myself to discuss this feeling with her. It was new and intimidating, reminding me of Aris and Valentina's recent relationship revival.

"Do you think you'll ever come to visit me?" she asked, beaming hope. "I'll make sure to give you my new address once I settle down away from Chicago."

I let out a low chuckle. “Sure, why not. Kamila won’t need Aram’s permission to leave the country anymore. I’ll make it happen.”

She nodded, knowing we were a hopeless situation. There wasn’t much we could do with Aram alive.

“Friends don’t take baths with each other,” I told her.

She responded, “I know.”

I’d kept my hands out of the water long enough. Inhaling, I led my left hand underwater. Mandy’s ass welcomed me, plush and smooth. Whenever I got my hands on it, I devoured it, unable to comprehend how she could hate her body.

There were lines on her upper thighs, remnants of a past in which she used to cut herself. She’d told me that Manuel shamed her for cutting her skin, so she stopped. She started eating her frustrations instead. “... My eyebrows aren’t symmetrical. My father mentions it every time I see him. My nose is too big and also not straight. I think I broke my nose when I was younger, but I don’t recall it well. My hair is so dark because my mother has Mediterranean roots. She had spotless skin. My hair’s everywhere. It’s a struggle to keep it under control. Then, my thighs are too thick, and my hips are too wide. Spencer lectures me on all of my flaws every time he sees me. That’s why I keep away from him. That’s why it was so easy for me to move in with Manuel. He presented a way out.”

She sighed. I saw the disappointment in her eyes. I didn’t even notice half the shit she mentioned about herself. My vision wasn’t focused on the details of the supposed imperfections of her body. But then again, it wasn’t my place to tell her what to do with her body. She was a foreigner, a strange breed of people that I didn’t understand.

I proceeded to ask her if her mother’s name on her wrist would stop her from cutting her wrists. She said yes.

That had been the precise reason for why she had that part of her body inked.

“If I could keep you here, I would, you know,” I revealed.

She didn't jump in joy. She didn't kneel in front of me to suck my dick in appreciation. She didn't even move a single limb. I only felt her breath against my skin. She responded, "You can't, though. That's all right."

"Are you going to be okay out there on your own?" I asked her. She leaned into my ass-grabbing practices.

"I'll manage." She sighed. "I'll get into celebrity journalism to make some money to get by with. I'll look into indebting myself to go to college for professional journalism."

"If you need money, I'll send you some. I've got a fund from my work..."

She shook her head, removing her arms from around me. She didn't feel comfortable being indebted to anyone. I could see that when she counted every single drop of refreshments that she drank or when she thanked Kamila and me every time we paid for her food or anything else. "That's... I can't accept money from you. Thank you. I mean it. Please, don't offer it again. The flight back home is already enough trouble."

"When you get all defensive, it makes me want to fuck your ass."

"My ass?"

"Your perfect ass, yes."

She blushed. "Ass as in anal?"

I chuckled. "Yes, anal."

She rolled her eyes, giving me a little shove with her hands. "You're unbelievable."

"The erection you're sitting on is quite believable," I said. Mandy shifted on top of me, chuckling devilishly. "Have you ever done it before?"

"No, have you?"

"What sort of question is that?" I replied. Her fucking nipples were teasing me. They were begging to be played with.

“Right, I forgot. You’re an encyclopedia of sex.” Her tone was nonchalant.

“I mean, I’ve never done scat play, but golden showers are a thing of their own,” I responded, reveling in her dismayed gasp. “Every girl should do that at least once in their life.”

She cleared her throat. “If you promise not to send me to the hospital by tearing me apart, I might agree to it.”

“What if I get you a jar of your favorite peanut butter?” I’d learned a lot about her eating habits when we spent a week together. She had iron problems ever since she was a kid, she said, that often resulted in her wanting to stay in bed all day. The abdominal pain she had recently started experiencing was an entirely separate thing that she hadn’t had a diagnosis on yet. I could bet that it had something to do with her anxiety, but I didn’t have a degree or the right to think of her in detail like that.

“And ice cream,” she pleaded.

“I’ll remember that next time I want to fuck your ass. Peanut butter and ice cream. You’re quite easy, my pretty little whore.”

“The erection I’m sitting on is quite easy, I’d say. All it takes is a little...” Mandy shifted on my lap, teasing the fuck out of me. “And, voilà, your cock is hard.”

I groaned.



THERE WAS A HUNGER IN HER EYES I HAD NEVER SEEN BEFORE.

“I love how much you enjoy your ass being played with,” I told her. The bottle of lube stood on her nightstand. Two of my fingers were inside her tight ring of muscle, probing, and testing her. The look she gave me almost had me making a mess of her bed when all I wanted was to fill her tight hole with my come.

Her slight blush, coupled with her writhing against my fingers were the end of me. I had my thumb on her clit, rubbing and applying the right amount of pressure.

“I didn’t know that this could be fun,” she confessed. I watched her lips as they moved, imagining them wrapped around my cock. I let it be. There was no time for that. I had to make sure she was prepared. I’d made a promise not to send her to the hospital. I had to keep it.

“We should take you to an Anal Candy Shop before you leave,” I suggested, my eyes focusing on the feast between her legs.

“Do I want to know what that is?” She was amused.

“It’s a new venture. A friend of the palace specializing in resource-friendly lollipops and gummy bears opened up a new chain in Katantia.” Her hole spasmed around me, so I applied more pressure on her clit. She was close. “It’s expensive candy for anal insertion. It comes with anal cleansing tools and recipes on which foods to eat to keep your ass clean for anal play. It’s quite fun and quite modern. He’s created a formula that protects girls’ holes from inflammation and what not. Aram’s pissed.”

She came, panting underneath me. My dick jolted, begging for attention.

“Condom?” I asked, stroking myself.

“I don’t know.” She sounded raspy. I tilted my head to the side. She knew how much I hated indirect answers. “I know you guys get tested every other week, but I’d feel better if you wore one. Perhaps you could fuck me bare sometime in the future. I’d love that. I need a bit of time.”

Any harder, and I could break bricks with my cock. It was almost painful to hear Mandy say she wanted me inside of her without a condom. Fuck.

I should put a condom on. As royals, we weren’t supposed to fuck people who weren’t our objects without condoms. All the things I should’ve done ended up being things I never considered.

“Don’t hold back,” I warned her. I didn’t appreciate her clipped answers or her lack of oral responses. We were playing around. For some strange reason, I was determined to convince her that this was it. She could have everything she ever wanted.

With me.

Fucking hell, she’d turned me into one of the foreigners.

“I’ll try,” she replied, biting her lip. I wanted to grab her chin, bring her mouth to mine and kiss that fucking attitude out of her. But we weren’t usually kissing. That wasn’t our thing. We were friends. Friends who played games.

“You either do, or you don’t.”

She nodded.

I lined up my cock at the entrance that she didn’t expect, making her let out a gasp. I groaned. The scowl on her face murdered me, sending me to an early grave. Just a couple of strokes, I told myself. A couple of strokes later, I was still sheathed inside of her, enjoying the tightness of her pussy.

This was the first time I was on top of her like this. It irritated me how this simple position could make me feel this entire scene in my bones. I didn’t want to take her ass while fucking her from behind; I wanted to look at her face and make sure she wasn’t in pain.

With my fingers still in her puckered hole, I teased her.

“Do it now.” She writhed beneath me, meeting me for each thrust. “If you don’t, I’ll come.”

I appreciated the warning. If Mandy had come around my cock right, I wouldn’t have been able to hold back, experienced fucker or not. We had a long night ahead.

Without hesitation, I slid out of her. She was so fucking wet that I considered leaving out the lube. She’d endure it like this. I’d make it work.

“What are you staring at?” she asked. I almost answered that I was gawking at her clenching pussy or her other hole, the one I was about to breach. She was glowing for me.

“I’m going in. Let me know how it feels. I’ll go slow.” I removed my fingers, lazily watching her hole contract. My hands went over the inside of her thighs, trying to spread her even further as if she wasn’t already open and available like a buffet for me.

I cursed underneath my breath when I leaned forward, gently pressing into her. She grabbed my arm. My eyes shot up. The look on her face gave me the green light I needed. Earlier, we had established that she liked the idea of getting her ass fucked. We were playing out her fantasy. Everything was cool.

But it wasn’t.

I was going slow. Only the tip was inside of that tight hole of hers. Yet, I felt engulfed in Mandy’s forbidden heat. “Mandy.”

“I’m okay...” She was panting. “Be patient.”

I could be patient all she wanted. I could stay in this position forever. I gave her the moments she needed, playing with her wet folds and trying to distract her from the stinging pain. Gradually, I dipped further inside. Her hand still grabbed my arm, possessively so and almost a threat.

She was full of me. That was how I wanted it. Every fucking day, every fucking night. It was wrong. It would never happen. We were having a last hurrah. She was going to be leaving soon after the wedding. I was going to be a married man, the savior.

My fingers on her clit made her come. Her tight hole swallowed me whole, clenching around me like there was no tomorrow. I had never felt a better fit.

When I finally met her eyes again, there was an urgency to her. We were both sweating, making a mess out of the sheets. The lube mixed with her juices was making sure that these sheets were thoroughly wet. Precum was a forgotten thought. I was about to bust at any given moment.

Her eyes were urging me to kiss her. I couldn’t do it. That would have sealed our fate. I couldn’t make her go through

that. We wouldn't go there. I'd make sure of that. Mandy didn't belong on Katantia, not as it was now. If I kissed her, I made her mine.

She wasn't.

Instead, I planted kisses below her ear, taking in the scent of her. She enjoyed being talked to. She was into it, as dirty as it could go.

She was my pretty little whore for the night. I fucked the insecurities right out of her.

CHAPTER 37

KAMILA



MANDY DIDN'T KNOW THAT I SNEAKED INTO THE HOUSE LATE at night when she was asleep. You couldn't wake that girl up once she shut her eyes. The only thing that woke her up was the morning light. As always, her shutters were not down.

Weston was sleeping in her bed, looking all sorts of comfortable next to her. He twitched as I walked by Mandy's bedroom quietly. They'd left the door open in case I returned.

It warmed my hollow heart.

The house was cold, too cold for me. I didn't want to turn on the heating system. I didn't want to announce my presence in the house.

I put on my favorite pajamas, then went to bed without any further delays. My bed felt the best. In the palace, I barely slept.

And I needed my precious sleep now.

Only a couple of days were left. Then I'd be free.

For now, I had to endure all of Aram's plans for me.

I slept.

It was early in the morning when I opened my eyes again. The sun hadn't risen yet. As I walked out of the house, I

noticed that it was freezing outside. On my way to the palace, I started shivering. I never needed a jacket in Katantia; things were changing. This storm didn't want to leave.

At the doors, the early shift guards let me into the palace. We were all sleepy, not in the mood for boring conversations.

I made my way up to my room on Aram's private floor.

And I waited until Aram called for me.

It took him a couple of hours, but he called for me. He wanted to see me in one of the meeting rooms. It was the large one with the view of the city.

I strolled up there. To my demise, I heard a lot of male voices even before I entered. They were having energetic conversations.

I knocked.

Suddenly, there was silence. I was invited in. Tables formed a U. Cigar smoke crept up my nostrils, making me gag. Alcohol was being served. Servants were at the side, ready to provide the king and his friends with anything they needed. These were important people. I recognized them from meetings I'd listened in on during work days when Aris wasn't in Katantia. Influential CEOs of Katantian companies sat there.

In the middle of these tables, there were naked women. I counted nine. I was the tenth.

I wasn't acknowledged by a welcoming gesture. It was like I wasn't even there.

When I cleared my throat, Aram turned to me as if I was the thing he was most embarrassed about.

"Get naked. Stand beside them. You may recognize them. They're most prized possessions of Vladimir, Leon, Dean, Gustav, Michael, Tristan, Gregor, and Dalton. You're taking over Felicita's duties in the public humiliation today,"

Aram announced. Everyone heard him and his demeaning tone. I felt sliced by his voice. "Leon asked for boys as well, so we have five bad boys who need punishment coming in soon."

I didn't speak. I did as told. For years, I had been conditioned to yearn a lack of control. It affected me like

nothing else did.

I was the oldest here. The girls seemed younger than Mandy. Eighteen? Nineteen? I asked, “Felicita participates here?”

“Yes, she successfully does. Her cunt is well-known here,” one of the men at the tables answered.

My eyes widened. I didn’t want to imagine Felicita in this environment. I was fighting an inner battle of right and wrong. A part of me growing louder and gloomier reminded me that I didn’t appreciate what was happening. I wasn’t here because I wanted to be.

I didn’t know what was expected of me. “What am I doing here?”

“Since Felicita is unable to be present, you will replace her. You’ll go through the motions as if you were her,” Aram revealed. “Your wedding’s soon. We all want to take advantage of your body before Weston takes it away.”

There was a knock on the door. Five young men entered. They were around Mandy’s age as well. I felt sick.

Aram stood up and walked into the U of the tables where our naked bodies stood.

“You’re lucky,” the king announced. “Kamila Ruby is today’s victim. She will lick every asshole and pussy in this room. She will suck every cock. She will get fucked by every cock.”

It sounded like a lot of work.

“The five punishment boys aren’t allowed to finish, but everyone else can drown the sluts in their come. The ten sluts are to be used properly. Kamila’s the only one who isn’t allowed to finish. The punishment boys are a new addition to our celebration, so we’ll see what we’ll make of them. We’ll spend an entire day here, celebrating the beauty of Katantia. As the King of Katantia, I hereby allow our day to begin.”

Everybody else was better prepared than me.

I stood there without a clue. The nine women lay down on the floor right next to each other, widening their legs.

There was so much work. I barely had time to breathe, let alone take a break for my jaw.

I should have felt exhausted, but there was no time for that sentiment. I kept Aram at bay by performing for him. If this was what Felicita endured every week, then I needed to be strong.

I peed on the floor. The punishment boys had to lick it up for me.

I cried because of exhaustion. My powers were giving up. Aram slapped my face and demanded a happy smile.

I wanted to drown. I didn't want to wake up. I wanted to shut my eyes and leave it be forever.

When I threw up, there was basically nothing to throw up. I hadn't eaten much.

I started seeing color again when a migraine overwhelmed me. I was overdoing it.

I observed the sweat on my skin and the restless faces around me. They were all having sex, but I had the most auditors. Seven men were circling my body.

Before I could react, Aram called out, "I, the king, end this day. We'll meet in two weeks again when the wedding celebrations are over and done with."

The sex stopped, and I ran out of there naked, losing all sorts of control over my own body. My survival instinct had taken over. It urged me to leave Aram.

By the time I hit the stairs, I had fainted.

In the middle of the night, I woke up in the palace. Luckily, my skin was clean, superficially speaking. My room was cold, and the windows were wide-open. There was a tray of food next to my bed, but I ignored it.

I picked up the phone, asking for Travis. He was with his wife at the hospital. She needed his care. I understood that.

My body was broken. Desperately, I needed a shower. I reluctantly took one, careful not to damage my wounds any further.

It took me longer than usual to get out of the palace. A familiar guard ended up helping me, holding me close as he accompanied me home.

My throat was dry, asking for one thing only. It would take the edge off. It'd help me get by for the next week or so. I only needed a line or two, nothing more. I'd survive like that.

"Can you get me some coke?" I asked the guard as we walked across the road that led to my home.

"Coke, miss? You get your shopping on your own," he replied, confused. I'd seen him around. He wasn't new. He should get me whatever the fuck I asked for.

I needed those lines.

"Cocaine! Find me some of that," I demanded, slurring my words. "Now."

I was heaving.

"I'm afraid I can't."

"I'll tell the king to fire you."

That worked. The guard swallowed, rubbing the back of his neck with his free hand. "I can't get cocaine, I'm sorry. But my father took Xanax a while ago. I'll get you what's left of that."

"In addition to that, you'll find me hard drugs like cocaine, heroin, or even ecstasy. Anything. Any-fucking-thing! Go!" My body awakened at the thought of those treasures. I had never really got over my addictions. I distracted myself well enough, but now those days were over. I didn't have enough energy to distract myself. "If you don't, I'll get you fired. You're a guard. You know where they store the good shit."

Badly, I needed a hit. A tiny one would suffice. The tingling sensation under my skin got me excited for what was to come.

The guard left me.

When I entered my home, it was empty.

I searched every corner for any type of medication to soothe the pain between my legs. The paracetamol Weston had left in my bathroom wouldn't give me the results I wanted. He was good. He had stripped my entire home of medication. He didn't understand. He had a dick and the title of a prince. I was a princess, but that didn't matter much. A man would always own me.

Fuck that shit.

I was done.

I slept in my bed.

When I woke up, I didn't know what day it was. I took a walk to the palace. My body was more than sore.

I found the guard. He had drugs.

I returned to my house.

It was my fucking house.

CHAPTER 38

MANDY



WHEN I SAW KAMILA SLEEPING IN HER BED THIS MORNING, I felt elated. I couldn't wait to talk to her. I let her sleep while I prepared myself for the day. Felicita was back home. I had been invited to visit.

I strolled over to Felicita's humble home. I didn't bring a coat. It was cold, but I was used to it by now. Besides, the Katantian cold had nothing on Chicago's weather in Manuel's cold apartment. Valentina opened the door with a smile that reminded me of old times. "Thank you for coming."

"It's my pleasure to help you," I responded. I kicked off my shoes because that was their way of doing things in Katantia. "I know your situation is difficult. How is she?"

"She needs to relax and do nothing. They will be checking her stitches soon," Valentina whispered. I observed that there was no extravagant makeup on her face. She looked like her age for once. "Unfortunately, the exhaustion won't go away that easily. You can't stitch that together. She's fatigued."

We made our way into Valentina's parents' bedroom. I followed the girl, wondering where we were as friends.

"I'm sorry," she uttered. "I didn't mean to startle you the other day. I'm new to this... Being kind thing. I meant every word I said."

I nodded.

When we reached the room, an unfit Felicita welcomed us. Her eyes were red, and her skin was pale. I could see that Valentina had been the one to dress the woman. She wasn't

comfortable in her skin. We didn't hug because Felicita caught a cold during her hospital stay. She thanked me for coming, too.

"What do you guys do now?" I dared to ask.

Felicita lowered her gaze. "I'm on a break, but I have to continue living life the way I did before. It's for the best. I want my children to have a good life. I'm the king's whore. I will continue to be."

There was no use in discussing. They had their ways. They were unable to change them.

"She's getting a couple of days off until the stitches are removed, but... I'm still afraid," Valentina confessed. She crossed her arms in front of her chest, hugging herself for comfort.

I didn't know what to say.

Felicita coughed hard. She had a minor fit, but drinking a bit of water helped her. "I'm not leaving you anytime soon. It can't get worse than double penetration, Valentina."

Valentina said, "I can think of a couple of things."

"What's Travis saying about all of this?" I asked.

Spitefully, the daughter replied, "He's working. He's not said a word to Aram. Sometimes I wonder whether he loves us."

A lump appeared in my throat.

"Don't talk about your father like that," Felicita demanded. She had gathered all of her strength for that. "He does everything he can for his family. He won't be disrespected by you."

"He doesn't do anything to earn my respect. I wish I could meet my uncle. He seems to protect his family much better than Dad," Valentina argued, inspecting her long red fingernails. Absently, she shrugged. Who was this uncle? Why had I never met him back in the day? "Mandy, do you want anything to drink?"

“Some water would be fine, thank you,” I replied.

Valentina got up, leaving the room without another word. Felicita lightly patted her hand on the spot at the side of the bed, gesturing for me to come closer. I took a seat.

“How are you doing?” I asked her. I didn’t want to acknowledge that she barely moved her limbs. Her exhaustion scared me. Kamila was overworking herself. I feared what that would do to her. I had to talk to her today. She couldn’t leave the house without having a talk with me.

“I’ve been better.” She coughed again, heaving. “On top of it all, I’ve caught the flu. I guess I’m lucky. Aram doesn’t like to get sick. I might get another week off.”

“What happened? Why did you move to Katantia? My father never told me the truth,” I asked her, unable to hold it back any longer. I’d been curious about her answer for days now. “Why are you still here, enduring all of this? Who made you do it?”

“I can’t give you all the answers,” Felicita responded, shutting her eyes. She inhaled. “I wish I could. It’s not my place.”

“My father had something to do with it, didn’t he?” I inquired. I lowered my gaze, ashamed. He was behind everything. My eyes fell on the tattoo on my wrist. I had to be strong for my mother’s sake.

“You remember that my husband didn’t have the cleanest job back when we were your neighbors, don’t you?” She opened her eyes. She twitched. I nodded. To live in the area we lived in, you either had to be my father or somebody who served people like my father. There were no honest people in that neighborhood. When I left home, I was finally able to breathe again.

“He assisted my father. I remember Mr. Cross being around him, doing whatever he asked.” Kind of like he was acting with Aram now. I felt a lump in my throat. “Bad things. I remember that Mr. Cross used to scare me back in the day.”

“People who do bad things get punished, dear,” Felicita commented. She was breathing heavily. She reached for the tissues on her nightstand, blowing her nose.

“Then why is my father still out there?”

“Your father is in a league of his own. He’s the incorporation of evil. He can’t be punished. He invented punishments,” Felicita explained. She cleared her throat. Drops of sweat coated her skin. “My daughter told me what he has done with you. I am sorry for what you had to go through as a child.”

I sighed, feeling the lines on my thighs come alive. “It’s nothing. I lived in a mansion. I had everything I needed. I don’t have any reason to complain...”

“We live in a palace,” Felicita interfered. “The king of the palace calls for me. I seem lucky to anyone who crosses my path, not that I ever leave the palace, but I’m most certainly not. I’ve done some things in my life that I regret. I wish I knew how to right my wrongs, but I can’t. I’ll live with that regret forever...”

“I know.”

“You do?” Tears filled her eyes. “I never wanted to involve Kamila. I didn’t have a choice. My daughter... She was just a child. I never intended for things to end up like this, but then again, I didn’t have the power to change anything anyway.”

“Why did you start sleeping with Aram?” I asked. “I remember you loved Mr. Cross. You were the perfect match.”

“Love is complicated. Things aren’t as they seem. I didn’t choose to sleep with Aram. It happened. I was the pawn used to humiliate my husband even further. Travis and I are connected by something other than love. We have our children. We were never in love. We were there for each other. We backed each other. What I have with him is a strong partnership, but it’s not love,” she explained. She rocked left and right, taking deep breaths. “Travis saved me at a time in my life when I needed it. My family will forever be indebted to him.”

“I never knew,” I admitted, trying to process her words. “Please. I want to understand.”

“He killed my abuser. There’s not much more to it,” Felicita mumbled. She shifted in the bed, turning to her side. “He killed him. He took my brother and me in when I wasn’t even a teenager. He helped me overcome my demons. I knew he had his own. Somehow, we created a partnership that benefited us both.”

“Who was your abuser?” I asked her. Mr. Cross had murdered a man. Somehow, that didn’t surprise me. Working for my father, I hadn’t expected anything else.

“I don’t speak of him.”

“I don’t know what happened to you, but I’m sorry,” I told her. I sat up straight. “For you to stay with Mr. Cross and to follow him all the way to Katantia, I’m sure it was groundbreaking.”

She shut her eyes again. “We didn’t have much choice in coming here, you know. We loved your mom. She got along with us. She understood Travis. All the gorgeous women understand my husband. He speaks their language. Travis hated what had to happen to her. Your father, he made sure to take everything away from us. We didn’t have a choice. We had to come here. It was part of Travis’s punishment...”

She mumbled under her breath, saying things I didn’t understand. Something about a Jordan? An Alex? I sat there, observing her. Her breathing changed. I knew she had fallen asleep.

I left Felicita in her bedroom, making my way downstairs.

Valentina was in their living room, on her phone. She’d obviously forgotten the water she had come down here to fetch me. It was okay. I wasn’t thirsty. She looked up when she noticed I was on my way out. “Hey, are you leaving already?”

“Yeah, your mom fell asleep,” I informed her absently. “I’ll see you later.”

She nodded, leaving me be.

Each step I took back to Kamila's house, I tried to process Felicita's words. She had seemed out of it, but that didn't make her words hurt less.

I entered Kamila's home, which smelled like coffee. Kicking off my shoes, I was grateful for Kamila's presence. I needed to speak to her. It had been too long.

When I entered the kitchen, two cups of coffee were steaming away on the kitchen counter, but she wasn't there.

I heard a clattering sound from upstairs, so I rushed over there to catch the source.

She wasn't in her bedroom, so I hurried to the bathroom. Kamila was dressed in a large shirt only. Her eyes looked tired, the rings beneath them dark. Her face was glistening in sweat. There was a white powdery substance on her nose.

She didn't register me standing there in shock. She didn't respond to my pleas.

On the cold bathroom floor with the windows wide-open, she lay there unconscious and paler than ever before.

Kamila had relapsed.

I headed to my bedroom, calling up the number Weston had given me for emergencies.

"I'm at work, my pretty little whore. I'll be with you later tonight—"

I was panting. "It's Kamila. She's home. I think she took drugs again. I don't know what to do. She—"

Weston hung up.

CHAPTER 39

WESTON



I HUNG UP ON MANDY TO CALL THE AMBULANCE. ARIS WASN'T with me today, so I drove to the hospital. I cursed at every slow driver and forsook every traffic jam I stumbled upon. This wasn't the time to be late.

I should have noticed the signs. Kamila was going to be my responsibility. I didn't see that she was in danger of a relapse. After her suicide attempt, I never let her out of my sight for more than two days at once. I checked in with her. She needed that; she needed a person who was there for her.

I parked the Wraith. I stormed the hospital, asking for Kamila. She hadn't been brought in yet, but she was on her way. That was what they told me.

While I waited, I called Travis and asked him to go through security footage. I told him to single out any person Kamila had been in contact with. I would end whoever gave her the drugs. No punishment would suffice.

The guards we hired were specifically trained to help Kamila not throw her back into a relapse. I was fuming. I had been wrong. I had abandoned her when she needed me.

And now I was paying the price.



“WESTON, PLEASE, TALK TO ME,” MANDY PLEADED WITH ME. We sat in the cold waiting room, alone. The floor

had been cleared. I'd demanded it. That was Kamila being treated in the emergency room. She was the princess of this hellhole. She wouldn't heal in a cramped space, not under my watch.

Kamila had almost slipped through my fingers once again.

And I didn't know if I should give up or keep helping her.

Mandy and I were the only ones here in this stifling environment, but I knew that the rest of the clan wasn't far behind. The princess couldn't relapse in silence. This would be all over the news and social media by tonight. I bet that Aram and the palace had already been alerted.

"I saw her sleep. I went to the Cross' house. I thought that when I returned, we would finally talk. I didn't know she had these thoughts again..." Her body shook next to my still one. Her whimpers and pleas were exhausting me, but I couldn't go out and tell her that. It would make me the cold motherfucker. Not that I wasn't.

"It's not your fault," I assured her. I didn't touch her. She didn't attempt to hug me or soothe me. She knew I wasn't in the mood for her humane needs. I had one thing in mind only, and that was getting the princess the fuck out of here. "You don't know her like I do. It's not your job to take care of her. It's mine. I let her down once again."

"She chose to take these drugs. You didn't make her. She did that on her own," Mandy argued, running a hand through her hair. The scent of blackberries added color to this bleak and clinical setting. "She's a grown woman. It's not up to you what she puts into her body."

"You're not in Chicago," I reminded her. I gestured at this oppressing hellhole. "Here in Katantia, I make sure that the princess is far away from her fucking drugs."

"We need to find out who provided her with drugs. She told me you got rid of the dealers," she said, staring ahead.

"You don't intervene. This isn't your responsibility." I crossed my arms in front of my chest. I'd rolled up my sleeves earlier, the cufflinks in my pockets. The upper buttons of my

shirts were unopened. My hair was the only thing that stood as it did before. I wasn't one to fuss around in times of chaos. I stilled instead.

She swallowed after what I said. I hoped she understood her place now.

"When the Cross family comes, they'll take you home," I told her. She winced.

"I want to be here with you."

She didn't need to see me like this. "I don't want you here."

Mandy didn't say a word in response. She occasionally whimpered. Hiding her face behind her hands and turning away from me, she tried to hide her tears. But they were there. They burned every single piece of me.



AS LONG AS KAMILA WAS STILL UNDER THE CARE OF A doctor, I didn't plan on leaving the hospital.

Ten minutes had turned into three hours. Mandy had offered me coffee and water after I told her that I didn't want her here with me. I had refused to accept it. My throat was dry, but I didn't want to drink. I didn't want to soothe my pain while Kamila was in there fighting for her life.

Aram didn't even bother to see how Kamila was doing. To say that it bothered me was an understatement. I had expected such a dick move from him, but it still riled me up.

Mandy sat next to me, the opposite of my calm posture. She clenched her fists, then she unclenched them. Occasionally, the brunette rocked back and forth on her seat. Sometimes, she hugged herself.

She didn't talk, something that I appreciated.

Travis arrived first. He brought palace security guards who would be here to provide Kamila with the necessary security.

Kamila's drug crisis wasn't supposed to get out to the people, but I knew Aram would find a way to make it a spectacle.

The first time she ended up in the hospital because of drugs. Katantia was buzzing about it. They had witnessed the entire process that led to her hospitalization. Aram had used her unfortunate situation to promote our own 'war on drugs' and enforce stringent punishments for anyone who came in contact with drugs.

It made me furious that Kamila's health was a play of politics for the king.

The king's assistant joined Mandy and me in the unwelcoming waiting room. He was in formal wear and looked as stressed as he always did. "How's Kamila doing?"

"How is she supposed to be doing?" I asked, frustrated. We were close to getting married. She was enduring a relapse. "We don't fucking know because they won't say. They're probably pumping her stomach empty as we speak."

"What Weston means to say is that she is in good hands. We're waiting for further news," Mandy carefully added.

I didn't need her to speak for me. I wanted to correct her, but I didn't have it in me.

"Can we talk in private?" Travis asked, straightening his tie.

The time for secrecy was over. "Mandy knows. Whatever you have to say, you can say it here."

Mandy went still. She was confused. "Weston? You can talk in private. I'll go out and wait for more information on Kamila—"

Travis interrupted her, "I know that you're aware of what Weston and I have been discussing. I simply think it would be better if we talked about this specific issue in private. It's a royal matter."

The king's assistant and my most valuable informer plucked at the cuff of his shirt. He was lying, but Mandy bought it because she was easily impressionable. She trusted

Travis because she once used to know him. She had seemingly forgotten the ruthless side of this man.

Katantia had beaten it out of him. He could threaten us all he wanted, but, in the end, the king had him by the balls.

Mandy swallowed her pride, leaving the waiting room.

The worry for Kamila had already made me a mess, but whatever Travis had to say made me want to break something. Hatred transferred to my every cell.

Travis undid his tie, freeing his neck from the pressure I knew so well. He looked like he was about to burst. A lot depended on Travis. Aram was the king, but Travis did most of the work. It seemed like anxiety had gotten to him.

“I can’t hold this back any longer,” Travis uttered. He lowered his head. “It’s not easy to reveal this to you, Weston. Things will never be the same after I tell you. I’m not supposed to talk about this.”

I responded, “It can’t be worse than my mother being killed by Aram.”

Travis avoided my gaze. His chin trembled. “Aram didn’t kill your mother. I did. He asked me to do it for him.”

Abruptly, I stood up. “What the fuck did you just say?”

He shook his head. I still couldn’t believe it. Travis was covering for Aram. He always did that.

“For years, I did Mandy’s father’s dirty work,” Travis explained. I cursed underneath my breath. “He’d found me on the streets. He molded me into the man he needed, a merciless one. I played my part well. I did as told. Somewhere along the way, I married my children’s mother. When I decided to keep her, Spencer said I’d pay for the favor one day. Years later, he decided to cash in. I was sent to Katantia to murder an innocent woman on her husband’s order. I was never told the reason why.”

I processed what he told me. I didn’t fucking like it.

“We never saw you back then,” I told him.

“You weren’t supposed to. I’m trained to stay in the shadows,” Travis explained. I wanted to strangle him. Travis didn’t look proud of his actions. I couldn’t empathize with him, not one bit.

“How did you end up here four years later with your tail tucked between your legs?” I asked. I could see the life draining out of his eyes, but I couldn’t act on that sentiment. This fucker was a trained killer. He’d murder me before I moved a limb.

“Spencer kept watch on everyone in his family. He knew that his wife was going behind his back and that she had been doing so for years. When his wife started digging into Spencer’s relations with Katantia, Mandy’s father snapped. He ordered me to kill her. At first, I refused. I’d been around their family for years. My children had grown up alongside Mandy. I couldn’t do it.”

The crunching feeling grew. “I can’t believe you.”

“Aram and Spencer had their wives killed. That’s the only truth,” he specified.

I should have punched Travis bloody. He should have left the hospital in a body bag. He had caused my family and Mandy an inexplicably tremendous amount of pain. I wanted to end him. Fuck, I craved it like I had never craved anything else before in my life.

“Why the fuck did you kill my mother, Travis?” I spat at him.

“They threatened to kill my family.” He couldn’t look me in the eyes.

“So, you decided to take away ours?”

“Nothing I tell you will make this easier.”

“I know. I’m fucking aware of that, you piece of shit.”

What was there left to say?

He took a deep breath. He revealed, “Aram Wraith is Spencer Rawlins’ older brother.”

All hell broke loose inside of me. I fought to keep my exterior calm. Travis didn't deserve to see me break. He'd murdered my mother.

My lungs were caving in. I was developing feelings for my own blood. "We're related?"

I knew that Mandy and I weren't just friends. I'd known the moment I laid eyes on her.

I'd send her away, but I only did that to protect her. I wanted her at home, where she was safe. Nobody would harm her in the palace, not even Aram. I didn't want her to see me at my lowest.

Mandy, my newfound blood relation, was the woman I wanted to be mine.

"Let me explain..."

CHAPTER 40

MANDY



KAMILA WOKE UP DISORIENTED AND FUZZY. HER EYES NEEDED time to get used to the harsh light in her private hospital suite. I sat in the back while Weston stood by her bed, watching her every move.

He was powering through the entire situation. In the past few hours, he hadn't slept, he hadn't eaten, and he hadn't changed out of his clothes that were beginning to look like his second skin. His eyes were hollow, barely showing me the Weston I knew. His expression was empty.

Kamila opened her eyes, heaving.

We'd been told that she'd need a moment to realize what had happened.

Neither Weston nor I said anything in those first moments. She breathed hastily, taking in her environment. She glanced at me first. Apologetically, I shrugged, not knowing how to react. She knew I wasn't going to be a problem.

Weston was this close to exploding.

"I'm sorry," Kamila uttered, wiping her forehead where sweat had formed. "I didn't think this would happen."

"Sorry won't cut it. I'm disappointed, but I obviously shouldn't burden you with that. That's what the doctors say." He cleared his throat, but his voice was still raspy. "You had me worried."

At that moment, I could have sworn I saw Weston Wraith break. It made me shiver in my seat. His intense stare was

directed at the one person who meant the most to him, his...

“Weston, relax,” she said. Her croaky voice was similar to Weston’s. “I’ve had worse. It simply overwhelmed my body to be back on uppers again...”

“Don’t ever fucking say that,” Weston cursed. “I don’t care. You mean so fucking much to me. I don’t want to feel this way ever again. I can’t lose you, too.”

I decided to give them some privacy. I was just a friend, after all, unimportant to the bigger scheme of things.

Quietly, I left the room. I heard Kamila call my name, but that didn’t stop me from returning to the empty waiting room.



FOR TWO DAYS, I SLEPT ALONE AT KAMILA’S HOME, GOING through the motions. Valentina visited me. I went over to the Cross house to keep busy. Weston refused to leave Kamila’s side. On the third day of observation, Kamila was finally allowed to come back home.

They created an entire regiment for her. She needed to check in with doctors every day for the next couple of weeks. I found it all confusing, but Weston and Kamila were determined to make it work.

I cooked for Kamila and Weston on her first day back. I took care of them as much as I could. Kamila had returned to her good old self like her overdose had been nothing but an inconvenient setback. Weston was a different story. He didn’t talk much. He barely acknowledged me.

I was surprised when he announced that he’d be staying over.

I couldn’t believe it when I found him in my bed that night, ready to go to sleep.

“Do you think I’m the worst ever?” he asked me. I didn’t cuddle with him because I knew that he needed space when he

was tense like this. He'd told me so often enough in the week we spent together.

"Look at the lengths you go to keep her safe," I reminded him. With him, the bed felt warmer. I didn't need the blankets. I had turned on the heating today. Valentina had helped me adjust it. I'd mostly kept the windows shut, forcing the stormy weather to stay outside.

I wanted to reach out to touch him and let him know I was there for him, but I also didn't want to push him. I didn't really understand what our relationship was like. It certainly wasn't something I had experienced before.

"Do you really mean that?" he asked, glancing at me.

"Yes, I do."

"I shouldn't have snapped at you back at the hospital," he began.

I interrupted him, "You were right, though. I'm a friend. I shouldn't have interfered with your family business. I should've known better."

He shook his head. He was freshly showered, filling my senses with his familiar scent. "That's where you're wrong, and I apologize for making you ever believe that you were ever anything less than mine."

"Excuse me?" I tilted my head in his direction.

"I want you, Mandy. You're mine," Weston said. His hand reached out to touch mine, and at first, I jerked away. I hadn't expected him to do a complete 180. "Nothing and no one is ever going to tear us apart. You're in my life. I'm not going to lose another... You're with me now."

When I finally responded to his touch, the warmth his fingers emitted was suspicious. He traced lines on the tattoo we had got together.

Weston added, "You'll always be mine. Promise me that it doesn't matter what happens. I own you."

"You're freaking me out, Weston," I told him in all honesty. If this was his idea of a romantic confession, he was

fooled.

I couldn't let him continue this talk. He was making it sound like I was his object. I had to interfere. "I'm not your object. I never will be. I'll leave this forsaken country once the wedding is over. I don't want to be here. I wasn't made for this life."

His recent change of mood had made me think he would give me an argument over my statement, but instead, he responded, "We'll find a way. I'll get you a house in London. You'll stay there and wait for me to come to you when I can."

"I have a life outside of you, Weston!" I blurted out so abruptly that I scared myself.

Weston's fingers caressed my thigh. Then he went upward. His palm cupped my pussy. I sighed, feeling jittery. "Are you my pretty little whore or not?"

"I'm Mandy Rawlins. I'm me. I... I will work for my money. I won't let another man boss me around ever again," I insisted. His fingers rubbed my covered pussy. It was difficult to concentrate. He had his way with my body, finding all the soft spots that yearned for him. Underneath his skilled fingers, I was weak. "I don't sit around, waiting to be fucked like that's the highlight of my day."

Weston repeated the question. "Are you my pretty little whore or not? It's a simple question, my intelligent girl. Answer it. Your pussy and your ass are waiting to get fucked, despite what you may say."

"I'm your whore, okay? I am. You got me. Are you happy now?" I snapped, giving him and my stupid hormones what they wanted to hear. "But, we're discussing the logistics of me being your whore."

"Discuss."

"This is lust. This isn't love." I pointed out bluntly.

"It can be if that's what you want."

"Do you mean it, or do you just love my holes? I can find another guy who'll love my holes. I'm more than that," I

argued. His fingers were still on my private parts, applying delicious pressure to my clit. I shifted to meet his demanding touches.

“You’re my pretty little whore. You’re mine. There’s no other man who’ll have you like I have you.” He exhaled. “Kamila will be mine on paper, but you will satisfy my needs. If I wanted holes, I’d go to the Hole Store.”

A moan escaped my lips when his other hand reached the waistband of my panties, diving underneath. “Don’t ever change. I want you to stand up for yourself.”

I dared to reach out and cup his erection. It was long and thick, just waiting to be inside of me. I wanted it there, filling me up.

“Feel that?” he whispered in my ear. I nodded. I felt it all right. “One day, it’s going to give you babies.”

“You better not fuck any other girls. If you do, I’ll make you regret it. I’m your whore. You’re mine. End of the story.” My heart raced as I said the words that seemed as permanent as the tattoo on my wrist he kept touching.

“Remember that. We own each other. That’s the end of the story,” Weston said. “Now, let’s go get your ass fucked again because my pretty little whore has a thing for that.”



A WEEK PASSED. WESTON AND I MASTERED THE ART OF fucking in silence because Kamila was sleeping in the room next door. For each unsolicited moan that escaped my mouth, I got spanked. That pain was nothing compared to the pain in my body. He was good at spanking me, explaining how it was an art in itself. I liked wearing the marks he gave me. It was better than the ring Manuel had given me.

Each day, my willing orifices provided a distraction. We were avoiding the talk of me finally leaving Katantia on the day after the wedding. He hadn’t told me the specifics, but I knew my days in his country were over.

Two days before the wedding, he came home late. He smelled of liquor. He didn't make a habit out of drinking when he came to see me. Kamila slept next door. There was a rule of staying sober around her, just to show your support.

I didn't comment on his drunkenness. I let him join me in bed.

He fucked me with a condom, but he removed it to finish on my pussy. I'd wiped his come away but still... Lost in the haze of pleasure, I almost ignored the fact that Weston had changed in the past week. His moods shifted quicker, from brooding to excited and all the way back. He messaged me all the time, keeping me up to date with his work schedule.

We felt normal. People did stupid things like finish on their partner's pussy. I had never done that before, but there was always a first time.

"My pretty little whore, you've been good to me," Weston said, his fingers tracing lines on my stomach. He was lucky I found him and his sharp edges amusing. "I owe you honesty. I wasn't raised a liar."

And that was when Weston told me everything.

"...he finished by informing me that Aram and Spencer are brothers."

My mouth was slightly open, but I couldn't breathe. I was frozen. I couldn't think straight. Travis? After the initial shock, I jerked away from Weston.

Every inch of my body felt betrayed.

He grabbed my arm, but I kicked at him. I felt like crying. Fuck that. I started sobbing. My mother had been murdered by Travis.

On top of that, I had a family that owned a land of misogynistic pricks. I wanted to scream.

I couldn't scream. Kamila was next door. She needed to rest. She didn't need any further stress. I panted.

"Calm down," Weston demanded. "We're going to get through this."

“There’s no ‘we’ anymore,” I blurted out, almost in a hiss. I wrapped my arms around myself, distancing myself from the bed. “You’re a liar.”

“I own you. You own me,” Weston responded with conviction. I feared the look in his eyes. “I was just trying to protect you from the hurt, but I couldn’t keep it from you any longer. Travis also said that—”

“You almost came inside of me tonight,” I interrupted him dryly. Stunned, I tried to work through the overbearing heat that started to dominate my body.

“Yes.”

“Have you lost your fucking mind?” I asked, trying to keep it all together. My head was spinning. I moved so far away from the bed that I hit a wall. I held onto it.

Weston instructed me, but I still had a lot of things to get out of my system. “You’re overreacting. Let me finish.”

I smelled like Weston. This room... This house smelled like him. I needed fresh air to breathe. As calmly as I could muster it, I said, “I’m done with you and your crazy shit. Marry Kamila. Fuck your whores. I’m over this. You don’t own me.”

“I own you.” His confidence amazed me. “Travis said that your father found out about your mother cheating on him. You’re not Spencer Rawlins’ kid.”

I shook all over. I had to get out of there.

I hurried into the hallway, and he followed me. He tried to stop me from putting on shoes and my coat.

Travis had killed my mother. Spencer made him do it... It was true. Everything Weston had said was true. Every memory from my childhood was a lie. Travis hadn’t been a trustworthy man. I was right to have feared him.

Travis Cross was a murderer.

“Where are you going?” Weston asked. He didn’t look like he had processed my reaction yet.

Weston attempted to grab my arm to keep me inside the house, but I kicked him where it hurt and left. I had to run if I wanted to be quicker than him.

I knew Valentina was at her mother's, so that was where I went. Travis wasn't home. That helped. I couldn't face him yet. His family had nothing to do with his murders...

"Mandy? What happened to you?" Valentina asked when she opened the door of her family's house. "You're red all over. Should I call a doctor?"

"No, I'm okay," I lied, turning to see if Weston had followed me. He hadn't. Kamila's entrance door was shut.

"Come in. Tell me what happened."

I didn't tell her. It would destroy her just as much to know that her father was a killer.

We headed upstairs to her mother. They talked. I didn't feel like participating.

Felicita asked what was wrong with me. I simply shrugged. She was soft-spoken, but I still hid my truth.

Soon, her son joined us. He was worried about me, genuinely like a friend would be. But I still didn't come out with the truth. These people weren't at fault for what Travis had done.

Felicita probably knew, but she couldn't have stopped it. I was aware of that. You didn't come between my father and his will.

Sometime later, we found ourselves in the Cross' living room.

I didn't have anyone else to turn to.

When Aris appeared, having come over after work, I cried. I couldn't stop. Valentina held me. She knew something was off, but she didn't dig around for answers. She let me pour it all out in my tears.

They didn't know what to do with me.

CHAPTER 41

KAMILA



WEED HAD NEVER BEEN ENOUGH FOR ME UP UNTIL NOW. IT proved to be the one thing I could sneak into the palace without troubles. I was known for my gardening interests. The guard who had previously provided me with my drugs turned out to be a solid guy. He helped me smuggle tools like a grinder across the palace security borders. They were hidden amongst my plant orders and flower soil.

In the week that led to my wedding, I smoked in secret. Weston and Mandy were occupied with each other in her bedroom. They tried to keep the noises down, but the walls were thin. Unfortunately, Weston made Mandy lose control more times than comfortable for me.

I had a spray that helped me with the odor. Not that Weston knew what weed smelled like; he had never done drugs. He barely knew what they looked like. But one could never be too safe.

My guard and I didn't only smuggle weed to my house. We also managed to exchange urine samples. I kept the samples in apple juice bottles stored in my bedroom's refreshment mini-fridge. Every time my testers entered the premises of the palace, I got alerted. I had new burner phones now, courtesy of my guard. In my bathroom, I proceeded to warm up my guard's urine in scorching water just enough that it could reach body temperature levels.

I was granted enough privacy to pee on my own.

And so it went.

Every day, there was a new wedding detail I had to approve. I talked to people I never intended to speak to. I invited monsters to my wedding to keep Aram pleased. I tried on my wedding dress. I felt nothing. I made it seem like it was everything, though.

One night, Mandy didn't return home. I had to sit downstairs with Weston, trying to extract information. He didn't let anything slip. We sat there in silence while I craved to call up my guard and ask him for something a little more dangerous than weed.

I didn't understand what had occurred between Weston and Mandy, but it seemed like a deep ridge in their relationship.

The next day was my final day of freedom. We spent it as a family, taking pre-wedding photographs in the great hall of the palace that had been decorated for the happy occasion. Tomorrow, the wedding would take place here.

Weston and I stood in the middle of the photoshoot, acting like the photographer's puppets. He directed our every move. I had to play my part well. Aram was watching my every move. He observed every aspect of my body. His eyes lingered on my tits and the junction between my thighs. On any other occasion, I would have been affected. My body had been manipulated to ache for him. My good little friend called weed helped me out. My sex drive was atrocious after a week of smoking. That made sex with Aram hurt more than before, but I thrived on that pain. It reminded me of my purpose.

The Cross family had to drag Mandy to the photoshoot. That was what Aris told me. She'd spent the night at Felicita's house, crying her eyes out. Mandy refused to eat. She didn't say a word.

Everyone who would be in front of the camera at some point in the shoot had come dressed up and ready to go. Mandy sat in the corner, brooding. The rings under her eyes scared me. I hadn't seen her like this before, not even when she found out what her former fiancé had been doing behind her back.

While I had finally accepted the Cross family, Aris and Weston had decided to revert back to the old days. They didn't speak to Felicita or Travis. They didn't look at them. If it were up to Aris and Weston, they wouldn't have existed.

Weston and I did things for the camera I regretted thoroughly. Not because it hurt Mandy, because it obviously did since she didn't stop sobbing, but because he was Weston. I didn't want to do these things to him. I didn't like his hands on my body, as gentle as he tried to be, so that we could get through this madness.

Mandy studied us with sadness in her eyes.

When the photographer finally called it quits, Weston had had enough. He walked up to her while the rest of the family gradually departed the hall. I noticed that Valentina stayed behind, keeping an eye on her friend.

"You need to stop this charade," Weston told her. The palace staff had entered the great hall, cleaning up after the photoshoot and adding some minor details for tomorrow's big festivities. They ignored the prince, but I didn't. I saw that he was about to do something he'd regret.

"I won't," Mandy responded, a painful sob escaping her throat. She flinched when Weston reached out to touch her.

"I don't see a problem there. You shouldn't either. This is my country. We can be whoever we want to be," Weston explained with urgency in his voice. Mandy wouldn't listen.

She stood up and stepped away from Weston. "Please, go away. Let me be. I'll be out of your hair in no time."

He leaned in, whispering something in her ear that upset her even more.

Mandy tried to shove him away from her body. She urged him, "Stop it. This ends now. I can't do this."

"You'll come around, my pretty little whore. I know you will." Weston turned away from Mandy, waving goodbye. I was stunned. He left the great hall without any further ado. Even though Mandy had asked for him to leave, she seemed bothered by the empty space in front of her.

I waited until we were back home to confront her.

Once the door of my house was shut behind us, I confronted Mandy. I was tired of her silence. “You need to tell me what the fuck is going on, Mandy Rawlins. If you don’t, I’ll bring Weston here and force him to spit it out. I’ve lost my patience. You can’t leave home like this. I was worried.”

“Kamila...”

“No. Start talking. Now,” I demanded. I was bitchier than usual. Being back on substances did that to me.

Mandy breathed out. She walked into the living room, taking a seat. She wiped her cheeks that were wet from her fateful tears. “It’s a long story.”

“Really?” I responded. “I have time. I’m only getting married tomorrow.”

“Are you sure you want to hear this?” Mandy asked me. I nodded. I hadn’t had a smoke today, but I was pretty sure I could take whatever she would serve me. “I wanted to wait until you were married. I don’t want this to ruin your day.”

“Skip the intro. Talk,” I insisted. I took a seat next to Mandy, ready to listen to whatever bullshit Weston had pulled.

I should have forced her to clean up my house instead. That would have been more beneficial. What she eventually told me fucked my brain up.

Mandy revealed every single thing she had been working on behind my back. She topped it off by saying that we were family, but her mother had conceived Mandy with another man.

When she got to Travis, I had to pretend to be less crushed than I truly was. Mandy told me that he killed our mothers. I kept a straight face. A princess didn’t allow anyone to see her fall.

Travis had pretended to be my friend all these years. Betrayal didn’t even begin to cover what I felt.

I finally understood Mandy’s meltdown.

When she finished her story, I embraced her. She cried in my arms. I didn't shed a tear. I had a couple of suicide attempts on my belt that made up for the lack of tears. I had felt it in my gut; Mom wouldn't have ended her life in a fucking bathtub. Who did that? I had. I'd tried to end my life in one, but it didn't work. As royals, we were watched. I had a family that needed knowledge of my location. My mom must've been no different.

I should've known better.

"Do you forgive me?" Mandy asked.

I responded, "You're just a messenger. There's nothing to forgive. Aram and Travis, on the other hand? Well. They're going to get what's coming for them."

She sobbed. I caressed her hair, soothing her as best as I could. "You need to process what you've found out. Are you sure you don't want to stay here a little longer?"

Mandy shook her head. "My entire life has been a lie. I need to go back home and face the music. I can't stay here. Weston will keep trying to make excuses. I can't deal with that."

She was a mess. After I made her some tea, we drank it in silence. Eventually, I sent her upstairs to get some rest. She desperately needed it. Tomorrow was a big day for us all.

When I heard knocks coming from my front door, I hesitated. Weston would never knock.

I opened the door. There he sat.

The king had taken a seat on my front porch, observing the road. Outside of the palace, he still brought his lethal energy. He was dressed in his everyday clothes, a tracksuit sponsored by some big fashion house from a foreign country I had never visited.

His heavy cologne unnerved me, reminding me of all the times I had woken up handcuffed to his bed.

"How's my favorite whore doing?" Aram asked. He never came to my house. It felt like an invasion of the worst kind.

My defenses were on alert.

I didn't respond.

"When I ask a question, you open that pathetic mouth of yours, and you respond. Is that clear?" If his voice was an object, it'd be the sharpest knife on earth. One touch and it sliced through you.

"I'm doing well, thank you very much," I responded in a clipped tone.

"Daddy," he reminded me.

"Yes, Daddy, I'm doing well," I deadpanned. What Mandy had told me about the king didn't surprise me. I couldn't get madder than I already was. The only thing that bothered me was Travis's involvement. Suddenly, I questioned each meeting I had ever had with the man. Had he been planted by Aram?

"Fix whatever's wrong with Mandy. She can't keep whining around tomorrow. There'll be cameras everywhere," he ordered. I nodded. "I told your Weston to keep his hands away from her, but he didn't listen. In fact, he never listens."

I rolled my eyes at him.

Aram continued, "I'm not a fool. I know Weston's marrying you to save you from me, but you're mine, Kamila. Nobody will ever take you away from me."

I hated that he knew me and that I knew so little of him. All those years, he was able to hide his secrets from me.

"You will still fuck me after you become his. They all think I'm addicted to you, but the truth is you want me just as much. We'll keep fucking because you love it, Kamila," Aram said triumphantly. Lies. So many fucking lies. I prayed that the lies wrapped around his neck to choke him to death. "It's better than the petty drugs you drown yourself in. I'm better than any death. I granted your every wish. I'm your entire world. I'm the reason you exist."

I swallowed.

“Now, excuse me.” He stood up from the chair. He approached me, grabbing my jaw with his soft hands. “I have five eighteen-year-olds waiting to fuck me for pictures with the newlyweds tomorrow. I won’t let them down. Soon, that’ll be you again. Don’t get all too excited over your false sense of security. I know more than I let on.”

Before I could respond, he was already walking away.

I hurried inside, searching for my burner phones. “It’s urgent. Meet me at our spot.”

CHAPTER 42

MANDY



RELUCTANTLY, I OPENED MY EYES. I RUBBED THE TATTOO ON my wrist, seeking comfort in my mother's name. I didn't know what to think. She'd been murdered. All these years, Spencer got to play the miserable widower for the public.

I had made excuses for my father. *He's not even my biological father!* He radically changed behavior after my mother's death. I thought her death had altered him. Now, I thought her death only resulted in him showing his real face. He dropped the mask. He let me see the monster I'd been living under a roof with.

The world seemed different but still the same somehow. My eyes saw through the mist of lies. The date on my phone confirmed that it was Kamila's thirty-second birthday, the fourteenth of October.

It was also her wedding day.

My room needed fresh air, so I headed toward the window to let some in. The wind had calmed down for the day. The sun was about to rise. I'd woken up early, but our usually empty road was already packed with traffic. Cars were looking for parking spots. All sorts of people mingled, gazing at the houses and the palace. They didn't look like official guests. I guessed they were here for the preparations. Guards had been positioned on all fronts, protecting the royal properties.

I glanced at the palace that peeked at me from behind tall and full trees. The Katantian palace looked shinier today. All the windows had been polished. The paint had been reapplied.

The lights were on everywhere, although the sun provided enough visibility. Everything seemed louder and fancier than I'd been used to these past couple of weeks.

I went into the bathroom to do what I had to do to look presentable. The face looking back at me from the mirror frightened me. I swallowed. Everything was moving too fast. I took a quick shower. When I exited the bathroom, I heard voices from downstairs. After quickly dressing up in jeans and a shirt, I went down there.

Kamila and her horde of wedding assistants were gathered in the living room. The windows were wide-open. Relaxing music played in the background at a comfortable volume. Flowers graced every available table. Unopened champagne bottles were scattered around the living room, making me wonder who the fuck allowed alcohol around a recovering person.

“Hey!” Kamila welcomed me with a hug. Her eyes were glossy, and her red hair was hidden underneath a towel. “Good morning. I hope they didn't wake you. I told them to be quiet until you woke up.”

“Happy Birthday! Good morning,” I replied, fatigued. We let go of the hug way too soon. Her energetic movements were too much for me this early after I had opened my eyes. She led me to the chairs in the middle of the room where we took our seats while people fiddled around us, grabbing their tools, eyeshadows, curling irons, and whatnot. Her living room had been transformed into somewhat of a boudoir. The sofas had been pushed back toward the walls. A lighted makeup vanity table was at the center. The bride-to-be would sit on a diamond-covered seat while her makeup was being applied to her. All the other chairs that had been brought in were black and basic.

The front door was wide open, and they all went in and out. I had never experienced this house as busy. Kamila was here. She appeared excited, but I sensed that something was off. She was pretending.

Camera crews. Makeup artists. Hairdressers. Palace staff who would serve everyone drinks. The fashion designer who had gifted Kamila her dress was going to come over later on as well. Kamila had explicitly demanded that I'd get ready with her. So I sat there in a position I'd never been in before. They all said I grew up like a princess, but I had never had this many people bent to my will.

I didn't want to.

I'd seen where that had led my mother.

I swallowed.

"Are you sure you want to go to my wedding with Ryan Cross?" Kamila asked me. A woman was correcting Kamila's nails that she'd done the day before for the photoshoot.

Dryly, I replied, "Yes. I don't want to go alone."

"I told you I could find another guy. You don't have to go with a Cross."

I shook my head. "You don't have to force anyone to accompany me. It's not Ryan's fault."

She disapproved, but she wasn't willing to discuss it any further. I didn't want to make it the subject of the day, either.

Kamila whispered to me, "If you want to eat something, you should do it now. There won't be any time for that once they start applying makeup. They're going to do that to us at the same time so you can see how they put me in the wedding dress."

I nodded. That would be the highlight of my day. I had volunteered for this. Kamila had offered to book me a suite in a hotel to wait for the wedding out, but I had told her I wanted to be by her side.

I felt like I would throw up if I ate anything, so I sat on my allocated seat and waited for everything to start. I couldn't count the people around me. I didn't know any of them.

I felt lonely and lied to. I could still remember Weston's come on my skin, and it weirded me out.

The camera people kept telling me to smile like Kamila. She looked glorious. She was a trained princess, doing as expected and thriving at it. Everyone around us was mesmerized by her grace. She didn't snap at anyone. She talked to every person whose eyes she met, asking them questions about their lives and what they were up to.

I couldn't help my gloomy face, so they distanced my seat from Kamila's. They wanted the best shots for the wedding film.

The clock struck twelve. It all began. They turned up the music. It was the music Kamila loved, old music from the sixties and seventies. People started touching Kamila. They also touched me. After flinching at the beginning, I gradually grew accustomed to being pampered.

The hair was next. While they did my hair, I observed Kamila. Something was unnerving about her today. I didn't quite know what it was, but it freaked me out that I was the only one who could see it. I wondered if Weston would agree with me.

My hair was finished before Kamila's. They started applying makeup to me while Kamila's hair was still being taken care of.

Her people had utilized the entire beauty arsenal on her face and hair. They were done with me soon, so I was left to watch a princess becoming a princess.

Kamila Ruby looked like her name, extravagant and royal.

When the makeup people ended their masterpiece, it was three o'clock. Every single person in the room applauded. That was the perfect material for the cameramen.

Kamila stood up. The room was in awe of her beauty. My jaw dropped. She still hadn't put on her wedding dress. She took my breath away.

The cameramen went upstairs first. We followed. The designer and her assistants joyfully joined us.

"Everything set for later?" Kamila asked the designer. I knew her. I had seen her face in the magazines. Famous people

went to her when they needed a dress, but I forgot her name.

“Yes, darling! Anything you want, you’ll get!” The designer winked at Kamila.

“What’s later?” I asked her. We didn’t share blood, but I considered her family. I felt it. All the slurs and degrading comments that my father had forced me to hear were justified. If Kamila was the primary example, I was an epic failure.

“I won’t be joining the party in my wedding dress,” Kamila explained. The designer giggled. “She has other dresses prepared for me.”

“Ah.” I didn’t know what else to say.

Kamila’s dress was laid across her bed. Assistants were holding it up at every end. The bed was too small.

When Kamila undressed, I turned away. I didn’t need to see her naked. One of the assistants warned me just in time. The snow-white dress was getting fitted on her. Kamila didn’t wear high heels because she would knock everyone out of the park with heels. The designer had brought her fabulous flat shoes. Nobody would see them underneath the dress anyway. It took another hour to get the dress on right.

My eyes had never seen such a thing of beauty. They filled with tears because Kamila looked like the most stunning woman I had ever seen.

Thank God the makeup people had used water-resistant products.

The cameramen asked Kamila, the fashion designer, and the assistants questions.

“How does it feel to dress the Princess of Katantia?”

“Is this your biggest job ever?”

“Has Weston seen the dress yet?”

“Are you going on a honeymoon?”

Soon, the assistants accompanied me to my room, helping me put on my dress. I’d cleaned up my messy room for them before they came. I was a Rawlins daughter, but I had never

been treated with such care by fashion world people. Spencer encouraged anyone to bully me because of my weight. That was why I had avoided clashing with the fashion world until today, for Kamila's sake.

Everyone except Kamila headed downstairs to watch her step down the stairs of her home. The camera crew encouraged the people to clap and be enthusiastic.

The music was still on. I focused on the song that was playing as Kamila carefully took step by step. The song was called “(Your Love Keeps Lifting Me) Higher and Higher.”

I swallowed my sadness and attempted to feel happy for Kamila. She was getting away from the king. That was the biggest priority at the moment. It didn't matter that I would soon see Weston at the palace. If Kamila was dressed up like this, he was going to look like heaven on earth.

They filmed Kamila exiting her house. Eventually, it all stopped. The bride was sent back inside as the staff left her home. They took their seats and other things with them. The only people left were the fashion designer and a few of her assistants.

The camera crew had moved on. They had to set up at the palace.

“You're the most magnificent bride I have ever seen,” I told Kamila. She smiled. We were standing in her now empty living room.

Before I could start sobbing, Ryan entered Kamila's house. He looked handsome in his suit. I couldn't deny it.

“It's starting soon. We should get going,” Ryan suggested. “You both look beautiful, by the way.”

“Make sure she gets home all right,” Kamila warned Ryan. He gave her a quick nod in response.

It hurt my heart to leave Kamila alone. They wanted her to come to the palace on foot. Soon, they were going to stop the traffic so that the bride could walk towards the palace. She had a short way ahead of her, thankfully.

Ryan and I walked away from Kamila's house in silence. He didn't ask questions. I was grateful. He'd seen me break down the other day. His sister must've warned him to tread carefully.

It took us only a couple of minutes. We were in the middle of the festivities. A red carpet had been laid out for Kamila's entrance. We were asked not to step on it.

The back entrance of the palace was where Weston was waiting for his bride. Anything I'd imagined had been nothing compared to how he looked today. He was mouthwateringly handsome. His tux suited him, a tailored and expensive fit. His hair was tamed. His eyes were searching for mine, but I didn't meet them. I couldn't.

He was surrounded by almost a hundred people. A look inside the palace told me that guests were everywhere. Some had sat down in the hall where the ceremony was going to take place. Others waited to see the bride first with Weston.

Since Ryan was a Cross, he had to stand by his family. His family and Valentina were right next to Aris, and he stood behind his brother. I couldn't look at Travis. It hurt that he was even here, still breathing while my mother was dead. I didn't want to focus on him. So I quickly moved away.

Aram was inside the palace, entertaining older guests.

Everyone I saw looked bleak in comparison to Kamila. She was by far the attraction of the day. I couldn't wait for people to see her.

"How does she look?" Valentina asked me, thrilled. Ryan and I had joined them again.

"Words can't describe it," I told her.

"Mandy?" His voice sent shivers down my spine. The Cross family stayed quiet. "Can we talk for a second?"

"Everybody's looking at you, so no," I responded through my teeth. All eyes were on Weston. I felt nervous.

"Just let me have a word with you?" Weston insisted. The way he looked made me want to kiss him. I felt disgusted by

myself. It was fun until it wasn't. I couldn't be his object. I refused.

Ryan stepped between us, almost aggressively. "She says she doesn't want to talk to you. Shut up and wait for your bride."

The silence that followed was haunting. I heard the stomps of the guards before they appeared in my vision.

Ryan and Weston would have gotten into an altercation if the guards hadn't intervened. They took Ryan away. Nobody said another word amongst the Cross family. The rest of the guests reemerged in their chatter.

When the king joined us, I knew Kamila was on her way. He didn't say a word to the Cross family. He patted his sons on the back.

Aram leaned into me and whispered into my ear, "Silly girl. Weston will never be yours."

My eyes were ready to tear up, but I stood firm. Everybody's eyes were on us. They didn't need to see me cry.

A live orchestra was playing music. They played the royal Katantian theme. My heart fluttered.

This was the moment.

Kamila would be arriving soon.

They played the theme again. People's chatters were gradually disappearing. The orchestra did another round of the theme.

Valentina whispered something to Aris. Felicita held on to Travis's hand. Aram looked stern.

Weston had no idea what was going on, just like I didn't.

The theme was played again.

People stopped chatting.

Kamila Ruby was a no-show.

CHAPTER 43

MANDY



THE ORCHESTRA PLAYED THE KATANTIAN THEME ANOTHER three times. At some point, they were silenced. Guards in formation were sent toward our houses to search for Kamila, to bring her to the wedding.

I feared the worst. What if I hadn't seen the signs? She was exceedingly thrilled. She looked like she wasn't from this planet. Her beauty was impeccable. This would be the happiest moment of her life.

She had to be found. Maybe she was playing games. In some countries, the brides stood up the grooms at the church.

The only problem was that this wasn't a church. We were waiting at a royal palace. The guests were important Katantians and international friends of Katantia. This couldn't be happening.

If she didn't show, it would be a great stir to the current peaceful atmosphere amongst the family.

The Cross and Wraith family turned toward me when the guards returned with Kamila's wedding dress. I had witnessed its purity. Now it looked damaged, even from afar.

“What was she like today?”

“How could she get out of the dress?”

“Did she get high?”

“Where the fuck's Kamila, Mandy?”

The guards walked up to the Wraiths. One of them gave a report only we could hear.

“The designer and some of the assistants were downstairs. Kamila told them she was going to the bathroom. When we arrived, the designer hadn’t noticed that something was going on. Apparently, standing up the groom is a tradition where she is from. The guards outside the house weren’t there. They were sent here. Two guards went upstairs and found the dress damaged. One of the assistants who went upstairs to help her with the dress in the bathroom is still unconscious in the hallway. Kamila is nowhere to be found. What shall we do, Your Majesty?”

“Close the borders. Watch the beaches. No one of the international guests are allowed to leave Katantia until after their interrogation has proven that they are innocent,” Aram ordered. The man’s eyes were cold. I wasn’t standing close to him, but I took a step back. His posture was intimidating. “Most important of all, find Kamila Ruby and bring her in for her punishment.”

“Punishment, Your Majesty?” The guard was confused as I was. Kamila was gone. Maybe she had been abducted. Why would he immediately assume she needed punishment?

“Yes, she will get punished. She will breed my seed until she gives me another son. She will be executed,” Aram revealed. His voice was penetrating. I swallowed. My hands shook. My knees were weak.

Kamila was in big trouble, and that was just an understatement.



CHAOS ERUPTED. THE KATANNTIAN GUESTS WERE immediately let go, but the international guests were escorted to hotels nearby. Some guests protested. I could bet that Aram would declare them the prime suspects.

Guards escorted us to our houses down the road. All the cars were gone. The silence had returned.

Travis and Felicita went to their house. Valentina and Aris walked toward their home.

Weston stopped in the middle of the street. I had vowed not to look at him, but it was impossible to resist the urge.

He was broken. I could feel it. My problems with him seemed irrelevant compared to the brick that had hit him right in the head.

I approached Weston carefully. I didn't have it in me to push him any further. "Let's take you home."

"I want to see her house. She might have left clues," Weston said, making his way toward Kamila's home. He walked swiftly. I couldn't catch up with him.

By the time I arrived, he had turned the house upside down.

I realized that the guards must have searched the place as well.

"There's nothing here," Weston yelled. I saw his fingers tremble out of anger. We were all worried, but it was the most personal to Weston. He put his life on the line for Kamila.

I prayed she had left on her own. I wished she had thought this through.

"Weston, please, calm down," I told him gently. He was making me nervous. "We need to think logically. Perhaps a departure was the best solution."

The prince looked at me like I had just said that the earth was flat. He cocked his head. "Did you hear what he told the guards?"

I nodded.

"If running away was an option, we would have done it already. Kamila would be in Hawaii sipping cocktails, learning about indigenous history," Weston spat. He ran a hand through his dark hair. "The drugs did this to her. If she were clearheaded, she would've been aware of the danger."

I swallowed. I lived with Kamila. I didn't notice a thing. I wanted to slap myself. "I should have noticed..."

"You're too young to see the signs. You can't even tell a spiked drink from a normal one," Weston pointed out, insulting me. I was the child in this situation, how spectacular.

Times like these reminded me of his age. He was twenty-nine years old. The only person my age at close proximity was Valentina. I wondered whether her opinion was valued, or her insight was questioned. Then I remembered she lived in Katantia.

"I'm really sorry," I dared to say. It felt like I was trying to avoid stepping on mines. Weston looked like he was ready to explode. "She looked incredible. Words can't even begin to cover her appearance..."

"Do you think I give a fuck about what Kamila looked like today?" Weston asked me bluntly. I retreated into my shell. "He's going to give her hell when he finds her. She's embarrassed us on an international stage. There's no going back."

"When he finds her?" It was just a matter of time then. A cold shiver ran down my spine.

"Aram Wraith will find Kamila. Katantia has a lot of friends on the outside. When he finds her, the countdown to her death will start."

I didn't appreciate him saying that. "Don't say that. She's... It's going to be all right."

"Kamila's my sister, but I'm not delusional. Aram won't show mercy when he catches her," Weston uttered. He didn't look at me. The prince glanced ahead. Terrified, I listened to what he said. "It will be a blood bath."

Barely, I mumbled, "She's my family."

I couldn't contain the whimpers.

Weston shot me a questioning look.

"You're my family." The look in his eyes changed. His blue eyes dissolved into a deeper, darker color of lust.

I didn't want to admit my feelings because they filled me with shame. We weren't related by blood, yet it felt strange to entertain the idea of being with him. Especially, when being with him meant that he'd own me.

Jittery, I continued, "I care about her. I want her to find happiness. I..."

Weston took hold of my hands at my sides and surprised me with a kiss.

I didn't protest.

CHAPTER 44

WESTON



MANDY BROKE OFF THE KISS. I WAS LEFT WITH HER blackberry scent possessing me. I couldn't touch her unless I wanted to alienate her any further.

I needed her to distract me. I wanted to kiss her all over. My cock surged to fuck her, each of her orifices, to forget what a massive failure this wedding had been.

"I feel confused," Mandy revealed. Hiding her face behind her hands, she stepped back from me.

She wasn't the only one. I still couldn't wrap my head around the fact that Aram and Spencer were related. Miraculously, Mandy and I didn't share blood. Every part of me wanted her. I was convinced that our families didn't matter. I ignored how my decision made me more like Aram than I ever wished to be.

"I can't decide whether I hate you or love you right now," she added, sighing. "You lied to me, but I don't like seeing you hurt like this. It's impossible to find a balance. I—"

"You were right. Kamila's her own person. What we tried to do here backfired. I don't know what we were thinking," I said, rubbing the back of my neck.

We headed to Kamila's bedroom. After skimming through Kamila's stuff, we found ourselves sitting on the floor. Our hands were intertwined. Her thumb trailed the back of my hand. The small movement messed with my head.

"Are you saying she orchestrated all of this?" Mandy asked. Her eyes roaming the room. Everything seemed as it

always did. Kamila had a thing for structure and cleanliness. She didn't tolerate dust or dirty clothes messing up her spotless room.

"I honestly don't know how she could have pulled it off. Aram has eyes everywhere," I said. Perhaps I underestimated her. There was also a faint possibility that she was abducted, but I didn't believe that would've gone this quiet. You don't kidnap the Katantian princess without wanting something in return.

I had the undeniable urge to fuck Mandy and get this shit out of my head.

She needed to feel moral superiority. I let her have it. She'd come around. I knew she would.

"What happens now?" The answer to that was unpleasant.

I responded, "Now we prepare for her funeral."

Mandy gasped. She removed her hand from mine. Mandy started shaking next to me. She tried to hold back her sobs, but they were stronger than her. She whimpered, "You can't give up on her like this..."

"She gave up on herself when she started doing drugs again after being sober for years. She gave up on herself when she abandoned her family today." Wryly, I continued, "I don't know what else I need to do. I came up with the perfect plan to keep her safe. I've been watching her. I checked on her. What does she want me to do? Lock her up in her room and throw away the key?"

"You said you weren't a hero," Mandy reminded me. "Kamila wanted to save herself. If she did this, she took the upper hand. I admire that about her."

"You admire the fact that she's one foot in her grave?" I asked, snapping.

She shook her head. "It doesn't have to end that way."

"You've been around your father." She nodded. "I've been around mine. What are the chances that Kamila gets out of this

alive? When Aram gets her back, he'll torture her to a slow death. He'll suck the life right out of her."

The realization hit her. She froze.

"One day, you will learn to live with it," I assured her.

She up and left the room. I sat there in the silence for a moment, hoping for a sign. But it didn't come. Why would it? There were no signs on Katantia.

There was only Aram and his will.

I walked into Mandy's bedroom, finding her covered by her sheets. She hadn't calmed down.

"I can't carry this around, Weston," she confessed. She sounded broken, panting almost. "I don't want her to die. She's the one person who deserves to live. She deserves to find happiness."

I couldn't agree more.

I took a seat on the edge of Mandy's bed. I couldn't even sit straight anymore. This fucking day had cost me a decade of my life.

"Wherever she is, and whoever she's with, I hope she makes it." I heard her swallow. "If that means we never see her again, so be it."

"I'd advise you to keep your hopes low," I said, hanging my head. "The men involved will leave no stone unturned."

"I can't even pretend that everything is fine," she uttered, groaning. "Knowing that my father killed my mother, anything is possible. All bets are off."

Mandy pushed the cover aside, revealing her beautiful face. She hadn't washed her makeup off, and now it was running down the sides of her cheeks. Mandy had changed into her pajamas swiftly; she was a sucker for those. She continued, "I can't deal with that. I can't live without hope. I'm not ready."

"Then you should stay here with me," I suggested. My cock stirred at that thought. It would do me good to have her

around. Without Kamila as an object, I could marry her instead. There would be no objections. Her father didn't want her back.

"I will cherish what we had. You taught me a lot," she explained, sighing. "But I can't stay. I have to go back. I need to get away from here. Katantia isn't healthy for me right now. Everything reminds me of you and of her... You walk around like you can still fuck me and get away with it."

"That's because I can."

She turned away from me, shifting on the bed and tearing at the sheets. "That's why I need to leave. We had a deal. Now you need to let me go home."

My ego wasn't pleased. "So you're going to give yourself to another man?"

"I can't imagine any other man taking me. I wouldn't feel safe like I did with you. I'm probably going to stay alone for a while, maybe the rest of my life." She wiped her eyes. "I can't trust anybody right now."

"You don't fuck other men. If you don't want to fuck me, I'm forbidding you from ever touching another man."

Mandy bit her lip. She was intrigued. She squeezed her thighs together. This was the reaction I wanted. Trying to sound stern, she said, "I'm not yours. You don't boss me around."

"If I say that you're mine, I mean it." My hand reached for her thigh. I grabbed it. "You're going to go home, as you call it. That will never be your home again. I'm not there, so it's not your home. I'm your home. Where I am, that's where you crave to be. You'll sleep in your bed. You'll dream of me. You'll hear my name on the news, and this right here..." My fingers traveled to her pussy, cupping it. She didn't flinch. "My pretty little whore's pussy will ask for me. She'll beg me to come for her and fill her up with my seed."

"We can't have that. I won't allow it..." Mandy mumbled. Her eyes were lost in guilt and lust. I dipped below her

panties, finding her hot flesh with my eager fingers. “I don’t live in your world. I grew up with different morals.”

“Yet, you’re still letting me touch you like this.” I moved my hand so my thumb was on that spot that made her writhe. Her clit was mine to play with.

She bucked her hips. If that was her attempt to move away from me, she failed.

“As I was saying, your pussy will ask for me, but all you’ll have of me are memories.” I rubbed her clit with my thumb, making sure her pussy felt what she was missing. “You’ll think of me whenever you touch yourself. I’m a part of you. There’s no denying that.”

The night was beginning to set over my homeland as I made her come. The barely audible moans that escaped her parted lips had me on edge. I wanted to pin her against this bed and fuck this attitude right out of her.

I could do what I hadn’t done to Kamila. I could lock her in this room, handcuff her to the bed. She’d be mine forever. Her father had abandoned her. Her ex-fiancé was a dipshit who didn’t realize what had slipped out of his hold.

I could cement my role as the bad guy of this story.

But I decided to keep my word.

“Get dressed,” I demanded.

Her eyes widened.

I got up from the bed. I reached for my phone in my jacket’s pocket. All of Katantia was shut down, but it would only take one call to get my request going.

Mandy observed me as I called the airport. She started packing up her things in a hurry. There was no time to wait. Once she was in the air, Aram couldn’t touch her. I’d suffer the consequences alone.

We moved at a fast pace, reaching my car in a matter of fifteen minutes. Mandy was determined to leave this hellhole. I didn’t blame her.

The guards almost didn't let us out, but when they called the palace, the palace said they didn't give a flying fuck about what we were up to. We were allowed outside. Aram knew I would never advise or help Kamila pull off such an outrageous scandal.

The traffic was non-existent. Nobody was allowed outside in this time of crisis. The search for Kamila was still on-going. Wherever she was, it wasn't Katantia. I refused to believe she'd disappear on her own and stay in the country.

Bypassing security at the airport, we headed for the jet I had ordered. There were multiple jets parked here, guests waiting in their hotels to fly home. They'd complain when they saw our jet taking flight, but we were Katantians. Western complaints meant nothing to us, a bunch of privileged fuckers feeling entitled. Mandy didn't say a word. Compliant, she followed me to our destination.

We reached the jet, boarding it together.

I could've left the country with her, but then Aris would be left alone to handle this mess. I knew Aris was incapable of handling shit. I had to stay and play the prince.

Before departing the plane and leaving her alone with four starstruck stewardesses, I decided to kiss her mouth. The kiss opened up a chapter I should've left untouched. I fought for entrance. She let me in, her hands on each side of my neck. I wanted her to stay. I had the power to keep her, but I knew she needed to go away. She had to find herself. I couldn't be my pretty little whore's drug.

I took in her blackberry scent. I memorized it. Against her lips, I whispered, "Whatever this is, I refuse to call it the end of our story."

She didn't reply.

Silently, she took a seat, putting her seat belt on. She swallowed. Her eyes closed. She took a deep breath.

It was my time to go.

CHAPTER 45

KAMILA

WHAT HAPPENED?



I HAD ATTEMPTED TO KEEP MYSELF WELL-HYDRATED AND IN good spirits. Instead of swallowing pills or doing anything remotely drug-related, I tried to stay sane.

My designer, makeup artist, and hairdresser worked their butts off to create a bride who swept everyone off their feet.

I didn't want to be the attraction of the day. But I had to be patient. Soon, I would be a nobody.

I had planned to leave home when I set a date for the wedding. I had to bide my time. I'd planted seeds of futility after the engagement party, thinking that staying in Katantia would be of little use. Drastic measures needed to be taken.

Being famous and loved, taking advantage of people came easy to me.

The newer guards, the ones we'd hired after the engagement announcement for the wedding celebration, weren't as afraid of Aram as the older ones. I exploited their gullibility to the fullest. I had a guard for drugs who kept eyeing my tits.

Then I had a guard for my secret plan to escape the country. I'd researched the guards' backstories, and it turned out we were hiring anyone who applied for the job. Finding one with an anti-Katantian sentiment in his family was a piece of cake. Katantian authorities were incredibly easy to distract, especially when they were on the verge of experiencing the most important wedding in years. Our security had the same problem as Aram. They were too cocky after years of

obedience on everybody's part. They forgot that we might betray the country. In secret, I packed my things, knowing that Aram had eyes everywhere. He knew everything because he most likely bugged each room in each house on this street.

I used this to my advantage, pretending to relapse. I relapsed for real, but I had the situation under control.

Every guard or policeman working on my wedding day would get a holiday paycheck, meaning they got double their regular hourly rate.

I made my escape plan guard decide. That was an undoubtedly bold move, but I was good with people. Stupidly for him, he picked my side. Contrary to what Aram believed, my popularity boomed. Men would never dare to fuck me, but I still earned their respect. The women all wanted to be the Katantian princess.

I intimidated my guard, the crazy tall red-haired princess. We met in the woods in secret, far away from prying eyes and recording devices. Aram was convinced he had raised spoiled rich kids who weren't in touch with nature. Well, I was. I didn't frequent walking in the woods. I avoided falling into a routine to avoid raising suspicions. To my luck, the meet-ups in the woods remained a secret between my guard and me.

He agreed to my plan to ruin the most important day in recent Katantian history, feeling proud of his participation.

On the day of the wedding, he went to work as usual. He was on royal house duty, guarding my house and the other homes in my street. He'd scheduled a break for when I was supposed to walk to the palace, and my escape began. His car waited for us at the end of my road.

Around four, I was fully dressed, ready to be wed. The staff in the house had half an hour to leave my house. I had fifteen minutes to collect my final thoughts before walking up to the palace.

The ceremony would start at five.

It did not.

The guard climbed up to the first floor of my house with a ladder I usually used for my gardening escapades.

I told the designer I had to go upstairs for a moment of privacy before the wedding. I couldn't use the bathroom excuse. The dress I wore required three people holding it up for me to go pee without dirtying it. I carefully walked up the stairs right before my supposed departure for the palace.

One of the designer's assistants followed me. I almost shrieked when I saw him, but my guard came out of his hiding spot, punching the assistant. He lost consciousness, flopping onto me and my wedding dress, smearing blood all over it. I snatched him before he could make an alarming sound.

My guard tore the dress off my body, ruining a body of work that had taken weeks to create. He helped me into average cloud-colored sweats and a jet-black hoodie that would cover my hair. My makeup remover and cotton pads were already in my bag, which I grabbed.

We climbed the ladder down, one after the other. Then we rushed to the guard's car through the woods to avoid prying eyes.

Out of breath, we reached his car. The moment I sat down, I started taking off my makeup. After taking a deep breath, he turned the engine on. We drove past the palace with ease. He flashed our fake palace ID cards that he'd got for us. They weren't functioning, but they looked like the real deal. The guards at the gates didn't even bother to check the cards in the system. Most of the experienced guards were at the actual palace, guarding my family and their wealthy guests. The ones left here weren't lucky or experienced enough to witness the wedding of the century up close.

The light traffic made our journey easy. Everybody was at home, glued to the television. They were waiting to watch the wedding. I had enough time to remove the pretty makeup from my face and attempt to loosen my hair. The fake nails were a different story. I had brought a tube of liquid that promised their removal in twenty seconds. I told my guard to drive slowly because the nails were a tricky situation.

Once we were off the peripheral highway and in the concrete direction of the border controls, my heart started thumping. My collected guard didn't let me see what went on in his head.

I doubted he was unafraid. If somebody caught us, we would both face severe consequences. He'd be punished for life. I tried not to think of that because it made me nauseous.

He saw me jitter, instructing me, "Get it under control. You want to be here. There is nothing suspicious. We're a normal couple who wants to take a trip outside Katantia."

"Okay."

It was easier said than done.

They didn't recognize me at the border. I was rarely seen without makeup around my country.

But they asked questions about my trembling hands and tear-filled eyes. With a breathier voice than usual, I replied, "I'm on my period."

"IDs, please." Lowering my gaze, I fiddled with the fabric of my hoodie. My guard reached for his back pocket and took out the IDs. "Why are you on the road at this hour?"

Oh, the wedding. My guard served them a story about an emergency that required our presence in the neighboring country. With trembling fingers, he handed them his fake identification. I had bought the documents from my friends in the city. The IDs weren't that hard to get when you knew how to ask. My identification card was fake. In less than fifteen hours, I'd also asked for German passports.

My face turned red out of embarrassment and anxiety.

The border authorities took one look at the IDs. They nodded us away, uninterested in anything other than the spectacle on the television in their workplace.

I breathed out, relieved.

We crossed the border. A hundred meters away from the border on the highway, I faintly heard the sirens. I looked into

the rearview mirror. I saw the palace cars with their blinking red lights. I figured they had run out of patience.

I yelled, “Drive. Fast. As fast as you can. They’re onto us.”

His foot crashed on the pedal. We sped away.



FOR A DAY, MY LIFE WAS A UTOPIA. WE HAD MANAGED TO escape the authorities. Checking the news, we knew that my guard’s name hadn’t yet been associated with my escape.

We killed time in an average hotel, waiting for our flight to the United States of America. I had this flight booked when I asked for German passports. I showered, washing my hair off the madness called wedding hairdo. While my hair was wet, I cut it shorter.

I applied the hair dye from my bag and spent hours trying to get the perfect blond color. It was a shame that my red hair had to go, but my survival was more important than the hair on my head.

I didn’t feel the difference between Katantia and here. We were a couple of hours away from home. The distance wasn’t that significant yet.

I distracted myself by stressing over the details of our escape. I avoided thinking of my family or Mandy. I left everything in Katantia.

I shook those thoughts away.

“We can get drugs in Chicago, right?” I asked him. My skin was itching for substance. I had to stay clean because the tough hours were ahead.

My guard replied, “We can. I know where.”

“How can you be sure? Why are we going to Chicago anyway?” I asked nervously. I had been to the United Kingdom, but the United States seemed like another universe. It would take almost a day to travel over there.

“I spent a year in Chicago after I graduated high school,” my guard revealed. “It’s one of the only places I know out there. We’ll take a car and drive off after a couple of days.”

The time came to leave the hotel.

At the airport, I wouldn’t necessarily need a hoodie. I had one with me, just in case. I dressed averagely with things I wore to garden back home.

One day passed, and my wanted status exponentially gained more exposure on the news. The manhunt would soon reach the outer world.

We got through the airport and boarded our plane. Sitting in our seats, I took my guard’s hand. He had made it all possible.

My guard and I mastered it. He was of great help. I couldn’t believe he had agreed to help me. I owed my life to him.

“Thank you for everything,” I whispered to him.

He responded, “Thank me when we safely get through the American borders and into the city of Chicago. So far, it’s been child’s play.”

It really had been. I almost considered that Aram let me leave Katantia on purpose. Then I remembered that even though he hated our wedding, he would never deliberately jeopardize his image in front of his wealthy friends.

My guard kept my hand in his. It was baffling that I shared this life-altering experience with a stranger.

He was younger than me. I could see that he loved the edge we were walking on.

His eyes kept checking the doors. As soon as they were closed, we both breathed out with relief.



ON THE LONG FLIGHT, WE SPENT A LOT OF TIME SLEEPING. THE plane seemed to be a safe space. We were excluded from the outside world.

We made a stop in Germany. I didn't even notice which city it was, feeling terribly sleepy.

After hours of relaxation, we were finally in America. The plane landed, and we had to depart it.

For the first time, I felt homesick. The airport at home was twenty times smaller than this one. There were more people here than I had ever seen at London Heathrow.

It scared me.

I kept hold of my guard's hand. I felt safe next to him. His confidence helped me get through the airport without falling apart.

We walked by shops that sold alcohol. I envisioned the bottles, desperately. I would do anything for a drop of alcohol. I needed to get my mind off things.

"You know what we're doing here, right?" he asked me one last time.

I nodded. We had to play our parts brilliantly. The Americans didn't play. We needed to fool them.



THE MOMENT I WALKED OUT OF THE BOOTH I HAD BEEN questioned in, I rushed toward my guard, hugging him. I kissed his cheek and thanked him all over again.

They believed our story.

My guard rented a car for us. Then it was time to leave the airport before anyone made a connection. We paid for everything in cash. I had once again used my friends in Katantia to provide me with what I needed.

On our way to the hotel we would stay in, I turned the radio on. They played music I didn't enjoy. I shut my eyes and

waited for the news.

There were no reports about an escaped princess. Chicago news reported crime and presidential updates.

“Open your eyes. We’re in Chicago. You need to see this,” my guard told me. The familiar city invited him back in, but it seemed strange and cold to me.

I felt overwhelmed. My mind couldn’t process the size of the buildings or the number of cars. It downsized me. For once, I felt like a nobody.

I didn’t matter here. Great. That was the goal. But it was challenging to find that switch that made me indifferent toward it.

We drove until we reached a neighborhood that wasn’t as aggressively modern and large. Things were kept small here. Finally, my heart stopped stammering out of fear.

“Where are we?” I asked him.

“I lived here when I went to college. Our hotel room’s waiting.”

Average wasn’t what I saw. Some buildings were kept well, and others were deteriorated. It made me wonder why they left these houses like that.

In Katantia, we did everything to make our buildings appear flawless. We were obsessed with the look of things. Here it seemed like only the center of the city was important.

After half an hour of driving around, my guard stopped the car. The place was shabby, to say the least. There were almost no lights. I would have been terrified to stay here on my own.

But my guard accompanied me. He knew the place. He would protect me.

The car was parked. My guard stepped out of the vehicle, but I stayed inside. I felt like taking a deep breath.

A loud bang scared me to death. I had never heard such a sound in my life.

Quickly, I stepped out of the car, shaking from the shock.

I saw an exceedingly tall man standing on the other side of the car. He wore black clothes, and he seemed stronger than any man I'd ever seen in my life, except for Travis Cross back when he'd first stepped into the palace. I couldn't recognize the man's face.

Where was my guard?

I hurried over to the other side of the car. The tall black man stood there, unmoving. What was I supposed to do? I didn't even understand what had happened. The man held a weapon, but he wasn't pointing it at me. My eyes fell on the body lying on the cold ground.

My guard bled out on the street.

"He's dead, sugar."

"But... why? What did he do to you?" Tears filled my eyes. I had done this to my guard. I'd caused this. He only wanted to help.

I had heard of the cruelty guns caused outside of Katantia. At home, the palace and the police limited gun ownership and gun use. We walked around our streets without fear of getting shot... Fucking objects was more important than feeling gun power.

"Sugar, I know who you are." *Pinch me. Somebody, please, pinch me.* He added, "You're Kamila Ruby Wraith. He's the guard you ran off with. I'm Jordan Winters, and you need to come with me."

The world stopped. After a successful couple of days of anonymity, my princess status had reinstated itself.

"I'm not going anywhere with you. What are you? Police?" I took a step back from him. How could I ever overpower him? He had put his gun away, but I was sure he would use it on me if I ran away.

My heart beat fast. Welcoming the incoming nausea, I stood there frozen. "You're coming with me willingly or with a bullet in your leg. Time's up."

Going through my options, I eyed the surrounding area.

He added, “You’re not running away from me in this city, sugar.”

And suddenly, all the progress I had made in two days had vanished.

I was trapped.

WANTED

2



PART I



PROLOGUE

ALEX WINTERS



I SHOULDN'T BE HERE.

Earlier today, I'd signed a multi-million-dollar sneaker deal. I had sponsors lining up to kiss my ass. My coach slid into my DMs like I was an Instagram model with botched tits. I employed people to clean up my mansion. I paid for a team to run my socials on my behalf. My body's insurance was worth more than what some people made in their entire lives. During the day, I even had a driver.

Why the fuck had I followed Fylox to the middle of nowhere then? I couldn't shake the feeling that he was fading away, right there. Sitting back and doing nothing wasn't my thing, contrary to popular belief. He was my best friend. He'd been my family for as long as I could remember.

Our mothers were best friends, having sung back-up together for a Greek pop diva back in the late 80s on a worldwide tour. I owed it to them to keep Fylox close.

The other day, we'd played a one on one game on my indoor court. There were a lot of showers in my place, but we'd ended up in the lockers right outside my court. This should have been easy. I meant him no harm.

But he saw it that way.

I minded my own business, showering off the sweat of a workout session when Fylox turned feral. He attacked me for standing there and taking a fucking shower. I'd gone to practice with a messed up eye, and the news was still reporting about it. *Thug behavior. Who does he think he is?*

“Fuck,” I muttered under my breath. It was cold out here. Fylox had left the mansion in a hoodie, one that didn’t have my team’s name on it. He was dressed in black, from head to toe. A mask covered his face, revealing only his eyes. He hid his bleach-blond hair beneath this full mask.

What the fuck was he doing in an abandoned warehouse? He hated dirt. When he saw rust, he had a full panic attack. I left one used coffee cup in *my* kitchen yesterday, and he berated me for an hour about it. His OCD was fucking annoying, but he was family, and we all went along with it.

Fylox pulled out his burner phone. The one that the government couldn’t track. Pressing the keys on the phone like they had murdered his mom, I sensed his turmoil from afar. Whoever he was expecting was late.

Perhaps they shouldn’t come at all. From what I could see, Fylox wasn’t in the best of moods.

Click. Clack. Fast steps echoed in the abandoned warehouse. My throat was clogged up from the humidity in here, and I almost coughed. Fylox would know I was here. I couldn’t have that.

Click. Clack. Click. Clack. “No... Shit!” A high-pitched feminine voice sounded out from afar. “My heel just broke. Fuck...”

She hadn’t got the memo, had she? I chuckled to myself.

When the girl came into the picture, she limped toward Fylox. She wore a short, low cut black dress that left very little to the imagination. I wasn’t here to ogle or judge this girl, but she looked barely out of high school. Fylox wasn’t the guy to fuck underage girls, so I hoped that he had vetted her thoroughly.

“Take it off,” he ordered, gesturing at the dress. While they talked, I found another hiding spot. “Now.”

“Not even a hello? I messaged you that I’d be late. My boyfriend was a total bitch—”

“Do I look like I care about your boyfriend?” Fylox asked, not sounding bothered at all. Small talk bored him. “We’re not

here to talk about him. We're here to discuss your sugar daddy. He pays for fucks, leaves you unsatisfied, and then he goes to fuck teens from his daughter's high school."

"How do you know that?" The girl gasped, backing away from Fylox.

"I just do." He didn't let her get away. He moved into her private space, towering over her while she shuddered. "And you're going to help me get rid of him."

"Why would I do that?" she asked, drawing her eyebrows together in disgust. She took a couple of steps back, but Fylox grabbed her arm.

"You should know that you're boring me," Fylox informed her, tilting his head to the side. He sized her up like he'd decided she wasn't worth his time anymore. "And you'll be lucky to get out of this alive. You know exactly why you'll help me end your sugar daddy. If you don't, I'll leak the sex tape of you shitting on a minor in the presence of one of the richest CEOs of the city."

"He forced me to do that! I didn't want to do it," she argued, pouting.

"Take off your clothes, and shut up. Your lies are exhausting me to the point that I'd rather suffer brain damage than listen to your voice." Fylox gestured at her clothes. "If you thought this would impress me, you thought wrong."

"But you want to get off, don't you?"

"I know your charming personality isn't enough," Fylox responded. I was used to his monotonous voice, but it baffled the girl in front of him. "But doing all of this to yourself to walk into your death... You could've died in dignity."

"You're joking, right?" She giggled nervously. I wasn't laughing. This was what I'd feared. "You're going to murder me with your cock, right? God, I want to feel it inside of me. You're so big, and I'm so fucking tight..."

I rolled my eyes at the scene. The more this girl talked, the more he wanted to kill her. No, he didn't just say that. He meant it. He'd kill her.

He was in his bad moods, and there was nothing to do about it but sit there and take it.

“Did you bring the condoms?” he asked, fumbling with the sleeves of his hoodie. The girl watched his fingers, lost in the movements. “My eyes are up here.”

She shook herself out of it. “No, I didn’t. I’m clean, and I want you come to drench me. Come inside of me.”

It was times like these that I wanted to be a hero, jump in and save the innocent girl. I knew what my hesitation proved. Men formed brotherhoods. We believed in each other before we trusted a flimsy girl. Patriarchy at its worst, you guessed that right.

Fylox and I were more than that. Our lives were intertwined before we had even taken our first breaths. My father was like a second father to him. Fylox’s sister was my sister, and I’d do anything for that girl.

What had happened to Fylox ruined his family.

And we were all picking up the pieces in an attempt to puzzle it back together.

Fylox wasn’t doing this to feed his ego. He hurt. It had been eight years, but he hadn’t washed it off of him yet. I feared that he never would. My father behaved like Fylox wasn’t fragile, but he was.

He took matters into his own hands.

The girl slipped out of her dress, revealing that she had gone bare underneath. Not a single trace of hair decorated her body. In my eyes, she appeared too fucking young to be involved in anything that caught Fylox’s attention.

My best friend gestured at the girl’s heels, and she kicked them off. They clattered against the floor. She purred, “What’s next?”

Fylox pressed a finger to his covered lips, signaling her to remain silent. He removed his mask, bewildering me. What was his endgame? Quite frankly, the answer was simple.

“Lay down on the dirty floor, and touch yourself. Don’t make yourself come. Play a little game with me,” he instructed her. The girl’s face scrunched up, but she obeyed, lowering herself to the nasty floor. I shuddered at the thought, and I wasn’t even obsessed with cleanliness. I didn’t fire my maids when they missed a trail of dust.

The girl started moaning, and I could sense Fylox’s tension. His jaw was set. Fury flittered in his eyes, dark and vile. “Let’s get to know each other a little bit before I fuck your *tight* pussy. Tell me what you know about me.”

“That’s not how the game is played, though,” she whimpered, turned on by the insanity of what was going on.

“Play the game, or suffer the consequences. You have a choice,” he warned her, crunching down beside her. I observed her shiver from afar.

“I-I know that your name is F-Filoxenos... Fuck. Did I get that right? I said it to myself a million times to memorize it. You’re twenty-six years old. Your dick... Fuck, it’s nice. You like sending dick pics.” She giggled, one hand on her pussy and the other teasing her nipples. “You are the most handsome man I’ve ever seen. You don’t share your face on dating apps... You have that picture of your naked chest with all those scars... Fuck. Can I come?”

“No, keep going. I like it when you talk about me,” Fylox commented, and I almost chuckled. His humor was dry but fuck it. That was Fylox in a nutshell.

“I love a man who isn’t afraid of pain. Will you cut yourself in front of me? I want to see it. I don’t know why you cut yourself. You’re so fucking attractive. If I were you, I’d fuck myself every second of every day. That face, holy shit...” Her moans were getting more honest now. I couldn’t stomach the things she said. Fylox’s composure was tense, but he didn’t let the girl in. She had no idea what was happening.

I did.

“What else do I know about you... You didn’t share anything else. You mentioned that you’d prefer fucking my

ass. I ate what you told me to eat yesterday, and I starved myself today just so that you could have a lick. You like that, don't you? Telling people what to do is your thing... Please, let me come now." She couldn't stop moving, rubbing her clit harder.

"No, now, you get to hear what I know about you," Fylox informed her. He never touched her. He observed her, but he wasn't hard. He didn't... He had particular tastes, but fucking in a nasty abandoned warehouse wasn't his style.

"Oh, please. Yes. Talk about me," she urged my best friend.

"You turned twenty about three months ago. Since high school, you've been with your boyfriend, but he doesn't really know you, does he? He doesn't know about your social media and the way you sell yourself online. You started out when you were sixteen, and you've been cashing in ever since. You met your sugar daddy when you turned seventeen, and you wanted to finance your Turks and Caicos trip. You wanted something special, didn't you?"

The girl either didn't care that he had looked up her entire life, or she was lost in bliss fucking herself in front of Fylox.

"I'm tempted to call him your sugar pimp. Isn't that a nice name?" The girl giggled. "I'm into that. Let's call him sugar pimp. He's the guy who made you shit on your underage cousin, isn't he?"

"She's not my cousin," the girl mumbled. I could hear how wet she was, and I was seriously disturbed by it.

"She definitely is. You fucked her with him, didn't you?" A low growl followed. "You can trust me. I want what's best for you. We can end him together. Wouldn't that be sweet?"

"Yes, we fucked her. Can I come now?" she hissed in pleasure. Fuck, it was getting late, and I was losing my patience.

"Who else did you fuck?" Fylox's cackle rattled me. "Oh, wait. You don't have to tell me. I know! I found out while scanning your cloud. You have a big family, don't you? You're

the oldest of your generation, and you hate those little peasants, stealing all your thunder, don't you?"

"I do," the girl confessed. "But I couldn't... I-I had to! I was forced!"

"Me, too. I feel you. I have to do this, or else I'll feel hollow," Fylox told the panting girl. "You fucked all of your cousins with your sugar pimp, but the icing on the cake was when you took your twin siblings to meet him. Did you enjoy that?"

The moans that erupted from her broke my fucking heart. I clenched my fists.

"You were nineteen when that happened. Your siblings had just turned thirteen. Did your sugar pimp reward you for that?" Fylox coaxed her.

"He d-did," the girl responded, trembling.

"I bet he did. You were such a good girl for him, weren't you?" Fylox went on, "I wonder. Have you been able to look them in the eyes ever since you and your sugar pimp raped them? A nice little boy and girl that look almost identical to you."

"I have to see them at home. I had to go to their showcase the other day. They flunked it so bad, they became the laughing stock of their school," the girl revealed, amused with herself. If he didn't kill her, I would. Fuck my career. Fuck the sneaker deals. Fuck it all. This bitch... "My boyfriend thought I was crazy when I couldn't stop laughing at their stupidity..."

"You can stop touching yourself now. I'll finish you off," Fylox informed her. He got up, adjusting his clothes. He made it look like he adjusted his dick, but I knew better. "I'll fuck you against the wall. How does that sound? You'll get all the cuts you want like that. I didn't bring a belt, but we can improvise if you want more marks."

"Do you have the knife, though? You said you'd fuck my ass with a knife. I was looking forward to that," the girl confessed. Her tits hung heavy as she lifted herself from the

ground. She turned to face the wall, revealing all the dirt that clung to her sweaty skin from behind.

“I decided against the knife. That’s too messy. I’ll use my hands for now.”

Fylox stepped closer to the girl. He whispered something to her that I didn’t catch.

When he raised his hand, I looked away. I took a deep breath, and I walked out of there, paying attention to every step I made. My father had taught me, but at times, I missed a spot, and the ground beneath me betrayed me with a creaking noise.

This time, I didn’t make sounds.

It was the girl’s skull crashing against the wall that echoed in the abandoned warehouse. I felt her bones breaking in two.

Once I was outside, I headed to my car that I had parked five blocks down from here.

When I arrived home a little later, I washed the warehouse off of me. I went to bed, and I should’ve fallen asleep, but I didn’t. I had practice tomorrow and an important game in one week.

I was losing my best friend again, and I couldn’t do anything to stop it.

I’d taught him to read, to write. His sister Maia Callie and I worked with him day and night to get his high school diploma. He graduated under a false name because he *didn’t exist anymore*.

Fylox worked out with me, keeping up with what I put my body through to be the best at the game. We played in my indoor court because he technically *didn’t exist*. I couldn’t let him participate in games with my friends, some of the league’s biggest names.

When he needed money, I gave it to him even if he didn’t ask for it.

My father gave him a job. I wasn’t in the know about what that job entailed. But I was sure that my father didn’t put

Fylox up to killing girls all over town. He didn't just leave it there. I was convinced that the sugar pimp he so fondly chronicled would end up six feet under soon, too. Fylox didn't discriminate in that aspect.

There was an easy solution. I could let him go. He would leave without a trace if I asked him to. He hated that I spent most of my life in the limelight. But I knew that if he didn't have us in his life, he would soon *stop existing* for real. There were things that he couldn't escape in his head. We worked with him, but sometimes, even our love for him wasn't enough.

Fylox didn't feel understood by his family.

He knew we loved him. He knew that we needed him in our lives. We'd lost him once, but we didn't want to risk it again.

But we weren't like him. I went through my own shit daily, but that was barely a scratch in comparison to what he'd been through. Sure, my parents had divorced when I was just a little kid, barely in school. My father disappeared for a while, stamping us as *that* type of black family. I gained a stepfather that I hated. Despite all of that, I had followed my dreams, and my determination led me to every comfort I had. My father was back, and I wanted to make him proud. The game was everything to me, and all I wanted to do was master the fuck out of it.

Fylox didn't have dreams like me.

He'd been taken into a nightmare, and I feared that nobody was strong enough to get him out.



IT'S YOURS. GO AND GET IT.

The murmurs and whispers buzzed in my ears. *Eat right. Exercise. Don't get injured. Don't fuck the hoes. If you curse on national television, you'll lose the white conservatives.*

Don't do drugs. For fuck's sake, don't be caught liking thirst traps on IG.

Don't slide into DMs.

Stay the fuck away from the Kardashians.

Don't talk about social issues. You're just a basketball player who wants to win. Did Jordan lose his cool about police brutality in the 90s? Fuck no.

My life was a composition of rules. Most of them I'd chosen freely, but some others I was pressured into by my employees. I had an image to uphold, and I worked hard to keep everything balanced. Divorced parents? Yes, but did you ever see me partying in Vegas? White stepfather? Yes, but I never sold out to appeal to the white mainstream. You got a college degree? Who the fuck needs a college degree when you're all THAT. I wanted to be the best and have a fucking degree. What's wrong with that? I made more cash than some entire countries' GDP, and I put that money to good use in neighborhoods that needed it.

"Son?" my father addressed me. He ran a hand over the cashmere beanie I'd given him for Christmas. My office was heated, but he didn't take off his black leather jacket. "What's troubling you?"

"He killed again," I blurted out, unable to hold back the truth. Dad had that thing about him where he could sniff the lie from miles away.

"I told you to stop following Fylox," dad reminded me. His eyes traveled the four walls of my office, decorated with pictures and autographs from my favorite athletes. Framed jerseys. Sports memorabilia that was so rare I had a separate security system installed just for this room. "Let him do his own thing. He knows the ropes. I trust him."

"But you won't let me in on what you do?" I asked. It was a thorn in my eye that I was kept in the dark. I knew the reasons why, but I didn't like it.

My father sighed. "You're going to be remembered as one of the best to ever play the game. I won't allow you to get

involved with us. We're your family, and we might not be trafficking cocaine and Brazilian prostitutes, but you still don't get dragged into it. We separate family from work. Get that?"

I didn't respond. My eyes fixated on my office desk. Murmurs hummed my ears numb, and I wanted them to stop.

"Son, do you understand? This isn't me trying to exclude you. I'm protecting you from harm. I'm keeping your legacy clean." My dad had this Denzel Washington vibe to him. You couldn't deny him. He wrote the law, and you followed it. It had been easy to fall back in line with him when he had returned from wherever dad run off to after he divorced my mother.

In a couple of months, I was back to being dad's favorite and vice versa.

I was undoubtedly his favorite. There was no debate. I'd achieved the unachievable. Dad came from a foster home. He had no idea who his real parents were. At least, that was what he claimed. Mom was a Nigerian refugee turned background singer who toured the world with a Greek starlet. She'd never made it on her own. My parents met coincidentally. They weren't meant to cross paths.

I wasn't supposed to be here.

But they made me happen.

I was going to break records playing ball, and there was no stopping me.

"Why does Fylox have to kill?" I asked exasperated. "Can't he join an MMA fight club? Why does he have to do this to himself?"

"That's how he copes," dad commented, his face falling. We were all hurting. In our eyes, Fylox was the baby boy that we were trying to protect from harm.

Well, we'd failed.

"Forget about Fylox for a second. I came to speak to you about your coach. What are you going to do about him?"

And so we went about our day, pretending like my father and my best friend didn't kill people for fun.



FUCK, SHE WAS MAGNIFICENT.

Broken but gorgeous.

“Earth to Alex?” Maia Callie disrupted my wet dream about the Princess of Katantia. “Hello?”

“Fuck.” I cleared my throat. “Yes? At your service, Your Highness.”

Fylox's sister chuckled, throwing her braids over her shoulder. “You're glued at this screen. See anything you like?”

I nodded. “She's stunning.”

“And she's your dad's job,” Maia Callie reminded me. Our parents and her brother thought we kept ourselves out of their business. We didn't. We followed their steps closely. “You better not catch any feelings for the snow princess.”

“Look at her.” I pointed at the screen. It showed Kamila Ruby Wraith next to a row of men in suits, signing a contract. Behind her, images of skyscrapers covered the wall. The princess wore a dress that hugged her curves so tight, my cock sprung alive at a glance. She was taller than all of them, stealing all of the attention. Her long legs were murderous. She wasn't intimidated by the suits. She had them at her fingertips with that naughty smirk of hers. Her lips were full. She could wrap them around my cock anytime.

The Princess of Katantia is rumored to have escaped Katantia. Her failed wedding is making headlines worldwide. Where did she go? What's her next step?

“Yeah, you're right. I'm creaming my panties. No wonder your dick is hard at the sight of her. She is sex,” Maia Callie commented, her eyes squinting at the screen. She licked her lips, and I wanted her to cut that shit off. “I wonder what magic tricks she can pull with her pussy.”

I frowned at her. “Hey. Don’t talk about my dick. You’re still my best friend’s sister.”

Maia Callie elbowed me. “It’s a free country. I’ll talk about any dick I want.”

We watched the remainder of the news, but my thoughts were fixed on the princess. She looked like a dream. Ready for fucking. But she owned the room like a lady. I never knew an image could cause such damage to a guy. I didn’t fuck women out of lust. I had my contacts in certain cities, nice girls that occasionally wanted some cash or a Birkin bag. We kept it simple, off the gram, and most importantly, at a distance. I didn’t do random. Everything in my life was calculated ahead.

Kamila Ruby Wraith wasn’t in my plans.

“You look like you want to devour her,” Maia Callie commented, scanning me with judgment in her eyes. “You got endless pussy. Leave her alone. She’s as broken as can be.”

“What do you mean?” I asked with a dry throat.

I had a game tomorrow, and I needed to focus. Chicago wasn’t an easy city. Fuck. It was almost eight; Maia Callie had to leave soon so that I’d get a full night’s sleep. Besides, there was a curfew. I wasn’t allowed guests in my hotel room post curfew. I had a franchise to build, and I used the time before I fell asleep to scheme.

“Hello? She was about to marry her brother. Disgusting.” She exaggerated the last syllable, wincing. “And her Daddy’s been fucking her since her twenties. As much of a hottie that she is, she’s damaged goods. You’d be better off fucking the San Diego cum guzzler who swallowed eight nuts in one sesh.”

“Eight nuts? Who the fuck did that?” I asked. My family and closest friends had my phone number. They were who I communicated with. I didn’t do social media. I paid people for that. I didn’t need the drama.

“I forget what a nerd you are.” Maia Callie pulled out her phone, typing on it with excitement in her eyes. Then she

showed me the screen. I didn't know the cum guzzler. Good for me.

"I'd never fuck her," I told her.

"You shouldn't fuck her because she ratted out on your colleagues and not because she swallowed eight nuts. That's an accomplishment right there. I bet Kamila's swallowed ten nuts at once! Her daddy's known for his sex parties. I'd never swallow that many nuts because *ew* semen but to each his own," Maia Callie raved. She put her phone away. "Pussy tastes so much better, but that's just my two cents."

"I'm not discussing pussies with you."

"Killjoy!" Maia Callie threw a pillow at me, but I caught it. "Good catch, bro. Don't forget. You ARE a good catch. You're not settling for a hoe. I won't let you. Forget that blonde bitch from New York, you hear me?"

Blondie, who? Shit. Maia Callie knew about my ex, the one that occasionally visited my house because she was still obsessed with me. I'd forgotten all about that girl.

Kamila Ruby Wraith, on the other hand... She was what dreams were made of. I'd only seen the woman on television, but she instilled something in me. When my father had mentioned that his next job was protecting the Princess of Katantia, I barely knew what he meant. I'd heard teammates talk about vacays in whorehouses and Crack & Nuts. Hole Stores. It hadn't mattered to me at the time. It was a freaky sex island. So fucking what. I preferred spending time with my family during the offseason.

If my father was protecting this woman, I wanted in. I had to see her up close. Who was she underneath all that armor? I knew a PR trained puppy when I saw one. I was one myself. "Don't talk about her like that."

"Are you feeling all right, honey?" Maia Callie pouted at me, batting her eyelashes. "Are you developing a crush on Ms. Sex-On-A-Stick?"

"It's time for you to go home. Give your mom and dad a hug from me," I told her, dismissing her mildly. "Don't come

to the game tomorrow. There's some—”

“I know. Your dad has warned everyone to stay away,” Maia Callie deadpanned. “The one time you play in Chicago... Couldn't he have picked Detroit? Does he have to bring her to your game tomorrow?”

“What?” She shouldn't have said that. My father must have kept it a secret on purpose. I didn't need this information. It would fuck with my head.

“I overheard my dad talking to your dad about it. My dad thinks your dad's crazy for bringing her to your game. There'll be so many cameras there,” she said, shaking her head. “I think it's insane. He should just hide her in a safe house.”

“MC, I love you, but you got to go. Now.”

“Okay, nerd. I'll leave you to it. Try not to jerk off too hard to her videos, okay? You got a game tomorrow. You need your hands.”

I rolled my eyes at her playfully. Maia Callie gave me a firm goodbye hug, kissing my cheeks seven times. She wanted me to win seven rings in my career. That was her good luck charm for me, seven kisses.

Never say never, but... I had a long way to go.



HOW DID FYLOX GET INTO MY HOTEL SUITE UNDETECTED?

“I locked my windows, didn't I?” I asked myself out loud.

“I came through the front door,” my best friend revealed, taking a seat on the recliner at the corner of the room.

“How?”

“The cameras are turned off. I made them show earlier footage on repeat,” he explained like it was nothing to hack into the most expensive hotel in Chicago and make it your bitch. He didn't hide his face tonight. He wore one of my team's sweaters, passing as an average basketball fan. The

kicks on his feet were worth a fortune, and I'd prefer it if he put them back where he found them in my closet, but I wouldn't say a thing. I knew that if he got my shoes dirty, he'd clean them meticulously.

"In case you forgot, I've got a game tomorrow. What do you want? Is everyone okay?" I asked. I didn't allow shit to get to me before games. Finding out that the princess was coming to my game tomorrow was the type of information that messed with the schedule in my head. I couldn't panic. I was as catatonic as could be. But, fuck, if somebody had been hurt, I'd skip the game.

It didn't always seem like it, but my family came first.

"I came to tell you that she's mine," he professed in the monotone voice I was used to from him.

"What are you talking about, Fylox?" I asked. I had to sleep. What had he woken me up for?

Fylox stated, "Kamila Ruby Wraith is mine."

I could list all the ways that she wasn't. He hadn't met her yet. I still had a chance with her if I wanted to. Who'd pick him over me? I was husband material. She was made for public life. Fylox couldn't provide that for her. What would she do with him? Live in a cabin in North Dakota? Get the fuck out of here.

"You know, I can hear you curse in your thoughts," Fylox commented.

"I didn't curse," I added swiftly. He didn't need me to trigger him. I'd prefer to show up to my game without a whipped face tomorrow.

"No need to lie to me. She's mine."

"Why are you telling me this? And how do you know—"

"We've been over this." Fylox cleared his throat. "I track my sister's whereabouts. I can listen in on her phone. I know what's going on in her life. She picked up that you like the Wraith woman."

I cursed under my breath. "We were joking."

We weren't. Fylox knew that.

"She's not yours. You won't hurt her," I declared. This was the moment to huff and puff out my chest, raise my voice. Make him crawl back into the hole he came out of.

Fylox remained silent.

I warned him, "You won't hurt her. We won't hurt her."

"We?" he asked.

"I want to meet her."

"Well, your dad says that you can't."

I tilted my head to the side. "I can, and I will. I need to see her in person."

"Didn't have you pegged for a Katantia fan," Fylox said dryly. I wasn't. It was a shithole. But she was a diamond in the rough, and I wanted a piece of it.

"Promise me that we won't hurt her," I urged him. Fylox ignored my plea. He stepped away in silence, unbothered. "Fylox."

"I don't make promises I don't intend to keep."

PROLOGUE PT. II



I OPENED MY EYES. FOR THE FIRST TIME IN FOREVER, I DIDN'T know where I was. The ceiling was sparkly clean, and the blinding lights above me caused me to wince. I felt a stabbing pain in my abdomen.

My attempt to rise from the bed was futile. I couldn't move my limbs because I didn't have the strength. I started heaving, and the pain in my body increased.

The numbing sound in my ears turned into a blaring beeping of the machines attached to my body.

I moved my head, but my vision was blurry. Chaotic movements of one or more energetic nurses dressed in white filled my vision. They asked me questions, but I couldn't find the words to answer.

The memories in my head were faded. I didn't know how I'd ended up here.

CHAPTER I

KAMILA



FUCK YOU, DADDY.

Yours truly looked like a modest blond woman from Germany or Sweden, wherever they bred tall blond women. I had thought my hair change would work, but apparently, it did not. Jordan Winters glanced at me once and knew who I was.

My guard was dead, in the street where I'd reluctantly left him after Jordan had shot him.

The man driving the car I was handcuffed in had dragged me away from the spot. Nobody had asked any questions. Nobody blinked twice.

Jordan, as he had introduced himself, was fucking up my life, and he had only been in it for twenty minutes.

My heart was racing.

"What does all of this mean?" I asked him. I took this urgent tone with my father, never with anyone else. I was above begging in my life outside of my father's bedroom. "Why am I handcuffed? Kill me. If you're going to send me back to Katantia, you might as well go ahead and kill me. I'm already dead."

Jordan let out a low chuckle, adjusting the black beanie on his head before running his hand down his face and across his neatly trimmed full raven beard. There was a hint of salt and pepper there. It revealed his age to me when his face kept up with a man in his mid-thirties. The man didn't budge. Calmly, he kept driving, gazing ahead. He didn't speed, and he obeyed every rule of the road. He went too slow for my taste.

“Answer me,” I ordered.

“Shut. Up.”

“Why are you going so slow? Drive faster. Get me to my father already if that’s what you’re after!” I yelled at him, but he wasn’t moved.

“If the cops pull us over, it’s done. I’ll be another dead black man on the evening news, and you’ll most likely be dead, too, sugar. Your death will be reported on E! News instead.” He didn’t need to say anything else. He kept driving, but I didn’t see the airport. How would he send me back to my father if he didn’t take me to the airport?

When the houses started becoming bigger and fewer, I started panicking. Where were we headed? “Do you have children?”

Jordan didn’t respond. Crossing my arms in front of my chest, I waited for his answer. Kamila Ruby Wraith wasn’t going down just yet. “Would you ever have sex with them?”

I searched for sympathy, pity, for a hint of reassurance in his hazel eyes, but he didn’t even flinch. He knew exactly what went on in Katantia and he didn’t... care. “Would you abuse your child? If you send me back, that’s exactly what’s going to happen to me. My father has been sleeping with me for...”

“I know. You need to shut up,” he barked.

Jordan stopped the car in front of an abandoned house. The lawn wasn’t trimmed, and the trees were wildly tall and messy. The entrance of the house was packed with old newspapers.

I jumped when he stepped out of the car. Soon, he opened my door, carrying an overnight bag and my backpack from the getaway car. He had thoroughly searched the backpack before taking it. I took a deep breath, and then I exited the car, standing next to him. He was taller than me, taller than Aris even, and he was six-five. This man was six-eight or nine, and he was definitely more built than Aris. In other words, physically, I didn’t have a chance.

Jordan led the way towards the house. He ignored the newspapers. Then he struggled to unlock the door because it was stuck.

I followed him inside. The house reeked of negligence. There was dust everywhere. I was pretty sure somebody had died in here, and they had left the corpse to rot.

“I know who you are and what you’ve been through,” Jordan said, sighing. He rubbed the back of his neck with his big hands. “That’s why I couldn’t let you walk into the lion’s den.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, clearing my throat. My wrists were aching, but I knew asking Jordan to remove them would lead nowhere just yet.

“Your guard was going to deliver you to Spencer Rawlins,” Jordan revealed.

“That’s a lie.” I shook my head. I crafted the plan. I didn’t tell anyone about it. I faked an overdose to distract everyone from my intentions. I did this. I brought myself here. My guard helped me. He didn’t do this for anyone but me.

“It’s not. Spencer must think you’re owed to him because Mandy will be staying in the palace. Aram didn’t want to give you away, so Spencer stole you away. He will start looking for you,” Jordan explained. He tried to turn on the light in the abandoned house, but there didn’t seem to be any power. “I was sent by Travis Cross. He’s an old friend of mine. He realized what you were doing before the wedding, but he didn’t think you’d fly to Chicago. When you did, he knew something was off.”

“Why couldn’t he tell me himself? Why did he let me come all the way here? I don’t believe you,” I mumbled, heaving. I was Kamila Ruby Wraith. I had friends. I had power. It was hidden, but it was there. I was my father’s child. I was ruthless when I needed to be. I wouldn’t cower in front of a stranger. Lying to myself had never been more challenging.

“Travis has ordered to keep you safe. You’re not to leave the premises of this place. People will start looking for you, Spencer, and Aram alike. It’s not safe for you to be seen anywhere because you’ll be taken away.” He walked away from the small entrance hall, leaving the overnight bag and my backpack at my feet on the dirty floor. I stood there, frozen.

“I didn’t leave Katantia to become your prisoner,” I told Jordan. “I don’t even know who you are. You’re a liar for all I know.”

“Travis killed your mother on the first of June, 2002, by injecting her with a lethal dose of liquidated painkillers. He left her in an overflowing bathtub for the world to see,” Jordan spat.

My knees turned to butter. I held unto the wall to stabilize myself. Tears left my eyes, and I found it hard to breathe.

“Who are you?” I muttered.

“I’m Travis’ friend. I always had his back when he asked for help,” Jordan explained. “And he’s always had mine.”

He made the rounds in the one-story house, checking the rooms, while I hovered in the entrance hall like a ghost. Sobbing to myself, I grew disappointed. I had intended to do this on my own. I wanted to escape my past and not be trapped by it even further.

“If I fuck you, will you let me go?” I asked bluntly when he reappeared. He didn’t kick off his shoes.

“What’s the matter with you?”

“I asked you a fucking question. Answer it,” I insisted, wiping the tears from my cheeks.

“I’m not having sex with you in return for anything,” he responded firmly.

“Am I not your type? I can do it all. I’ve done it all. I can please you in ways you haven’t even thought about,” I offered. A Katantian whore was on the loose. Nobody owned me. I wasn’t an object anymore. I had left my family behind.

“Is that what they teach you in Katantia?”

I nodded. He made me, a very tall woman, feel small. Next to him, I felt like a miniature. I had never fucked a man this enormous. I might benefit from it. “Next to maths, we get anal and blowjob conduct lessons. That’s how we do it.”

“Yeah, that’s not happening.” He shook his head, picking up the overnight bag and my backpack. “I brought some sheets for you to sleep in. Tomorrow, I can start working on the house to make it more bearable.”

I sniffled pouting. I despised pouting. It was beneath me. “I won’t be able to sleep in this amount of dirt. I stress about it.”

“Well, at least, you’re still here.” He turned away, heading down the hall. “Water and electricity will be back on tomorrow. In the meantime, fix your attitude. Be grateful you have a roof over your head. You’ll be sleeping with the handcuffs because I don’t trust you yet.”

“I’ll suck your cock if you get rid of the handcuffs,” I suggested, negotiating in ways my father taught me. My heart was beating its way out of my chest.

Jordan chuckled, but he didn’t lean into my offer. He led me to the room I’d be sleeping in. Unfortunately, it was in the same state as the rest of the house, and I figured I’d have a panic attack in it. Jordan studied my reaction, deciding to make my bed for me. Catatonic, I allowed him to lay me down on the bed in my filthy body and clothes that I hadn’t changed from my travels.

“I won’t leave your room tonight, just to be safe.” He sighed, lowering his head. “I know you don’t feel comfortable. It’s just one night. We’re hiding in plain sight for now. Everything will be settled soon.”

I curled up to the side, observing the handcuffs on my wrists. I swallowed back a sob.

I shut my eyes, but I didn’t fall asleep.

The bed ate at my skin, one piece after the other, clawing at me.



JORDAN DID AS PROMISED. HE STARTED WORKING ON THE house early in the morning after a long tiresome night of no sleep for either of us. He left the house for a short while, handcuffing me to the bed during his absence. To my surprise, when he returned, he turned out to be as precise with cleanliness as I was. He took care of my room while I was handcuffed to the bed. I offered my help as a gesture of gratitude, and surprisingly, he accepted.

At the end of my second day in Chicago, I'd finally showered after maniacally cleaning every surface for three hours in the small bathroom attached to my bedroom. Jordan had brought me the supplies I needed from a grocery store. After my shower, he turned on the news in the living room. The television was as old as my late grandmother, but it played the channel without any difficulties.

The news had broken all over the world. My guard's identity had been revealed to the public, and the main claim was that he had abducted me. They didn't know he was dead in the streets of Chicago just yet. Jordan had shot him in the face, mutilating him thoroughly beyond recognition.

"They don't know you're blond now," Jordan said, sitting back on the couch he had thoroughly cleaned. It looked brand-new. "That's good. I should get you some brown color. It might suit you better."

"Red suits me best. If I can't have that, I don't want anything else. Since I don't know when all of this will be over, I'm guessing I'll be here until my hair grows out anyway," I responded, tilting my head to the side.

He judged me for my need to have red hair with his warm hazel eyes. Quickly, I added, "I'm sure Travis told you about my cravings."

"He did." He turned the television off. "And that's why this is going to be difficult for you."

“Am I going to be around drugs? What kind?” My eyes must have gleamed. I saw the color in this bleak house. My heart fluttered. I’d do anything to forget about my predicament for just a little while. “Uppers? I can work with downers, too. I know exactly how much...”

“You won’t be touching drugs.” He checked his watch, and he nodded to himself. “All right. You have an hour to get ready.”

“Ready for what?” I asked, curious.

“An NBA game. My son’s playing,” he revealed. There was pride in his tone.

I studied him. “What is an NBA game?”

Jordan shook his head. “I’ve put together your outfit. We’ll pretend you can’t speak English. I can’t have you attract any more attention than you already will by being you.”

“What’s wrong with me?” I asked, looking down at my body. “I mean except the obvious...”

“You’re a gorgeous tall woman that looks like she jumped out of a fantasy movie.”

I crossed my arms in front of my chest, leaning back on the couch I didn’t fully trust. I let out a little chuckle.



THIS WASN’T LYING LOW.

There were lots of people around, way too many to count. We didn’t have these types of arenas in Katantia. I was having a difficult time not making this about myself, but I felt all the eyes.

Jordan walked ahead of me, hiding half of me with his massive body. Thankfully, he didn’t know anyone here. He kept holding up two laminated cards wherever somebody asked for ID. Jordan held my hand, not because it was a cute thing to do. He simply couldn’t handcuff me in public. When I realized we were in the midst of all this chaos, I considered

making a run for it. Only an insane man would bring me into a public event a day after he's sworn that he'll take me to safety.

Instead of sitting in the arena with screeching dressed-up fans, Jordan led me through the corridors to end up in a cubicle that overlooked the event from above.

We were finally alone again. I immediately asked, "What was that about? I counted almost fifty cameras on our way here. These crazy fans might not recognize me, but there are people out there in front of screens who just might! Thank you for nothing. Travis' friendship track record takes another loss tonight..."

"When Travis described you, he didn't say you were this impatient," Jordan replied, taking his seat in front of the glass. There was a television in the room, filling the four walls with sports commentary I couldn't decipher.

"You dress me up in this weird outfit." I wore a tracksuit with a sports logo on it. Who? Me. "And then you parade me around. Of course, my patience is running low. This is my life now. I have control over it."

"Not so soon, princess." He popped a gum into his mouth. Then he patted on the seat next to him. "Sit here. We're expecting a guest."

As soon as I sat next to him, we focused on what was happening on the court. That was the field where the players dribbled around, shooting and missing baskets. I had never watched a basketball game. When we were younger, Weston and Aris were more fascinated by American football and European soccer. What was Colton doing these days? I had never heard from him again after he left, and I doubted I ever would.

"They're very tall men," I observed, leaning forward to get a better view.

"They are. My son is number four. Can you see him?" Jordan asked. He sounded adorable speaking about his son. It filled me with a warmth that broke my heart into ten million pieces. Our father never spoke with love about us.

I nodded, spotting the boy. Well, he wasn't a boy. He was a full-grown man who seemed only a couple years younger than me. "He's pretty."

"That's what all the girls say."

"And he has a constant smile on his face. That's lovely." I commented, "That smile must be his mother's trait because you don't really smile, do you?"

Jordan chewed his gum. Then, he responded, "There's no reason for me to smile. I have too much to worry about every day."

The game started, and Jordan didn't utter another word until it was halftime, as the television commentators put it. His son's team from Indianapolis was winning. Number four had scored half of the game's points, which the commentators were surprised at. The father of this miracle player and my supposed protector kept a nonchalant vibe to his reactions. His son played a lot. He called the shots down on the court. I liked watching him play. It made me root for him to score, although I didn't really understand the rules of the game just yet.

"I need you to do as told," Jordan said at some point, taking me out of my trance. The show on the court was otherworldly. Balloons, glitter, and dancing transported me into a land of energy and passion. And it wasn't sexual, although the girls were dressed very scarcely.

I rolled my eyes. "I have been doing so already, and I feel like shit about it. I don't like to follow the rules. I like my freedom now that I've actually got it."

I missed my family. I missed Mandy. I actually missed the Cross women and our banter. I avoided thinking of Katantia since I was sure the devil would appear once I spoke about it.

"The plan has phases. This is one of them. You're about to embark on the next one. I'd advise you to stop offering your body in return for favors. It won't benefit you from this point forward," Jordan explained. Down in the arena, fans were walking around. More dancers took the stage, dancing to a thumping anthem that boomed through the walls.

“I don’t have any money. I don’t have an ID because you took it from me. So what else am I supposed to offer in a negotiation?” I asked.

“You can’t negotiate with Fylox.”

“Who?”

The game began again, and Jordan ignored me for another endless quarter. When it was time for the final quarter, the door to the cubicle opened. I couldn’t hear or sense whoever it was at the door. It didn’t seem like it was a breathing human being.

“It’s time,” Jordan uttered. I cocked my head to the side to glare at him. “Get up and follow him. We’ll see each other again soon.”

I was about to protest when he raised his hand to silence me. “Remember what I told you. His place is spotless. You’ll like it there.”

I sighed. I took one last glance at the court, and then I stood up from my seat, straightening the horrendous tracksuit that covered my body. It made me look even taller than I actually was. I stepped away from the seats, making my way to the exit.

When I lifted my head to acknowledge the new guy, I was startled.

I saw him.

CHAPTER 2

KAMILA



IF HE STOOD AMONGST TEN MEN, HE'D BE THE ONE WHO'D capture the most attention. His hair was bright, and his eyes looked like alcohol. I was already addicted to his brand of cognac. His cheekbones were accentuated, making him pretty like a model, but he wasn't pretty in that sense. There was something dark in his aura, something I was very much familiar with from Katantia.

He was taller than me, a breath of fresh air. His shoulders were broad. I felt the desperate desire to bite down on those muscles he was sporting underneath his clothes. The man had come in sneakers, jeans, and a t-shirt, all in raven black.

I wished he'd look at me and tell me something dirty. I craved to hear his voice. Would it be rough or gentle? Would he wound me or caress me? I had lost my train of thought.

He might have been a breath of fresh air, but up close, he was rough like a stone. Staring wasn't polite. Mom had taught me when I was young. I rarely ever stared at anything in Katantia because everything I wanted, I usually got.

I shook myself out of my trance, and I stood there proudly. I was the Katantian Princess. It didn't mean much out here, but I had grown up knowing better than to become all buttery over a strange man.

"Take care of her. You know how important she is," Jordan called from the other side of the room.

The man who stood in front of me didn't respond. He turned around, walking out. Panicking, I glanced at Jordan, but

he acted as if I wasn't in the room anymore. So, I followed the stranger.

We left the arena in a similar fashion as I had entered it. Lots of ID checks. He had a laminated card just like Jordan. Those were the perks of having team connections. Eventually, he led me to a different parking lot. His car was bigger and shinier than Jordan's. I recognized it from a fair some car manufacturers had organized in Katantia. We had decided against spacious cars like these because they were too wasteful. They were named after lobsters or a wild big cat animal. I couldn't recall which.

After living a life of constant sex, I was growing fuzzy. Three days or more had passed without me ending up with spread legs underneath a man. Somehow, that made me smile because it was an accomplishment, but it also made me unbelievably horny.

He opened the backdoor for me, not allowing me to sit in the front with him. When he took his seat, I put on my seat belt, observing the back of his body. Upon closer inspection, I detected faint scars on the back of his neck that made me shudder.

He didn't seem approachable.

My veins were on fire. I blinked. Maybe this was a dream. But the scars were still there, and they were scarier than before.

The world had stopped turning. Honest and brutal, my body went into overload. I had a thing for mean men. Back home, I had been fucking the king for years. The king was nothing to play with.

I had to calm my breathing, unable to help my panting. I didn't understand why his scars triggered me. I had never been visibly hurt by my father. My body was a canvas to show off to the public. I wasn't allowed to have visible scars.

What had happened to this man?

The world was spinning in my head. He drove around for ages, but he didn't leave the city. We were headed for the

crowded city center. To calm me down, I studied the people who reminded me of Mandy, closed off and in their own world. Women walked alone, strutting across the sidewalks to get wherever they needed to go. They weren't collared or marked. There were rings on some of their fingers, but that wasn't their entire life. They didn't live for sex like we did in Katantia. People here were concerned with the concept of time, money, and how to walk through a crowd without being noticed. In Katantia, everyone wanted to be noticed.

At some point, my quiet driver pulled into an underground parking facility. He parked his car, turning off the engine. I wasn't the type to let men open my doors because it rubbed me the wrong way, but when the bleached blond man opened mine after I hesitated to exit the car, my heart fluttered.

Before I could speak another word, he turned away. He led the way to a close-by elevator, which he accessed with a code I memorized.

"It changes every hour."

"What?" I asked startled.

"The code. There's a new one every hour. Don't bother memorizing it." His voice was deep. There was a hum to it that reached deep inside of me.

I swallowed, avoiding to look at his neck. Even the front of his neck was scarred.

When we reached the needed floor, the doors opened. I didn't step out, frightened by what this all meant. It was surreal.

He placed his hand on my lower back, encouraging me to step into his home. I felt enthralled by his warm touch. It was the first time he addressed me.

"This is a bad idea. I think I should leave now," I said, preparing to step away. Once I did take a step, I slipped. I had lost my balance, and he caught me.

Fylox caught me. "You won't be leaving this place until Jordan gives me the green light."

My fingers turned jittery. “Why are you guys doing this? I should’ve left yesterday. I don’t want to owe Travis anything. He destroyed my family. He doesn’t get to be the good guy.”

The man literally grabbed me, hoisting me up, and he dragged me out of the elevator. His touch was gentle as if I didn’t weigh more than a light feather. The elevator doors behind us closed. He smelled so lovely. Closing my eyes, I could smell his neck for ages. His scent was complemented by spicy wood but also citrus. “I won’t let Jordan down. He wants you safe.”

“Am I safe, though? Who the fuck are you? And put the fuck me down. Now!” I kicked at him, but I felt more hurt at my attempts than he probably did. He was sculpted, rigid, and unbending.

“Language.” His voice was almost a hiss.

“Excuse me?” I attempted to remove myself from his hold, but I failed. Any punch I threw was a miss. “I’m not some average bitch you get to discipline.”

Fylox took his time with me over his shoulder. While I was frantic and panicking, he led us into one of the rooms at the end of the empty white corridor. After kicking the door open with wrath that shook me, Fylox threw me off his shoulder. I landed on the bed.

Familiar territory, I said to myself. However, after a deep breath and a moment of silence, I looked at the edge of the bed. Fylox stood there with handcuffs dangling from his hands.

“Get up,” he ordered. His tone was calm like he hadn’t just dragged me around his place.

“No,” I refused, finding comfort in my power. I’d cement myself on this bed if necessary.

Fylox dared to grab my ankle and pull it off from the bed. I almost hit my head when I landed on the floor next to the bed. Without any emotion on his face, he explained, “I give you an order, and you follow it. That’s how this is played.”

“Look, I don’t know who you think you are, but you don’t talk to me like that. I don’t respond to orders from the likes of you.” His cognac eyes bored into me, turning dark. That fierce look in his eyes almost made me shiver, but he had to try harder than that to intimidate me. Aram Wraith had groomed me to withstand any weak bullies. I’d been manhandled before. He could push me. I’d resist his bullshit. “If you don’t want me in your fucking home, kick me out. I survived Katantia. Chicago is a piece of cake in comparison.”

Fylox stretched his neck to the one side, then to the other.

He handcuffed me to the bed without bothering to let me on the actual bed. On the floor, I sat panting and sweating my life away in the dirt of my journey here.

He walked away without another word.



I HAD MY OWN ROOM WITH AN ATTACHED BATHROOM. JORDAN had been right. The surfaces I could spot from down here were spotless without me going over them again.

There were no Katantia emblems anywhere. That soothed me. Aram wasn’t around the corner, looming and waiting for his opportunity to fuck whatever was left of my body. I didn’t feel like I lived in the past with classic Katantian ancient Greek columns everywhere and neoclassical furniture radiating a snob vibe.

Here, the walls were white, and the decoration was scarce. There was no sign of a woman’s touch, the bed and cupboards not matching. It was a bachelor’s pad through and through, reminding me of my youngest brother’s room in his house. Everything was kept minimal as if he was ready to pack up and leave on the spot if need be. But it was clean, which made me feel at ease even if I was bound to the bed.

“I don’t know about you,” I said to no one in particular, sniffing. I was shaking, and the pressure on my bladder was growing. “But I have to pee. And if you don’t let me pee, I

will pee, here, in the middle of this room. I'll drag the sheets of the bed through my dirt. If you don't come here..."

It worked. A couple of moments later, the door to the room flew open, revealing a tantalized Fylox. I knew a pal when I saw one. Jordan had done a great job at warning me.

Strong arms picked me up, carrying me to the bathroom. He wasn't helping me, no. He did this as a chore. His nonchalant attitude revealed how much I bored him with my silly needs. It wasn't my fault. He had me handcuffed...

"Can you undo these?" I gestured at my wrists. The surfaces were shiny and most decadent. I hadn't expected this sleek look. Fylox was either rich or fucking with me. "Close the door behind you after you're done."

My savior, or captor, stepped back from my trembling body. With one deep breath, he flared his nostrils. With open palms flat on the marble sink behind him, he stared me down.

"Excuse me?" I lifted my cuffed wrists.

"I can lock you up in here if you like. Then you can go to the bathroom all day long. Is that what you want?" he comments, tilting his head to the side. His cognac eyes spit fire at me, antagonizing me for the sake of it.

I sighed. I'd have to live like a Katantian girl from now on. I thought coming to America would result in... freedom? Instead, I lowered half of my hideous tracksuit, and I did what I had to do while he stood there, watching my every move with hatred burning bright in his eyes.

It was definitely hatred. Not even my dad messed with me while in bathrooms...

"I can't reach the toilet paper without making a mess," I informed him. There was none next to me. It was behind me, and under normal circumstances, I'd extend my long arms, thank my fucking genes for that, and I'd help myself. But cuffed hands were of no use.

Fylox didn't flinch. He kept glaring at me like I'd grown devil horns.

“Didn’t you hear what I said?”

No response.

I rolled my eyes, and I spat, “Fuck you. Kick me out! I don’t need your help. I’m the Princess of Katantia. You will treat me with respect! Why are you keeping me here if you hate me so much?”

My question made zero sense. If he hated me, holding me hostage was perfect for him. My dripping pussy, a result of something other than sex, needing some light patting. What was so terribly wrong with that request? I didn’t ask for the world.

It was just toilet paper.

“You’re the princess of what?” he asked, unbothered by my outburst. It was sickening to be this upset while he stood there perfectly balanced and relaxed.

“Of Katantia! Get these fucking handcuffs off of me. Now.” I was shaking, and it was the result of my withdrawal. I couldn’t sit still. I couldn’t think clearly. The smallest thing agitated me, making me explode.

“You’re in no position to give me orders.” Fylox stepped forward, and his scent moved with him. He was hiding in plain sight. Underneath that pretty face, there was hurt and agony. His eyes whispered those small truths to me. “You’re in my space. Here, you are a princess of nothing. You don’t exist. You’re a nobody, and you will be treated as such.”

As tall as I was, I still had to cock my head to glare at him while he towered above me. His crotch sat right in front of my face, but he wasn’t hard. No. He wasn’t doing this because he received pleasure from degrading me over a piece of toilet paper.

There was something wrong with this man, fundamentally.

I’d dealt with those sorts of men all my life. They’d always been older than me, but age... It didn’t matter while my hands were bound, and he was able to do as he pleased with me.

My frustration was growing by the second. It annoyed me that all of this was orchestrated by the man who had murdered my mother. My conscience ate at me for allowing him to interfere with my life once again. I had left Katantia, but its influence could be felt all over. Instead, I sat here in a compromising position, being ridiculed.

Kamila was a lot of things. But she didn't get played. No. Kamila was the one that played the game. Fuck him. Swallowing my pride, I lowered my voice. It always worked with Aram. Surely, being a pouty innocent girl would work for him, too. "I apologize. I didn't mean to come off so cross. I don't mean to sound so stuck-up. I grew up being the center of... Well, it doesn't matter. I apologize, and I hope we didn't get off on the wrong foot. I'm grateful to be here with you. I'm uncertain, but I'm grateful."

There was a movement in his face, but it didn't quite form into a smile. His eyes gleamed fury at me, and it didn't matter what the rest of his body said. The cognac they served me was... Tempting. Infuriating but tempting as fuck. "Get up."

Taken aback, I responded, "What?"

"Get. Up."

Work. Work. Work. Wrap him around your little finger. Work. Work. Work.

I took a deep breath, and then I exhaled. Bile rose in my throat, but I shoved it away. We'd play along with this man. Now, we were almost eye to eye. I still had to raise my gaze to meet the ferocious look on his face. Without any further delays, he demanded, "Get in the shower."

While the prospect of a shower pleased me, I was dirty as fuck, after all. I felt dumbfounded at how I was being treated. Aram was allowed to treat me like dirt. It was expected of him. But. Nobody. Else. Took. Such. Attitudes. With. ME. My heart pounded in wrath, but my face was loose, and my behavior gullible.

I nodded, and I tripped my way to the walk-in shower.

Just breathe, sweetie. I'm so proud of you.

Holding on to the tiles, I prayed for him to drug me. I didn't want to think of my mother dying in her bathtub. Murdered by Travis Cross. She hadn't killed herself, which was a relief. I'd spent years thinking we drove her to her death. We weren't enough. Aris. Weston. Me. But we'd been enough. She'd loved us. She never wanted to leave us.

Aram took her from us.

Travis helped him.

Tears blurred my vision, but I saw enough to realize Fylox wasn't stepping into the shower with me.

"Take off your clothes," he instructed me. I'd never been asked to take off my clothes for any other reason than fucking. This was... refreshing. I didn't let it get to my head. One by one, I ripped the fabric from my skin. The shirt and jacket I wore clung to my cuffed wrists. I didn't wear tracksuits. I was the Princess of Katantia. People bowed down to me.

I disappointed my people. I left them...

Cold water poured down upon my skin, and my body shook harder than before. I didn't open my eyes, for I didn't want to see the stranger in the room witness my breakdown. I leaned against the cold tiles, engulfed in the ice-cold water tickling my skin.

"Why aren't you begging?" he asked. I barely heard him because my ears were ringing.

"Begging for what?" I hiccupped.

"Beg me to turn the temperature up. Turn the temperature up yourself. What are you doing?" There was panic in his voice. It boosted my ego. *I'm so proud of you. Sweetie, you'll be the greatest princess this island has ever seen. We just have to be very careful about who you call your friend. Your status will cause envy...*

I wanted her to leave my thoughts. I had a job to do, convince Fylox to like me. I couldn't focus with her running circles around in my mind.

The cold shower stopped, and goosebumps decorated my skin. Whereas I thought I was shaking before, now, I could barely stand in one place. Nothing covered my body, and I knew a decent girl would protect her intimate areas.

I wasn't decent. I was filthy. I deserved this. I'd grown up like this, debased and brutalized. I laughed at myself. A cold shower was brutal all of a sudden? Try fitting two dicks in your pussy. Fuck. *Kamila, focus.*

Time passed, and I dried up without the help of a towel. When I finally composed myself, I realized Fylox was standing farther away than before. There was a crease on his forehead, worry and pity substituting for his early fury.

“What the fuck are you looking at?” I bit back.

“Language.”

“SERIOUSLY!” I hated myself. I couldn't control my mood swings. I'd just gone on a date with a shower, cleansing all the journey's dirt from my body. Yet, I still felt nasty. Used. Dripping in dust.

“Dinner's in three hours. I'll bring your clothes. I have to lock your door, but I will remove the handcuffs.” Fylox approached me. We didn't look at each other as I lifted my wrists for better access. There were open wounds already, my blood traveling across the back of my hand. I didn't bother caring about it. It was just blood.

When he removed the handcuffs, I dropped my arms from his hold. The first thing I did was run my hands through my hair. It wasn't even mine anymore. I'd been forced to change its color. I'd lost my character. Everything was changing around me.

I'd expected it.

I'd wanted it.

But living through it in four strange walls wasn't all I had envisioned it to be.



“FYLOX?” A FEMALE VOICE YELLED FROM OUTSIDE. I STARED at the ceiling from my position on the floor. Did he have friends over while I was locked up in this room?

“Fylox, where are you?” the voice called. Americans sounded different from us; we had a mixture of everything in our language. This girl sounded tender, sweet almost.

When I didn’t hear her voice again, reluctantly, I picked myself up. I slogged into the bathroom, intending to clean myself up properly.

I had a couple of hours to myself. I inspected the soaps and lotions, discovering that nothing had a scent to it. In Katantia, I had some friends mix blackberry into all of my custom-made toiletries.

It didn’t matter. I was able to wash my body just fine. I dried myself off after almost an hour of wasting my host’s water. I had a lot to think about. I didn’t like to reminisce about what I’d left behind. All I could envision was chaos. While I was a rulebreaker at heart, I had fucked shit up. I didn’t want to imagine what plans of torment went through Aram’s mind.

After finishing, I sat on the bed, gawking at the digital watch on the nightstand. My wrists itched. I hadn’t found any tape to shield the wounds, so they dried openly.

The time passed quickly. I kept feeling my heart pacing, and I sweated more than usual, although I was just sitting there at the edge of the bed, doing nothing. It reminded me of a time I had managed to survive once already, withdrawal. Every time you went down the rabbit hole of drug use, you had to dig yourself back up again.

When three hours passed, I knocked on the door of the room with a fresh attitude. My sweating and shaking had calmed down for the time being. What better way to start my fourth or fifth recovery? I had lost count.

The door pushed open, and I followed the shadow on the other end. Fylox rushed away like I was the devil in person. Perhaps I was.

I'd betrayed my people. I'd lied to them. I'd made them believe I'd give them a wedding, and, now, here I was in a foreign country, hidden away.

I took careful steps in the direction of the open kitchen and the connected dining room. I had grown up in big places; I didn't get lost easily.

"You're not a vegetarian or something?" he asked me when I stepped into the kitchen area, and I twitched at the sound of his voice. He was holding two long cylindrical glasses on his way to the table. They looked like club property for cocktails, not glasses for dinner. Taking advantage of the situation, I let my eyes wander over every detail of his muscular body.

I shook my head. My eyes took in the table. It was decked with takeaway food and two clear glass bottles full of water. I smelled something Asian, and I hadn't had Asian in so long. Was it Chinese? I yearned for some Chinese food. We had an excellent Chinese spot in Katantia, but the palace had tax issues with the owner, so we were discouraged from buying food from over there. I went back there a couple of times, only to find out it had been turned into an inner-city Hole Store.

The tall man took a seat at the head of the table. I joined him. He revealed, "I don't have any refreshments."

"It's okay. I'm fine with water," I responded. I didn't need a refreshment. I could look into his eyes and drink from the cognac they offered. Okay. Was there something in the water I had just showered in? I corrected my posture, and I held my head high, avoiding his face.

This was temporary. We would be separated soon. Obvi-fuck-you-sly, he didn't want to fuck me. I only attracted Aram because I was such a mess. And who said he had a right to want me? I didn't want him or his weird habits either.

Fylox unboxed the food. He told me each dish's name, and he let me choose which one I wanted to eat. It wasn't Chinese. It was Thai, but it tasted great, nonetheless. I feared my stomach would think otherwise in the long run, but I didn't care. I emptied my plate, and he handed me another dish. He'd ordered plenty.

"You can go into the room I've given you after dinner."

My eyes were fixed on the plate in front of me. I didn't bow to anyone. Why was it easy to bend to this stranger?

He went on, "I ask only one thing of you. Watch your language around me."

There was a subtle urgency to his tone that I only noticed because I'd been trained to pick up on the details. Daddy made sure that his children knew how to manipulate a crowd. "I didn't mean to come off so cross. I don't usually curse this much. They teach us clean language in the palace so that the public doesn't get the wrong idea. I'm sorry if I offended you."

"You're not sorry," he replied, catching me knee-deep in my lie.

"I'm not."

"But you will do as I say."

"I'll try," I promised him.

We ate dinner in silence. I didn't dare to look at him again. As much as I picked up on the small details of his pain, he saw right through me as well. Whatever they'd told him about me, it wasn't enough.

I was ruined.

And there was no coming back from that.

CHAPTER 3

KAMILA



I DIDN'T REMEMBER THE LAST TIME I ACTUALLY SLEPT. NOT being on the road and on the actual run gave me time to remember all the excruciating parts of my existence.

I'd tried three cold showers, but I still felt feverish. My mind raced, and my heart pounded in my chest, providing depressing music for my empty reality. I wanted my brother. I needed him to take care of me. He knew how to treat me in withdrawal.

Thinking back to my home in Katantia, and the last time I smoked a joint or actually popped some pills, it made my mouth water.

Sobbing to myself, I sat on the floor, my back to the bed. My vision was directed at the window, but the clear night sky depressed me. I missed seeing the stars. I missed hearing the sea when I opened my window. I missed my garden. What would happen to my garden now?

I whimpered.

I had stopped watching the digital clock on the nightstand. The red-colored numbers didn't make me feel any comfort. They depressed me, reminding me of the distance between my family and me.

The knock on my door came unexpectedly.

"What's wrong with you?" Fylox asked, stepping into my room.

Sniffing back my tears and snot, I cleared my throat. I responded, “A lot.”

I heard his calm steps coming closer, and then, he blocked my window view, towering in front of me. “What do you need?”

“You can’t give me what I need,” I told him. I stared at his white sock-covered feet, unable to raise my gaze to meet his. “I’m in withdrawal. I relapsed before I left home.”

He crouched down in front of me, leading the back of his hand against my sweaty forehead. He sounded bored, but his body trembled curiously. “You’re burning up. Is this why you were shaking earlier?”

He noticed? I wasn’t a schoolgirl. This wasn’t cute. He was simply an observant man.

I shrugged. “It’s just a lot. I messed up. I shouldn’t have left. My brother needs me. I... Mandy needs to leave Katantia safely. I should’ve taken care of the women before I abandoned my home. She’ll suffer now... I’m so selfish. I’m ashamed...”

I mumbled away while he lifted me from the floor. “I can’t take you to a hospital if you have a seizure. You don’t exist. I’ll have to call my private doctor.”

“Why do you have a private doctor?” I asked, my mouth dry. I held onto him as he led us into the kitchen. He didn’t flinch at my touch, and I registered that.

“I don’t exist.”

“Why?”

“You shouldn’t ask questions.” He hadn’t been relaxed, to begin with, and now, he was flustered.

“I’m sorry,” I blurted out.

“Are you hungry?” I nodded. “My cooking skills are terrible. I’ll call a friend...”

I shook my head. “I can try and make something easy. What do you have in your kitchen?”

Fylox was about to refuse, but I insisted. Cooking would make me feel useful. I had my own home back in Katantia. I cooked and cleaned after myself. I was a gardener. I was a person of interest. The Katantian people loved me... Fuck. The bottom line is that I had cooking skills.

My host's kitchen was as bare as the rest of his penthouse. I barely scraped together four ingredients for a pasta pot. I cooked with half of the spices I usually did, rolling my eyes at that fact. Meanwhile, Fylox stood close to me, observing my every move like a hawk.

I liked his attention. He was a quiet man, but his eyes spoke volumes. I avoided glancing at his neck. He hadn't changed into a short-sleeved shirt. As I waited for the pasta to finish, I gazed at his arms, wondering if they were scarred or tatted.

“You're a curious one.”

I nodded. “I like pretty views.”

“What's underneath that fabric isn't pretty.” His voice filled my eyes with sweet music. My heart was dancing to its own beat. I urged it to calm the fuck down.

“Let me be the judge of that.” I was laying it on thick. I smirked to myself as I prepared my pasta. The sauce was already finished, cooling down in the little pot on the side.

Once I finished in the kitchen, he cleaned up, not letting a single pot spend the rest of the night dirty. I admired his way of doing things. I would do the same. Mandy and I had disagreements on cleaning while we lived together.

I headed for the table, but Fylox gestured at the sofa. I scooted over to my spot from earlier, but he put a halt to that. “Sit on my lap. I need to watch your temperature.”

“I'm too heavy for that...” I blushed. Again. Pathetic.

“Let me be the judge of that.” He smirked at me, and I discovered a new sensation of melting inside.

I shifted on top of him until I found a comfortable angle. He put his arm around my back, holding me in place. I picked

up my plate of food, and I started munching like I hadn't eaten in days. Fylox switched on the television, flipping channels until he noticed I graced the screen of one. He turned the volume up.

I tried to ignore what the news anchor was going on about. It made me feel uncomfortable.

At the mention of my brother's name, I almost dropped my plate on my lap.

"Locals in Katantia haven't seen Weston Wraith since the ill-fated wedding. Eyewitnesses claim the royals' private jet departed the Katantian airport after Princess Kamila's sudden disappearance. Rumors have been floating around that Kamila herself boarded that plane, but those rumors have been shut down in a press release. He claims he has no hand in his sister's disappearance."

Videos of my publicity stunts in Katantia graced the screen. Pictures of my failed wedding popped up, and I couldn't help but memorize each worried face on the screen. Where was Mandy now? She wasn't a public figure, so the news had no obligation to report on her. I hoped she had stayed with my brother...

"Turn it off," I urged him. My fingers were barely holding on to my plate. The fork clattered against the plate.

Fylox didn't need to be told twice. "Eat."

"I can't." I whimpered, feeling sorry about myself. I was such a fucking embarrassment.

"Eat. Then you go to sleep. You need to rest." I wasn't one to obey orders. Whenever Aram demanded things from me, I snapped at him, making it fun for my pitiful self. With Fylox, I couldn't even make a joke. He didn't seem very humorous. Something in his voice told me to obey and shut the fuck up without the cursing, of course.

In silence, he studied me as I ate on top of him. I tried not to think of his warm body below me. I was a horny princess on the loose. This wasn't easy. Every other thought consisted of his dick size and how well it would fit inside of me.

Once I was done, he took the plate off my hands. He removed me from his lap, and he went into the kitchen, leaving me on the sofa. I stared at the screen as my ears were filled with the water running in the kitchen.



“I CAN’T SLEEP.”

“You need to rest. You haven’t slept in two days.”

“Don’t you think I know that? It’s stressing me out. So that makes me twist and turn.”

“Sleep.”

“That won’t work.”

“Sleep or else.”

“Or what? You can leave. I’m not being ordered around by you.”

“This is my room.”

“So what? You have five other bedrooms. Empty, in case you need a reminder.”

“Sleep. You like it when I tell you what to do.”

“Hm.”

“Exactly. Shut your eyes and start counting sheep. Or condoms. Maybe that’ll do it for you.”

“I haven’t fu... Sorry. I haven’t had sex with a condom in ages. I usually go bare.”

“I didn’t need to know that.”

“And I’m clean, too. In Katantia, they check us every other week.”

“Sleep.”



THE FIRST THING MY EYES NOTICED WHEN I FINALLY WOKE UP is the empty side of the bed. Fylox wasn't there. I doubted he had ever actually slept next to me. He'd put me here, and I had come willingly because I smelled it on him that he wasn't a predator. I sensed those from a mile away. They reeked like me, filthy and ugly. I smelled like them because, after all these years under Aram, he'd rubbed off on me.

Fylox had a job to do. Protect me. To do that, I had to either be handcuffed and locked in my room or near him.

I yawned, stretching myself in his enormous bed. There were clothes on the edge, picked for me.

After getting ready for my day, I left Fylox's room and made my way into the kitchen area. It was empty. I went through the cupboards to find some coffee to make. Once I was done, I sat at the dining table. I turned to the side so that I could gaze outside. It was a sunny day outside that made me think of my trees in my garden. They smiled at me when the sun shone, warming me up inside.

Here in Chicago, I couldn't see any trees for miles. I saw buildings on top of buildings. Glass and metal dominated the scenery. I felt cold just looking at the view.

Briefly, I debated whether I should head for the elevator, but then I remembered the hourly password that I didn't know. Fylox would immediately be made aware of my escape attempt. I would embarrass myself in front of him even further.

My temperature was better than yesterday, and I didn't sweat as much anymore. I had a slight headache, and my heart still raced. I felt better after a couple of hours of sleep.

Since I was left alone in a penthouse that I wasn't finished exploring, I put down my warm cup of coffee, and I started checking into all the rooms. There was nothing suspicious. As I observed on my first hour here, it was a bachelor's pad. The furniture was pitiful, to say the least.

At the end of the hallway, I found a storage room. The door was stuck, so I had to use additional force to enter. Once

inside, I smelled it. My nostrils fired up, and my heart almost jumped out of my chest.

Fylox had treasures for me, hidden in the depths of his penthouse. This wasn't a regular stash. This looked like a chemist's lab. I picked up one utensil after the other, inspecting it. There were a syringe and a bottle of disinfectant solution. I wasn't the type to inject myself. I had a phase once, but I grew out of it. For me, it was either the nose or my mouth.

I counted the medication in his storage. There was no heavy shit of my preference, but I recognized some anti-depressants that I'd heard raving reviews for.

Would he notice if I took one just to ease my restlessness?

CHAPTER 4

KAMILA



I READ EACH LABEL. FYLOX WAS LIKE ME, KEEPING everything in order. The syringe was staring back at me. I had my blood extracted once a week in Katantia. The pain was barely there, just a little sting. It wouldn't hurt to inject something into my veins.

I could lose consciousness, overdose once again. But at least, I would've danced in euphoria for a little while.

My heart raced. Weston wasn't here to save me. He was back home, worrying about me. Did he think I was dead? Did he hate me now? I swallowed.

My body tensed. I leaned against the table with all the magical poisons on it, but it couldn't hold me up. Everything inside of me stopped, making me fall to the floor. I hit my head against the corner of the table, but that wasn't the root of my pain.

Every limb in my body spun. I shut my eyes, and I felt like I was falling into nothingness. Curling into a ball on the floor, I placed my hands on my ears to stop me from hearing my own screams. My throat ached. My legs started shaking.

And then I lost consciousness.



I OPENED MY EYES, AND THE FIRST THING I SAW ABOVE ME WAS a young woman with beautiful braids. I wondered how she did it and how much care they took to make them look so slick

and perfect. Her full lips were pouting at me, peach lip gloss applied to them.

She gestured at somebody. “She’s awake!”

Then she addressed me. “How are you feeling? Can you hear me? My name is Maia Callie. I... I came to check up on you.”

I coughed. I needed water. My mind was still spinning, but I didn’t feel the pain anymore. I simply realized what a mess I was once again. “I’ve felt better.”

“Here.” She handed me a glass of water. It was a cylindrical cocktail glass like yesterday. I lifted my upper body to drink the water. It took me some time to stop feeling dizzy. Fylox and Maia Callie had me lie down on the sofa. “Who are you?”

Stunned, I hesitated with my answer. She smirked like she knew more than she let on. “I’m Kamila Ruby Wraith. Who are you?”

Fylox talked over me. “She’s Jordan’s guest.”

“Jordan’s more of a Viola Davis and Angela Bassett type of guy,” Maia Callie commented, tilting her head to the side while taking me in. I could detect liars when I saw them. I was one. This girl knew who I was, for sure. “You don’t look like somebody Jordan would entertain.”

“And what do I look like?” I asked. I hid my irritation with a fake smile.

“Like a whore who just jumped out of a Russian oligarch’s private jet,” the young woman responded.

I emitted a shy laugh. She had come close enough with her presumption. If Fylox was fucking her, good for him. She looked like a good lay with her confident poise.

Fylox muttered something underneath his breath. The hiss returned. “Language. And don’t speak of who Jordan spends his time with. That’s... Disgusting.”

Her face flattened at Fylox’s comment. She retreated back into her shell. “Sorry, bro. I shouldn’t have.”

Bro? I scanned them both for signs that they were related. I couldn't find any. His pale skin and her browner shade confused me, but I'd heard there could be a difference in mixed families. 'Mixed' was what Americans called it. On Katantia, we didn't share such views. Everyone had different cultural identities at home. We mostly focused on the sexual side of things...

"Can you deal with her while I'm in the kitchen?" Fylox asked.

Maia Callie nodded. "Of course. Do your thing."

The young woman waited until Fylox was out of reach. Then she inspected my pulse.

When she finished, I said, "I should probably go to my room. I don't want to bother you two."

"Don't be silly. We'll just pretend we're having a serious medical conversation." She leaned forward. Her voice was comfortably deep for a female. She sounded smooth and lively.

I asked, "What's Fylox's deal? He seems... off."

Shifting on the sofa, I noticed Fylox was wasting away in the kitchen harder than my silly brothers, and their spoiled rich boy asses ever had.

"He actually is off," she told me, tearing up. With her face away from mine, she hid her trembles. Her breathing was hard. "Forget what I just said."

Fylox had started the dishwasher, so we stopped discussing him. I memorized what she told me. I didn't want to trigger anybody, much less a guy who didn't seem to be my enemy.

The shaking started again, and I was glad Maia Callie was too preoccupied with her brother to notice. She kept glancing at him like he was the one who hung the moon. There was fear in her eyes, too.

At least I had stopped sweating. I sighed, crossing my arms in front of my chest.

When Fylox returned, he made us explain what had happened to me. I told them everything. "... and then I panicked. It has occurred before. The first time I stopped using, my brother had me hospitalized for my seizures. They're not serious, though. I never get more than one or two at a time."

Maia Callie discussed the medical details with Fylox. She warned him not to leave his medication lying around easily accessible. My reaction was somewhat expected, she claimed. She also said he had to be very careful with me in the first weeks. Weeks. Where was Weston? I sniffled. I hated myself for letting him down.

Before Maia Callie left, she offered to bring me some clothes. Her brother declined the offer. "Nobody's supposed to know she's here."

"I don't know her," Maia Callie uttered, raising her hands in innocence. She hugged her brother, and he had a strange reaction to it. He flinched like he was uncomfortable. Then, she turned to me, hugging me, too.

I watched her leave.

When I turned to glance at Fylox, he was already watching me. I felt a shiver run down my long spine. "You know, it's rude to talk behind somebody's back."

I nodded.

"Why do you have all these drugs in your home?" I asked. I grabbed the water from earlier, taking another sip.

He didn't answer. He simply glanced at me with an intense look that got me drunk off cognac.

I cleared my throat. "Since you won't say anything, let me speak my mind. I feel like a selfish piece of shit. Excuse my language. I know you don't like cursing. But I'm the worst human being ever."

I took a deep breath.

"You're not."

I rolled my eyes because I could hear he didn't believe a word he'd just uttered. "For the sake of my argument, I am. The day before my wedding, my friend opened up to me about some things she found out about my family. My plans to leave Katantia were already in action, and things were moving along smoothly until she told me how everything went to shit in my life. I was eighteen, almost nineteen years old. My mother had died five or so years ago, and I was already on and off drugs, driving my younger brother insane."

"I don't remember the first time. I just remember that one day I was a normal troubled teen, and the next, I was a filthy whore that fucked somebody she shouldn't be fucking. I'm sorry for all the cursing. Being a whore isn't bad where I'm from. It's actually a good thing, very esteemed. What I was doing wasn't good. I started hating on the woman who was suffering just as much as I was. She was older than me by many years. She had two children. I was just a spoiled brat." I let out a short sob. He sat far away, unaffected. "I didn't know this until my friend told me the day before my wedding. Supposedly, my father asked this woman to choose between her daughter or me. Who did she want him to fuck?"

My heart thundered as I recalled the events.

"The daughter was eleven years old," I blurted out. Fylox's eyes darkened. "I got upset because a mother decided to protect her child from this perverse man who is my father. I don't deserve to live. I should just walk out of here and take what's coming for me."

"He never had sex with that girl?" There was a warning in his voice. It alerted me. I should fear this man.

I shook my head. "No, we did what we could do to spare her. My brother married her eventually. They're quite happy with each other, annoying the fuck out of everyone around them. They have sex all the fucking time. I mean, on Katantia, that's normal. But they just overdo it."

"Do they have sex with underage kids where you're from? Is that something your country stands for?" He poisoned the air with venom. I felt it engulfing me.

“No,” I responded, trying to calm my offended tone. “We have different laws than you guys. People are of age at 16 over there. I... There are rumors. I hear lots of things, shameful things. I never participated. At least, my father had some decency in him left not to make me do such things. Like every other country in the world, we have pedophiles. But Aram refuses to make it legal. He doesn’t see a profit from it. He wants traditional families that produce tax-paying children and so on...”

I gulped down more water because the look in his eyes was scaring me. He didn’t say a word, but his eyes were screaming at me.

I froze.

“I owe Jordan my life.” He didn’t speak in anger, which intimidated me the most, the fear of the unknown. What was he talking about? “He’s the only reason you’re still breathing. Make sure to remember that.”

I wanted to ask a million questions. I opened my mouth, but no words left my lips.

He stood up from his seat. He towered above me once again. The room had grown cold.

“What do you mean?” I dared to ask. I had fucked it up with him.

“If it weren’t for him, you’d be dead now.”

I swallowed.

He slammed the door behind him as he left me alone, with death looming all over my soul.



“WAKE UP.” FYLOX’S VOICE RATTLED ME AWAKE. I SPENT THE entire night on the sofa, continually shifting. Unable to find peace in my tears, I willed myself to sleep.

I needed to stretch. My body felt weak and hungry. *Wake up, sweetie. It’s time for your lessons. Don’t let Mommy down.*

“Good morning to you, too,” I replied, croaking.

“Cut the pleasantries.” He stepped away from the sofa. “We’re leaving in an hour. Do whatever you need to do and be ready.”

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“That’s none of your business.”

An hour later, I had showered again, eaten whatever I could scarp together in the kitchen, and dressed in Fylox’s citrus scented clothes. My hair was tied up in a ponytail. The roots were already showing only half a week after I painted my hair blond. The cheap dye couldn’t help but be cheap. *I disapprove of your hair changes, sweetie. That’s not what a princess should look like. You need to be a constant in your peoples’ lives. They rely on you... You’re the opposite of your father, sweetie. While he flutters with the wind, you stand still and proud. I love you, you know that, don’t you?*

I sighed as I waited at the elevator. I had fucked it up with Fylox. I went and confessed the one thing I was most ashamed of. Why did I ever open my mouth? I should keep it closed. Dad always said I was only good for one thing, after all. Fuck. Aram Wraith wasn’t here to patronize me. I’d opened my mouth because my withdrawal made me irritable and needy for attention. I never shut up in the past, and I wouldn’t shut up now either.

I stood next to the elevator when I saw Fylox approach. He didn’t bother to look at me, but that didn’t stop me from gazing at him. His bleached hair was gelled back. His skin looked flawless, just like his sister’s. I usually had faultless skin, but Chicago air made my skin sticky and red. I’d tried to fix it in front of the mirror earlier, but it turned even redder. Fylox’s cognac eyes were mean as they ignored me.

Today, he finally revealed the skin of his arms, and it freaked me out. They were covered in intimidating scars that made me feel pain, although I hadn’t been the one who had experienced these wounds. I wasn’t an expert on scars, but most of them seemed self-inflicted careful, almost straight lines. The only comfort I found was that they were faded.

He wore a black short-sleeved t-shirt coupled with raven sweats. His sneakers were pearly white. There was a duffel bag in his right hand, and his left hand carried his keys.

He typed in the password, and then we made our way out.

Two hours later, we were in the middle of nowhere. He had this big fancy car, but he drove excruciatingly slow as if he was doing it on purpose. If he would just give me the wheel, I'd get us where he wanted to go. On top of all that, Fylox decided to behave as if I didn't exist. I doubt he even checked if I was breathing, sitting there next to him.

I was. Breathing, that is. Barely, but I managed. I had started sweating again, but at least there were no seizures to be had.

Eventually, I had enough of the silence, and I turned on the radio. An old Backstreet Boys song played on a popular radio station. I smiled, remembering my brothers at their high school prom. They had been drunk as hell, making fools of themselves in front of all the girls, but said girls still worshipped the ground they walked on. They had something charming to them, and then there was their title, of course. Weston had invited me in secret, and I'd dressed up with a wig and all to go, staying undercover. I'd never had a high school experience. Mom had homeschooled me.

Fylox didn't make me turn the radio down, so I let the radio play. More old songs played, and I felt myself loosening up.

"Daniela, rumor has it Chicago's very own is involved in serious negotiations in the East. Spencer Rawlins has posted selfies with all the important leaders of the area. The move can be interpreted as a display of power. Rawlins is one of the wealthiest men in the States, and his properties in the East allow him, let's put it mildly, to do whatever the heck he wants to do," a male announcer claims. He and his co-host chuckle at the statement, but I shiver in my seat.

"There's not a man on earth that can tell Spencer Rawlins no," the female hosts adds. "He's promised to bring stability back in the area by expanding his business ventures. He plans

to invest ten billion dollars over twenty years. It's a huge deal."

"He has done so much for the city," the male host comments. "But I find it unfortunate he's going to waste his money on foreign soil. I know a lot of causes that could benefit from his billions."

"Don't discredit the man." These radio personalities sound way too happy. Dial it down a notch. "He employs thousands of Americans. He's helped the economy of Illinois tremendously..."

"They're paid to do this," Fylox informed me, talking over the radio. "He doesn't do anything for the city. He's tearing down buildings, and he replaces them with unaffordable properties that only the top one percent can purchase, among other things."

I shrugged. I'd heard of such practices, but I couldn't do anything about that. I was locked up in a car with a stranger that I'd told my deepest secrets. "Where are we going?"

Completely ignoring my question, Fylox kept driving. The road was empty, tedious, and somebody should consider demolishing it. I doubted this was what Americans called highways.

"Do you think I could sneak a message to Mandy Rawlins?" She could get a message to my brother.

"No, you can't unless you want Spencer Rawlins or Aram Wraith to track you down and drag you right back to that country you love so much," he snapped at me. His fingers gripped the steering wheel tight for a moment. For one second, he let the beast out. The next second, it had vanished.

"What's wrong?" I cleared my throat. "I know you hate me, but there's something else, isn't there? You seem to be a very calm person, usually."

"Jordan has gone dark."

I asked, "What does that mean?"

“It means something is off, and I need to protect you and his son.” He rubbed the back of his neck. His arms were proof that he was a fighter, but this wasn’t the time to gawk.

“What about your family?” I couldn’t resist the question. Maia Callie had made an impression on me yesterday. “I told you to leave me. I’ll find a way. Take me back to Chicago.”

“My father is protecting my family. Besides, this isn’t about me. This is about you, and Jordan’s orders are what they are.” And that was the last thing he said until we entered Indianapolis two hours later.

This city was smaller in scale. I didn’t see much of it. As soon as we entered, we took another boring route towards open land. I reveled in the green scenery, opening up my window to breathe some fresh air.

When Fylox slowed down, there were very few houses nearby, and all of them had a generous amount of distance between them. Fylox drove into a small house’s driveway, parking the car in the garage.

The house looked neat from outside, tall trees protecting it from curious eyes. He parked the car, and this time, he didn’t open my door. That left me cold, but it was fine. I was Kamila Ruby Wraith. I didn’t have doors opened. I trashed them down and trampled all over them.

What is this, sweetie? You’re not drinking again, are you? Please. Talk to me. What’s the matter with you? I just want to help.

With his duffel bag and keys in hand, Fylox and I approached the house.

He entered a code at the door, and then he turned the key. There was a beep, and then we entered the house. The first thing I noticed was the cleanliness of the hallway. No dirt to be detected anywhere, but it was dark and tighter than the airy white hallway in Chicago.

Fylox took the lead, and I followed him into another room. The man I’d previously watched from afar sat back on the sofa with eyes focused on the silent television. He was studying a

game. He turned it off when he noticed us approaching. Fylox and who I assumed was Alex, didn't hug like Maia Callie and Fylox. They had their own handshake.

I was briefly introduced as if I was a side character. Fylox turned away, storming off with his duffel bag in hand. I studied Jordan's son. No sleeves on his light t-shirt, but a symbol graced his chest, something about the city of Indianapolis with a basketball attached to it. His sweats were gray and hazardous to look at. Why were all men wearing sweatpants around me these days?

But Kamila didn't bite. She didn't embarrass herself like that; there were other forms of embarrassment for me. My pussy had suffered enough for a lifetime. Out here in America, we were playing it safe. Teamwork would get us somewhere safe without complications of the sexual kind.

While I never glimpsed at Jordan's hair because he hid it under beanies or durags, a word he taught me, his son's hair was fresh and out in the open for me to explore. Of course, touching people's hair is inappropriate, so I scanned the deep brown fade on his head with my eyes only. Jordan and his son's facial structures were similar. Jordan's eyes were darker than the sea-green of his son's eyes, but they were hazel. Strong jaw, wide nose, and thick lips that I could have the fun of my life with if I wasn't so intrigued by the moody guy in the other room. His smile was contagious, and his eyes paid attention to your every detail. I was used to being looked at, but Alex spoiled me with his attention.

You should smile more often. Princesses smile. You're happy, aren't you? We've given you everything you need.

"Are you sick of him yet?" Alex asked, gesturing for me to take a seat on the sofa with him. If Fylox's voice was deep and dangerous, Alex's had this smooth tone to him. He'd make a great teacher, all calm and seductive like he didn't need to try for anything in his life. Like it all came naturally to him. Seeing his father watch him play, I knew it hadn't come easy. Observing him play and having him live in front of me, I acknowledged how much hard work he put into his lifestyle. People didn't just wake up and jump as high as this guy did on

the court the other day. I didn't know much about sports, but I knew he was a fine athletic man.

And that smile of his; I felt at ease just taking it in. It made me feel like it would all be okay, and I needed that.

I shook my head. "No, I'm not sick of him, but I think he is of me."

"That's just his usual self. Don't take it personally." He added, "Do you want something to drink? You seem exhausted."

I hadn't done anything spectacular to appear exhausted. I exhaled. "Some water would be good, thanks."

When Alex brought me the water, I gulped it down at once like I hadn't drunk in days, not ashamed about it at all.

"Dad says you're a princess," Alex commented. *Daddy has a new crown for you. It's Katantia's fiftieth anniversary, sweetie. You and your brothers will be center stage. I'm so proud of you I could cry.*

I gulped down my tears because Alex didn't deserve them so early in our acquaintance. "Your dad says you're the next big thing."

"Oh, I'm already big." The smirk he gave me made me chuckle.

I responded, "I can see that."

"So, if you're a princess, who's your king?" I could see he was trained in light conversation. He emitted this charm that Maia Callie and Fylox didn't have naturally.

"I don't have one," I told him, attempting to keep as straight of a face as possible. From all the sweating I'd done in the car, I probably stank. I needed a shower. I needed a pill or a joint, something to stop the fuzzy feeling that had been dominating my body. If there was a surgery somewhere in the world that could remove that king Alex was talking about from my memories, I'd gladly get under the knife. I'd give my all for that, a moment of peace in my mind.

“Then you’re a queen. Seems appropriate. You’ve got the looks for it,” he observed. *Sweetie, you’ll never be queen. I’m sorry. I know you’re the eldest, but your brothers... They’d have to die for you to receive the spot that you deserve. Don’t be sad. Mommy’s here. You don’t have to be the queen to do good.*

Alex’s sea-green eyes taking in every single detail of my body. “It explains why MC was so smitten by you. She called me up right after she left Fylox’s place. What brings you to our shores?”

“A failed wedding,” I explained. “And a dipshit of a father.”

“Daddy issues. I’ve got just the treatment for that ache.” He did something with his lips that had me gawking for a moment, but then I snapped out of it. There was magic in his smile. That was a fact.

“I bet you do.” I asked, “Why is everyone around him so cheerful, and he’s grungier than Nirvana on steroids?”

“Not my story to tell. But he’s an integral part of our lives. We love him, and we want what’s best for him. That includes cheering him up when he’s in his bad days.”

“He’s in his bad days?” I inquired.

Alex shook his head. “Nah, this is his standard phase. You’ll get used to it.”

CHAPTER 5

KAMILA



IT SOOTHED MY SOUL THAT THERE WASN'T A SURFACE THAT required further cleaning in this new... home. Everything was kept neat and tidy. Just the way I enjoyed it. The tiny house had two bedrooms, a storage slash office with an inflatable mattress in it, and one bathroom for the entire household. I had a small en suite bathroom to myself. I had never lived in a home with men before. Therefore, I had my doubts.

How would this work?

I was the Princess of Katantia. *Bitch, we're tired of hearing about your title. It means nothing out there.*

Which meant I'd been kept isolated from men all of my life. It had started with my mother. Her urge to protect me from the male gaze followed me throughout my childhood. When I began having moods, and I wanted to feel needed by another body, I'd lashed out at my mom for keeping me locked up in the palace. Not that I was spectacular at flirting with the other sex when I partied with Colt without my parents' permission.

When Colt left Katantia and my mother was murdered, I partied more, but I never touched another person. Nobody dared to come close to me either.

Retrospectively? That worked for me. At the time, I felt like I was missing out.

But I wasn't.

I should've been careful what I wished for.

“You look like you’re about to battle Nietzsche,” Alex commented, joining me on the sofa. He’d slept here last night while Fylox and I took the bedrooms. The sofa was the only thing that fit his huge body. He was a guest here, and I could feel it, but the sofa was plush and comfortable. He didn’t show any signs of back pain.

“Who’s Nietzsche?” I asked. The name sounded familiar, but I hadn’t studied in a while. Make that half of my life.

“A German philosopher who claimed God was dead amongst other things,” Alex explained. He stretched his neck, and I heard painful cracks of bones. I twitched, and he smiled at me in response. He’d gone out for a jog in the woods nearby while Fylox babysat me. Now, Fylox was out getting it on, and I was here, stuck on the sofa and incapable of finding something of value to do. “What’s really on your mind?”

“I’m thinking back to the time I was a virgin,” I told him. “Those were good days.”

“Really? What makes you say so?” His question was honest, and it freaked me out. Why was he talking to me like he didn’t want to fuck me?

“It’s just a feeling,” I replied, smiling awkwardly.

“You can’t start a conversation and then chicken out,” he said, crossing his arms behind his head. He looked even bigger this way, stretched out all over the sofa. He could crush me if he wanted to, but he didn’t. “There’s no media around. You can drop the PR act.”

If you weren’t my daughter, I’d have you killed. Stupid cunt.

“You know about that?” I shifted on the sofa, pulling my thighs close to my chest. It’d been days since my last *exercise*, and it was getting to me. My body didn’t have any soreness to complain about or lack of energy. I was in the present, but the past haunted me.

You’re the most intelligent girl I know, sweetie. Your daddy’s just fooling around. Trust me.

“Yes, of course. I already had those conversations back in college,” Alex revealed. The more I subtly studied his body, I realized I had never been in the presence of a person as athletic as him. Sure, Colton had dreams of being a basketball player back when I knew him, but he was never as tall or as big as Alex.

“In college?” My heart trembled at the word. *We should consider which college you’ll attend in England. Your brothers are going to Cambridge, but you can go wherever you wish. I hear Scotland’s beautiful, sweetie.* “You went to college?”

“Why do you sound so surprised?” Alex drew his eyebrows together, scrunching up his face. “I was valedictorian in high school, and I graduated top...”

I blushed, embarrassed I’d offended him. “I always wanted to go to college, but then... My mother died, and I never actually did. My brothers managed to go... I like hearing college stories. It makes me feel all fuzzy inside.”

“I hated my college experience,” Alex confessed. He adjusted the sleeves of his hoodie. Indianapolis was written on it in capital letters.

Immediately shaken, I asked, “Why?”

“I could’ve left earlier to play in the league, but my dad insisted I finish my degree.” He sighed, adjusting the watch on his wrist. “It felt like I was wasting time. I felt anxious about my missed opportunity. When I graduated and got drafted, I felt like an outsider. I worried too much. It took me a season or two, but I found my footing. I still worry it’s all going to fade.”

“You don’t seem like it,” I commented. Alex’s warm smile, his confident physique, and his calm voice spoke a different language.

“I’ve been having conversations with PR since my late teens. I know what people want to hear,” he told me, smirking at me. “I’ve been preparing all my life.”

I took a moment to understand what was happening. Exhaling, I confessed, “I’ve never just talked to somebody

like... A man. I don't usually do this. People listen to what I say, and then they leave. I haven't had a normal conversation with a stranger in years."

"Tell me all about your virginity then. Let's loosen up." He rose from the sofa, and my gaze followed his body into the kitchen. "There are snacks here. Do you want some?"

"I guess?" I responded.

Alex returned to the sofa with a bowl of chips. I stared at his arms as he handed it to me. I thought back to the last time I'd washed my hands and how many surfaces I had touched. It all added up in my head, so I picked up a chip. I attempted to hand Alex the bowl, but he politely refused. "I can't. It's not part of my routine. I'm afraid I can't offer you anything better..."

"You got this for me?"

"You need to stop sounding so surprised," Alex said.

"Do you expect something in return?" I clarified.

"For a cheap bag of Cheetos?" The laughter that erupted from his body was electrifying. "You're funny. No, I don't."

Weirded out, I picked up a Cheeto. What a strange name. We ate a lot of American things at home, courtesy of mom. I'd never had a Cheeto before. It tasted like addiction, and I found myself getting my hands dirty.

Alex watched me with fascination in his eyes. "You like them?"

"What is this?" I asked, unable to stop eating the Cheetos. I wanted more. *I'll make you gag on my cock some more. Then you'll start throwing up all that weight you've gained lately. You fat cunt!*

I chuckled to myself.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

"My dad tried to fat shame me," I responded. "But it didn't work out for him. Out of everything he did, the fat-shaming never got to me."

“What got to you?”

I swallowed the remnants of my Cheeto. I cleared my throat. “The fact that he took my virginity, and I don’t remember how it happened.”

Stunned into silence, Alex’s eyes widened.

“I didn’t say this for you to pity me...”

“You know what?” Alex cleared his throat. “Fuck a virginity.”

“What do you mean?”

Alex leaned forward, his elbows posted up on his knees. In his eyes, I saw anger, but he didn’t speak about it. “Virginity is a social construct, and if I had a daughter, I wouldn’t teach her about virginity. I’d teach her to respect herself, how to say no, and how to ignore what other people think of her choices. Girls have so much going on in their lives already. Adding the pressure of sex to becoming a woman is harmful, to say the least. Did I just mansplain virginity?”

I couldn’t help the fact that I started shaking. Placing the bowl of Cheetos on the coffee table in front of me, I moved further away from him. I hoped he’d leave. I was having a moment, reminiscing and torturing myself.

From now on, this is your life. Forget your education. I don’t even know why your bitch of a mother wanted to fill your head with ideas. The only things that get filled up now are your holes. I’ll pump them full of come. When I call this phone, you come running. I don’t care if you’re in the middle of your period. I don’t care if you’re sleeping. You come when I call.

When I found my footing again, I realized Alex had taken a seat next to me. He wasn’t too close, just close enough to hold my hand.

Alex Winters held my hand, rubbing the back of it with his thumb. My eyes followed the movements while my heart tortured itself to death. I hadn’t had a moment to think about what was happening to me all these years.

I didn't have a phone anymore. I wasn't on-call at all times. I could sit on this sofa and do nothing.

"I'm sorry." The sincerity in his tone bothered me.

"Don't ever say that again," I hissed at Alex. It wasn't his fault, and I wouldn't let him carry this burden with me. "This has nothing to do with you. I just met you."

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked.

I shook my head.

His hand made mine look like a miniature. Some of his fingers were taped, red and blue, decorating his long fingers. I frowned, not knowing what that meant. He addressed me in a gentle voice that I didn't want to get used to. "What do you want to do?"

My daughter means the world to me. I won't let her walk around looking like trash, Penelope. No, forget it. If you want to punish her because she doesn't obey you anymore, find another way. My little princess will dress in diamonds if she wants to.

"Nothing," I said. "I want to sit here and do nothing."

The light chuckle on his end made me snap my head in his direction. I memorized the tremble he caused inside of me while he talked.

Kind times never lasted. I cleared my throat, daring to demand one thing I'd always wanted to experience. "Can we lie down and just... Lie there? Is that something you'd ever do?"

If he asked me to have sex with him, I would. I missed doing it. But I could do without right now. I craved intimacy. I feared that I'd never experienced it before.

"Sure." Alex shifted next to me, setting aside the sofa's massive pillows. I observed him as he freed space around me on the sofa, and I questioned whether this was real. I could be in a haze, for all I knew. I was a recovering drug addict. My nose itched, and my brain throbbed with pain at the thought of

not being around my favorite friends. They weren't right for me, but I loved them anyway.

“Have you changed your mind?” Alex asked, and I inhaled sharply, sobering up. “There isn't a lot of space here. It's only meant for me...”

I shook my head. “Lead the way.”

“You take the inside.” He gestured at the spot previously occupied by the massive gray pillows. Trained in following directions, I never actually followed them. For once in my life, I did as told. I lay flat on the comfortable sofa, staring at the plain cream ceiling. It was flawless and boring.

I felt Alex's weight next to me, and I flinched. He noticed, distancing himself. He needed more space than me, so I moved to give him space. When he settled down next to me, I found myself trapped between him and the sofa. As comfortable as this felt before, now, I struggled to breathe.

When would the other shoe drop?

“Do you want me to leave you alone?” Alex asked sincerely.

I swallowed. “Would you?”

“Yes.” Why did it hurt so much? *What happened? You became a woman. That's what happened. That sticky shit on your thighs? That's my come. It dripped out of your pussy after I used you. You were made out of that sticky shit, so you better respect it. No, you don't get to shower today. In fact, I want you to walk around with that sticky shit for a week. Get an infection. I don't give a damn.*

“Please, stay,” I urged him. I took deep breaths, and I inhaled him, memorizing his own brand of scent. There weren't any remnants of an aftershave or a cologne. He didn't smell like anything but himself, and that wasn't because he wasn't freshly showered. In my experience with Fylox so far, nothing carried a scent around him. Nothing. Not even his friends.

One last breath and I placed my head on his chest. My arm wrapped around his torso.

I had never done this before. Was this even a thing? “Is this okay?”

“Yes,” he responded instantly.

“I like this,” I told him, snuggling closer to him. “Please, tell me if I’m crushing you.”

“I may not play football, and I don’t play against the Pistons in their Bad Boys era. But your 150 pounds do nothing to me,” he commented in amusement.

“I think in American terms I weigh 165,” I told him.

“Doesn’t make no difference.”

“Good. Let’s do nothing then,” I announced, shutting my eyes. I could hear his heart, and if I allowed myself to drift, I’d recognize his heartbeat was accelerated. His chest moved with every careful breath that he took.

This was simple.

Why hadn’t I ever done this before?

Right. *Don’t ask questions you don’t want the answers to.*

“Why did you start playing basketball?” I asked after a long silence.

“Sports distracted me when my parents divorced, and my father disappeared from our lives,” he explained, devoid of amusement. “It wasn’t a conscious choice. I looked at my options, and I realized I wasn’t musical. At all. I could’ve played chess; I was good at it, but I couldn’t stand sitting around all the time. I tried my luck at any contact sport I could get my hands on. I went through a lot of phases as a kid. I did some wrestling, but I liked boxing more. When I started growing, I couldn’t do martial arts anymore. I started focusing on basketball, and I found friends there.”

“Was this how you met Fylox?” I tried to envision Fylox in a school, at least the school’s image that I had in my head. I’d never gone to a real school. Everything I knew about schools, my brothers had taught me. They’d told me stories. Somehow, I couldn’t imagine Fylox in such a setting. He was out of place.

“No.”

“How did you meet Fylox?”

“Our parents were friends,” he stated. His voice was gruff now, and I didn’t know what I’d done. Had I offended him again? I didn’t mean to.

“So you grew up together?”

“To some extent.”

I sensed my questions about Fylox annoyed him. I dug into my long line of memories, and I picked something out for him to know. “I never had any friends... Real friends, that is. There was a boy once. Colton was his name. I met him through our parents, too. He played basketball like you, but he left Katantia when I was younger. I never saw him again. Colton Richmond is his name. He wanted to move here to play what you play.”

“I know the name,” Alex revealed, and I felt goosebumps. “He never got into the NBA, I’m afraid. He played in Spain, and he retired a couple of years ago.”

“Do you know every player out there?” I was touching him, but I noticed Alex didn’t return the favor. His hands were far away from me, and I wasn’t sure how to feel about it.

“I wish I did,” he confessed. “It would make my life easier. I only know him because when my team played a summer game in Europe a couple of years ago, Dad mentioned that he grew up on Katantia.”

“Can I ask you another question?”

“Go ahead,” he encouraged me.

“How did you lose your virginity?” I should tread carefully around sex talk with people outside of Katantia. They might sue me for sexual harassment over here for a simple question.

“In college. I felt pressured to do it because all of my peers did it,” he confessed. “I didn’t feel like a man afterward. It was quite the pathetic affair, if I may say so. I was too focused on my game to care about girls back then.”

“You only had sex in college? Alex! What the hell? That’s... Late, isn’t it?” I asked. Why would a guy wait that long? There wasn’t any boy over the age of sixteen without a sexual experience on Katantia.

“I actually wouldn’t have minded waiting for the one.”

“The one?”

“Yeah, the love of my life.”

I leaned over his body to grab the bowl full of Cheetos, grabbing one to stuff my mouth with. While choking on my food, I registered the creak of the outside door. Fylox was back.

“The love of your life?” Fylox appeared at the doorframe, sweaty and sulky. “Are you buttering her up? I’m sure if you asked, she’d spread her legs for you.”

“Actually,” I intervened, clearing my throat. Bloody Cheetos! I rose from my position on Alex’s chest, feeling dizzy. “I would definitely do it. I like sex. Is that so bad? Would you feel better if I was an inexperienced cute girl that’s never seen a dick before?”

“I’d feel better if you choked on the Cheetos and died,” Fylox commented nonchalantly, and I gasped.

“He’s joking,” Alex quickly added, glaring at Fylox. Alex’s hand connected with mine, and I felt compelled to stare at the union of our skin.

“I really am not,” Fylox muttered under his breath.

“Well, you’re lucky we’re not on Katantia. You could be executed for threatening my life over there,” I informed him. My name meant nothing here. My title was meaningless. I was a nobody now. I relied on my friends now more than ever. Were these people even my friends? I removed my hand from Alex’s grasp, and I crossed my arms in front of my chest in frustration.

“There’s something wrong with the outside door if you haven’t noticed. Dad wouldn’t want us to be this careless,” Alex told Fylox. “Can you fix it?”

Fylox scowled, leaving us alone.

“Let’s go back to doing nothing.”

I couldn’t resist the invitation.

CHAPTER 6

KAMILA



A STRONG ARM WAS CURLED AROUND MY SHOULDERS AS I woke up from a night of no dreams.

Opening my eyes, I stretched my neck out of the heavy hold. I lifted my upper body from the sofa only to see Fylox sitting in the corner of the room, watching us. It wasn't my intention to fall asleep in Alex's arms, but who could resist such a handsome man when he suggests watching a funny movie with him just to lighten the mood a little? We fell asleep at some point.

"We didn't touch each other," I blurted out. Fuck, I needed to brush my teeth pronto.

Nonchalantly, Fylox retorted, "Nobody asked."

"Do you always gawk at your best friend when he's sleeping?" I responded.

"I do when he's close to danger."

I raised my eyebrows at the suggestion. "I'm dangerous? That's funny. You two could knock me out in a second. I have no chance. I'm in a foreign country where people shoot at each other freely."

Kamila, it is your job to lie. I know you don't want to. It goes against everything I've ever taught you, but being a princess requires sugarcoating the details. You cannot allow anyone to see you fall. You stand proud. Do you hear me? Don't ever let anyone break your spirit.

Fylox's mirthless laugh made me shiver.

Alex heavy sleeper because our little discussion didn't cause him to lose sleep.

"Get ready. Today, I'm teaching you some basic self-defense skills," Fylox uttered, and I rolled my eyes.

"I don't need self-defense," I stated. I'd never slept next to a man who hadn't touched me before. I didn't want to leave Alex's side. I could lay here and stare at him for a little longer, inspecting the details of his kind nature.

"You need an outlet. You keep shaking and going off at anybody in your way." I could think of an outlet that included both of these men... "Training will take your mind off of things."

"I have guards to protect me. I'm the Princess of Katantia," I reminded him. I'd never in my life watched a human being breathe before. Alex's deep breaths calmed me. The movements of his strong chest were hypnotic.

"You're in my space. Here, you are a princess of nothing. You don't exist. You're a nobody, and you will be treated as such," Fylox commented as if it was a sentence he'd explicitly memorized for me.

"Can you come up with something new to say? All of that is getting tiring. I might not be a princess in this space, but my name..."

Cold, he interrupted me, "Get. Up. I won't repeat it. Alex needs his sleep, and you must come with me."

"Whatever," I responded. I smuggled myself away from Alex's warmth, leaving him in his peaceful sleep. He didn't look quite as joyous when asleep. I wondered where he traveled to in his dreams.

"Who's gawking now?" Fylox asked from the other end of the room as he passed the doorframe to the hallway.

"I like pretty views. Leave me be."

I picked up my pace, following Fylox out of the living room. I got ready for my day, and once again, all the products had no odor to them. Was Fylox allergic to it? There was only

one dominant scent around him, and that was citrus. Occasionally, there were spicy wood elements, but I figured that only happened when he shaved. He hadn't shaved in a couple of days, growing a stealthy five o'clock shadow that contrasted his bleach-blond hair.

The dark roots of his hair were starting to reveal themselves. He should go to the hairdresser's, seriously. Okay, no. His fucking hair was brilliant the way it was, not too long and definitely not short. It was gelled back on top of his head and trimmed on the sides. I bet his hairdo wasn't a result of a hairdresser; he dyed his hair on his own.

He looked like the models from the calendar Aris had gotten me for my thirtieth birthday. Sometimes my youngest brothers liked to tease me. The calendar full of hot ripped, and oiled up guys had been one of his more amusing jokes.

Whatever happens, sweetie, don't ever abandon your brothers. They need your guidance. Be what he'll never be to them. We'll help them find their way. I believe in you.

There was a knock on the bathroom door as I got ready to enter the shower. I let Alex and Fylox take over my thoughts in hopes to get my mom to leave my head alone. I considered opening that door to relieve my body of that ache between my legs.

"Did you use the dye?" Fylox asked from the other side of the door.

"Do I have to?" I hated myself as a brunette. I had brown hair when my father started doing what he did.

"Yes."

"Now?"

"Now. Don't make me tell you again."

"Or else?"

"I'll make Katantia look like a piece of cake."

I snickered at his naivety. I picked up the dye with a frown on my face. "You have no idea what Katantia's like."

“Try me.” That was the last thing he said. I heard his steps heavier than usual as he walked away.



BROWN HAIR, BRUISED LIMBS, AND BATTERED EGOS, THAT WAS my life on my first day outside of Chicago. *You're my little fighter, sweetie. With you by my side, I have nothing to fear.* I'd managed a couple of good responses to Fylox's snappy remarks about my condition. I'd told him I got my muscles from fucking. Well, I didn't use that exact word. I'd pissed him off enough for a day.

Fylox's training in the cellar of the house managed to distract me. My withdrawal symptoms were lessening by the hour, but they never went away completely. *I'll never leave you.* This time around, it was an easier route since I hadn't got my body used to the consumption again. I'd overdosed on my first contact with the drugs. I'd done it somewhat on purpose, but my body didn't really acknowledge that. The only thing I craved was weed, but that wasn't the reason for my increased heart rate or my possible sky-high blood pressure.

My strict trainer gave me an hour of a break to get ready for dinner. I took another shower, washing off the sweat that had become a second skin of mine. I dried off, and I put on some more baggy clothes.

I considered offering to cook for the guys since they were such lovely hosts for me, but when I smelled something heavenly spiced in the air on my way to the kitchen, I wondered who had cooked. Fylox said he didn't cook. I doubted they had food delivery services out here.

Alex addressed me as soon as he saw me enter the kitchen area. Fylox stood by the big fridge, observing his friend as he did his thing by the stove. “There you are. How are you feeling?”

I shrugged exhausted. “I've been better.”

“I made some things to eat. I hope you're not allergic to anything. I have a strict diet I like to keep up.” I nodded,

understanding. You couldn't compare fucking to his sports career, but I fully grasped the concept of having to watch what you ate when your body was your main prize. "The hair looks good on you."

"I like red more. Ripe and ready to be plucked like a cherry," I responded with a sigh, taking a seat at the kitchen island. Alex was amused by my comment, his smile lighting up the room. Fylox just stood there, shooting daggers at me with his eyes. "Do you need any help?"

"We've got it covered," Alex assured me. He gestured at his best friend. "He's on kitchen duty."

"Why can't I help?"

Alex's eyes didn't meet mine. It was like the warmth he usually exerted vanished in the matter of a millisecond. Fylox broke the silence. "You don't clean well enough."

But that was a lie.

They didn't want me around knives unsupervised, so they'd rather do it themselves. Fylox had been watching me intently at his place the other day, twitching with anticipation every time my fingers graced a knife. Also, Fylox did have a thing for cleanliness. Why couldn't we be better friends? I loved my kitchen squeaky clean, too.

Fylox and Alex didn't know the time for suicidal thoughts was over. Yes, I stressed over my family. Yes, I felt like a terrible piece of shit for what I'd done to leave my country behind. I had disappointed an entire country. Yes, I occasionally tempted him to kill me, but that was the dark part of me. Kamila, the redhead, wanted to embrace her brother. Her brothers, plural. She wanted to have a word with Travis. He orchestrated my rescue plan better than I had. I had a target on my back.

But I was finally free. I was in a new type of captivity, but I was free.

Free of him.

You'll never be rid of your family, Kamila. You have to deal with us! Why are you doing this to yourself?



ALEX CAME AND WENT. FYLOX SAID HIS DAD WAS STILL MIA. He was growing worried, but he didn't let me in on his thoughts.

The visits were irregular, but Alex always had a new story to tell and a brand-new sports bra in my size because he knew I needed bras in my exile. When he came here, we gathered in the living room to watch his games. We never watched the news. I didn't know what was happening outside of this house, except for the basketball games Alex won. Fylox and Alex discussed his career, and then Fylox left. Every time, Alex and I watched a light movie. We had a laugh. We fell asleep in each other's arms. I always woke up first, leaving him to sleep.

And then I trained with Fylox. My coordination was good, he always claimed, but I needed to work on my strength.

On some days, he took off his shirt. On those days, I was less focused than usual. His scars were endless, and his pain unconceivable. I couldn't comprehend who did this to his body. I saw burned skin, and I studied his knife scars. It didn't make me want him less. Fylox was toned, less so than Alex, but my trainer was mean as fuck. When that hand of his wrapped around my throat, I actually felt it ten times worse than when Aram's weak little hand grabbed me.

It was a good thing I was allowed to do my own laundry. My panties were in constant need of change. I washed them at night when everyone was asleep. Afterward, they'd smell like citrus, which didn't make it any better, but at least my juices were gone.

"You should come do it out in the sun. Let her get some vitamin D, man. She's growing paler every time I visit," Alex said, announcing his entry to the cellar Fylox and I trained in. Today was one of my trainer's shirtless days. "If you make her any whiter, we'll have a problem."

Yes, Kamila. You should exercise. Why are you staying inside all day? I never told you to wither away in here. I protected you from the mean people of our country. You're supposed to grow into your own now. Go out. Have fun at the beach. Perhaps it's time you brought a boy home. How about Colton? He seems like a sweet boy. Man. How old is he again?

I turned to look at Alex, who leaned against the doorframe, and then I glanced at Fylox, whose eyes were set on me. I blurted out, "I'm fine with some vitamin D. I'm in desperate need of it, actually. Alex is absolutely right."

As we left the dark cellar, Alex chuckled, making me all tingly inside. Fylox followed us upstairs without a single word. I felt his eyes on me, burning every inch of my skin.

An hour later, I was sparring with Fylox in the heat of the sun for the first time in weeks. It did feel nice to take in sunlight, but my sweating made it hard to enjoy it. The garden was unkempt, wild plants and trees looking miserable. It was disrespectful. I made a mental note to start fixing up this garden. I'd be here for a long time. I might as well make something out of it.

Both men in my proximity were shirtless. For a day in late autumn in this part of their country, they were enjoying every bit of sun they could get their hands on. And I stood there, unable to get my hands on anything. Fylox was fast on his feet, predicting my moves before I even made them. He always managed to bruise me somehow while acting out possible scenarios where self-defense skills would come in handy. I never managed to get through to him. I'd never thought of my life as mine to defend, so it was difficult to step into that mindset. Spoiled brats like me never had to vend for themselves. I always had bodyguards or my name to protect me. If one person laid a finger on me that wasn't my father, there'd be hell to pay.

Your body is your temple, sweetie. You don't let anyone harm you. Do you hear me? Promise me that if anyone ever hurts you, you'll tell me. I'm doing all I can to protect you, but you've got to work with the bodyguards and with me.

“Where’s your head at? Get it together,” Fylox ordered, cornering me against one of the trees. He was in close range. I couldn’t punch him. Instead, I found myself inhaling his scent while gazing at the marks on his skin. He was undefeatable, but there was a routine to his training. It took me some days to find out when he did what and for what reason.

Think ahead. You’re the Princess of Katantia, my untouchable baby girl. I love you so much.

“Thank you,” I said. Alex chuckled, listening to our exchange. His eyes were on us while he did crouches or sit-ups or whatever the hell these athletes came up with to keep their bodies in check.

“For what?” Fylox asked, taken aback.

I swallowed. I had a lot of things to thank him for. Thanks to him and the other shirtless guy a couple of feet away, I had imagery to touch myself to. It was the least they could do for cutting me out of civilization. I missed the numbness of drugs, but I missed the excitement of sex more. In Katantia, I could leave the house, go to a Hole Store or a whorehouse, and see some pretty imagery. Maybe get off or have a chat with the girls. I also visited gay gatherings with Travis; they were the most fun. The bottom line is that sex was everywhere at home. I lived, and I breathed it. Here, I was an empty shell that resorted to masturbating to images in my head without anybody to touch or to get touched by. For a Katantian, that was depressing.

Then again, I was grateful for the absence of my father. I discovered new layers of myself in his absence.

We’re always with you, sweetie. Your daddy and I will always love you. No, your daddy loves you. He’s just bad at showing it. Don’t let anyone convince you otherwise. Mommy and Daddy love you. You make us so proud.

“For helping me with everything. You spend all of your time with me, and you don’t ask for anything in return,” I blurted out. “It doesn’t seem like we get along very well, but you see beyond that. I’m grateful for what you guys are doing. Really.”

Fylox took a step back, tilting his head to the side. He studied me as if I was hard to decipher. There wasn't much I wanted, some head, some weed, and less sweating.

"I'm not doing this for you," Fylox responded. I was faintly aware of it, but his words hurt me nonetheless. "Jordan asked me to look out for you, so I am. I'm not doing anything he wouldn't do."

"Yeah, my dad wouldn't stare at her tits like he wants to rub his dick between them," Alex commented from wherever he was in the garden. "And he certainly wouldn't stare at her ass like he wants to fuck it sore."

"So, we're allowed to curse again?" I asked, confused and completely ignoring the essence of what Alex had to say. *It's not proper for a young lady to curse. You set an example for the youth and an entire nation, Kamila. Behave yourself!*

"You know better than to accuse me of those things," Fylox responded to his best friend. The hiss was almost ready to leave his mouth. He was close to frustration, his fist twitching to hit something. I could sense that my jaw would be his fist's victim...

"I know you, Fylox." Alex stepped closer. I heard him come, but I didn't see him. My eyes were blurry and set on Fylox's hands. I patiently awaited the next hurtful thing he'd utter. We spent a lot of time together. I hoped our relationship had improved from that day when I told him about Felicita deciding between her young daughter and me.

"You think so." Fylox's court response was sharp, like the knives that carved his skin.

Alex let out a low chuckle. "I know what you do when you're alone. I don't understand it, but I know where you go in the city when you think nobody's watching. You're my best friend. I lost you once. I don't think I ever found you again. I think you're still looking to find yourself."

"Stop talking," Fylox demanded, raising his voice ever so roughly. My heart pumped loudly and in excitement. He scared me when he got like this, stern and unbent. If only I

could get Alex to spill the details on Fylox, my life would have more juice to it. But Alex was a loyal friend, upholding his friendship first and foremost.

“She’s not your enemy,” Alex told Fylox. “She’s hurting. She’s had a fucked up life.”

Kamila, you have everything you’ve ever wanted! Stop being such a spoiled brat! What’s got into you? I don’t recognize you anymore!

“I’m right here, you know,” I exclaimed, sounding like I was whining, which I technically was. My sobs were slowly emerging from the back of my throat. A hit. At this point, I’d take a physical blow. Anything. I’d let Fylox hit me just to forget the numbing voices in my head.

“Of course, baby.” Alex’s hand wrapped around mine gently, and I felt my knees melt to butter. It was hot outside. I wore clothes that Alex brought me, loose but thick because winter was approaching. I sweated like a motherfucker. My body temperature was acting as if I was on my period 24/7 every day. “Of course, you’re here. I’m trying to make him see you instead of the façade everyone else sees.”

“There’s no façade,” I blurted out. I gestured at myself. *A real princess never shows her true colors.* “This is me. I’m stuck. My father fucked with my head. It’s not a façade. It’s the truth. I don’t deserve your protection. I deserve to be punished for the shit I’ve allowed to happen around me.”

“Watch your language,” Fylox ordered, raising his voice.

“Stop talking to me like I’m some little girl you get to control. I’m not. I might be stuck in the past, but I’m a grown woman. I’m trying to be better. I want to change...” My blood boiled, bubbling beneath the surface of my porcelain skin. I went from upset to uncontrollably sobbing in front of the two. Fylox took more steps to distance himself while Alex wrapped me into a hug. I let it all out against his warm skin. “Why is it so hard to change?”

Alex’s hand grasped the back of my head. His fingers moved rhythmically, soothing me.

“I wish I could go back and make my country better.” My chest heaved. *You are embarrassing your family. I can't believe it. I taught you better! This is the final straw, Kamila. You'll pay for what you've done.* “I wish I could stop being so fucking sentimental all the time. Ever since I left Katantia, I'm always crying or stressing about something.”

“That's normal, baby.” I snuggled my head against his broad chest. It was a new position I'd never tried. Hugs with men other than my brother were a no-go. Hugs were platonic back home.

Alex's hug felt everything but platonic.

“We'll put you back together,” Alex assured me. I couldn't see his face, but I knew his contagious smile was back. It warmed me up. It made me feel at ease. “I'll give you everything you desire.”

“What you said about him?” I cleared my throat, drowning out my mom, who was repeatedly reminding me of the fact that I already had it all. “That goes for me too. I don't know what the fuck he's been through. But I know I'm broken beyond repair. I can't be put together. I'm just here to collect the pieces and keep myself as sane as possible while the world around me crumbles.”

“Then you've never had an Alex Winters or a Fylox Castro in your life, baby.” He kissed the top of my head, and I shuddered. I wasn't used to gestures of kindness. *Stoic. Cold. Prepared. You don't bow to anyone. You don't let anyone close.* “We're resourceful motherfuckers.”

“You know, I don't intend to annoy Fylox. I'm sorry for cursing,” I said, feeling guilty. Another kiss. This time, I didn't flinch. I processed it. I liked it.

“He left. He doesn't like it when I bring up his past.”

The knot in my stomach twisted uncomfortably. My chest felt hollow. “I know we're not the best of friends, but if I could ever find out what the fuck happened to him, I'd finally be able not to walk on eggshells around him.”

“Even if you knew, you’d still be careful.” Alex’s thumb trailed my collarbone. My arms wrapped around him, not wanting this moment to end. “You know how it is. You don’t ever fully leave your past behind.”

“What happened to him? Why can’t we be friends? He’s the only person I see except for you. I’m getting the impression that I’m not a very likable person anymore. I grew up being admired by everyone I knew.” Except for my father. *Your father loves you. He couldn’t be at your birthday today because he had an important meeting on the East’s rising tensions, sweetie. He sends you kisses and hugs. Look at the pretty bracelet that we bought you!*

“Trust me, you’re very likable,” Alex guaranteed.

“For real? Even if I didn’t have a body that you’d like to fuck?”

“See, your confidence is making it exceptionally hard to hate you.” I could hear his smile. I could fucking feel it in my bones, and I needed that positivity. I latched onto it.

“Hard. Hm. Yeah, I understand that language.” I smirked. There was a lot of hardness on his side of this hug. I wouldn’t mind if he put it to use. I would actually get something out of it. I was dying to experience American sex. Was it different? Was it so different that it made my brother fall in love with our new American friend? Would I feel like a changed woman as well? I would love to find out.

“Let’s go inside,” Alex suggested, giving the top of my head one last kiss. It felt intimate, as if he genuinely cared. I wondered if he did or if he was also on his dad’s mission.

“Baby?” I let the word roll out on my tongue, tasting and savoring it.

“Yes, baby. Let’s go inside.” He chuckled, and it sounded like spring, warm, and wholesome. “Do you like it when I call you baby? Is that something the princess approves of?”

“She approves a lot of things. Being called baby is only one of them.” The hug fell apart, but his hand was still wrapped around mine like this was something we were

actually doing. “I’ve never been called baby before. It’s usually slut, whore, or cumdump. That’s how Katantians express admiration.”

“That’s more Fylox’s department,” Alex responded, and my interest was piqued.

“But I thought he didn’t curse?”

“He doesn’t like cursing. That doesn’t mean he doesn’t think about it. Or that he doesn’t use it when he gets his dick wet,” Alex explained. We drifted back inside the house, and it felt much colder than before.

“I like it when you talk dirty. It gives your image spice,” I confessed, blushing like a silly girl. Being around these two had reverted me back to a time of innocence, hiding my thoughts and touching myself under the covers in secret. That was the teenage Kamila back when her momma was still taking her to the beach house to teach her how to swim.

That was Kamila way before she got fucked in the head.

Just breathe, sweetie. I’m so proud of you.



“WAKE UP, BABY. YOU HAD A BAD DREAM.” ALEX’S GENTLE voice caressed my ear. I didn’t recall a bad dream. My heart was worked up, and my skin felt sticky. I was on top of Alex, one of my legs propped up on his. My arm was touching his torso, and my head used his hard chest as a pillow. We always did that every time he came here.

“I don’t remember it.” I didn’t remember the exact images. I had a bad feeling lurking in my stomach, but I didn’t know what I’d dreamed about.

“You were calling for your brother,” Fylox said out of the blue. How long had he been in here? The living room was dark. I couldn’t see anything. I only felt Alex’s heartbeat close to mine.

“Jesus, man.” Alex cursed under his breath, obviously startled his best friend was here with us.

“Why are you awake?” I asked Alex, cuddling into him even further. I liked the simplicity of having his arms around me as we slept. “You usually sleep so deep that it takes an entire orchestra to wake you.”

“He couldn’t sleep.”

“And how do you know?” I asked Fylox. My tone was snappy. I was still offended by his earlier remarks. Basically, I was offended by our entire existence. “Were you gawking again?”

“No,” Fylox countered.

Never leave your brothers behind, Kamila. They are your backbone. You’re theirs. You three will rule our world one day, and your bond has to be strong. If you ruin your relationship, it’s all over.

Alex revealed, “It happened on a night like this.”

I didn’t like the way he said it, as if he were afraid. Alex didn’t show fear. He smiled. That was his superpower, the antidote to anything that was in his way.

“Don’t start,” Fylox urged his best friend.

“I will never forget the feeling.”

“You don’t have to talk about it if it makes him uncomfortable. Please. You’re not the one who’s around him 24/7...” I urged him. Fylox wasn’t ready to reveal the information yet. I was patient in that regard. I knew things wouldn’t be fine anymore if we pushed him.

Fylox was nice to look at. He made me drool. He made Kamila fucking Ruby drool with his looks, but he wasn’t easy to be around. We were both in a bad place. We didn’t need to make it worse.

“I had this feeling that night. I threw up, and I wasn’t that kid. My mom tucked me into bed. She took my temperature. I couldn’t sleep when she left. I stayed there in bed, the Spiderman poster looking down upon me from the wall.”

There was something heavy in the air, and it hovered, threatening to explode. I didn't want to carry that weight. I was too weak. But I still wanted to know what had molded Fylox. *Curiosity will only get you in harm's way, sweetie. Never ask questions you can't stomach the answers to.*

Alex continued, "I heard my mother's muffled cry, and I knew something had happened. I didn't sleep that night. I couldn't sleep for a couple of days, actually. When my parents finally told me, I cried."

"Stop."

"No, this is good for us. We should talk about this. You should let it out," Alex suggested. I clung unto him. Out of Fylox and me, he was the guiding light.

"She doesn't need to know."

"She's been asking what happened to you ever since I met her. She wants to know."

Curt, he replied, "We don't get what we want."

"What happened to you?" I asked, barely a whisper.

"They took me."

"Who? Who hurt you?" I pleaded. Hearing Alex's heartbeat loudly in his chest, I knew the bad times were over. We were alive to tell the story.

"He was abducted when he was eight years old," Alex blurted out.

My head hit the hard back of the sofa as Fylox pushed me off of Alex. We had removed the pillows because it gave us more room to lie in when we slept here, so I hit the hard surface. In the dead of night, they rumbled against each other. I couldn't see their features. I saw only shadows dancing cruelly in the night.

"You fucking hurt her," Alex spat at Fylox. I heard skin clashing. I felt the heavy thuds. One of them landed on the other. My pants were desperate, more out of shock than actual pain. Sure, it stung, but I'd never been shoved like that before. "We said we wouldn't hurt her."

“You asked for it.”

“Let me treat her.” Alex hissed, and I shuddered away from them. “You promised you’d give her a chance.”

Another thud. My entire body was shaking like a floppy fish out of water.

“You can’t fuck me up, Fylox. I have a career. People will ask questions. I can’t show up with...”

“Fuck you.” Fylox’s voice thundered through the room. *You let the men handle it, all right, sweetie? Let’s go back to your room and tuck you into bed like a good little girl.* “Fuck the both of you. I despise the living sight of you. I do. You remind me of everything I hate in this world.”

That was directed at me, and it hurt more than the possibly bloody wound on the back of my head.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered to no one. I didn’t know who had hurt Fylox. *Kamila, if you ever lie to your mother again, I will lock you up in the cellar. I mean it! You’re a disgrace!* Perhaps I should make a run for it, finally, and leave them be. Fylox was only keeping me here as a favor anyway. “I’m sorry...”

Get your shit together, cunt. That’s not how my daughter behaves. Sober the fuck up! I came to my senses, gulping down nothing but my sanity.

Alex shifted out of Fylox’s wrath, reaching for me, but I flinched away. “Baby, stay there. I’m getting you some ice. I’ll turn the lights on to check on your head.”

“Don’t call her baby.” Moments like these, I realized out here, I meant nothing. People only loved me because I was their princess. *Without your crown, you’re a commoner. I can take your crown away at any time, any day. Just say the word, cunt.*

“I told you not to fucking hurt her, yet you did. So I get to call her whatever the fuck I want to call her.”

I ignored them. The voices were causing me a headache. I removed myself from the couch, taking a moment to stabilize my dizzy self. The world was spinning once again, but it

wasn't a result of my withdrawal. There was something sticky on the back of my head.

"It hurts." Holding back a sob, I ran into the coffee table as I tried to leave the living room. There was heavy pounding in my head, making me lose orientation. This wasn't me. Aram fucked with me, sexually and mentally, but he never put his hands on me like that. I wasn't used to this.

With a heavy heart, I dashed out of the living room. My stomach twisted, making me gag. I heard the guys' voices, frustrated and fuming. I didn't look back when I locked myself in my small bathroom. I took a deep breath, leaning against the door. Then I turned to the mirror. *Swallow. There you go. That's a good girl. Did I tell you to move, cunt? Stop crying. We're celebrating your dead mom's birthday in... ten minutes. We don't want your eyes to look all puffy, now, do we? No. You'll laugh, and you'll act like a heartless bitch who's glad that her mom's dead because now you get to take her place. Repeat after me...*

It didn't take long for the knocks to start. I turned on the light, lightly patting down the back of my head. I was losing blood. I'd never had an injury like that before. Fuck. Panic surged through me.

The knocks continued. "Let me help you."

"Go away. I don't need you." But I did.

I inhaled. I exhaled, but the dizziness never wavered. I wanted to lie down. The bed appeared like a safe haven for me, but I didn't want to get it dirty with my blood. I grabbed one of the small cloths that I used to clean my face and pressed it against the wound. I washed these cloths every day, cleansing them of the dirt. I pressed against the wound so that it would stop bleeding. Tears flooded my eyes, but I didn't budge.

"Open the door."

"I don't want to see you."

Showtime, Kamila. Show everyone who owns you. That's right. It's Daddy. Your king.



FORTUNATELY, THE BLEEDING STOPPED. I WASHED THE DRIED blood from my scalp, and then I took a shower, scrubbing my skin until it turned red. Until I almost shed more blood. My eyes were shutting, drifting off into nothingness. I was sleepy as fuck, but my determination helped me to power through it.

When I opened the door to my room with a towel wrapped around my body, I'd done so because I figured the guys had given up and left. They always left. *Where's Colton, sweetie?*

Weston was the only one who stayed, and I had fucking disappointed him. I'd put my life in danger for a pipe dream. What good was it to leave Katantia when I spent two fucking months locked in a house with two guys I barely knew? They fucking hit me. I was furious with them but mostly with myself. I had allowed for this to happen. I had succumbed to the need for closeness.

I still had my hands. Nobody had messed with my pussy. I had a creative mind. If I wanted to get myself off, I would do it on my own. End of story. Fuck these guys for thinking they were allowed to touch me. I gave them way too many freedoms.

Kamila Ruby Wraith was a lot of things. She wasn't a victim of women beaters.

Aren't you the least bit ashamed of yourself? No? Well, I wouldn't be either. Who cares who she is? Her cunt is mine to fuck. There's no God on Katantia. Here, I am God.

I jumped when I reached my bed, and I bumped into a rigid body, sitting there in the dark.

"What can I do to make it better? I'm sorry." It was the first time Fylox sounded remotely human. I could hear the sincerity in his tone.

"Leave me alone and get off of my bed," I demanded coldly, stepping back from the spot where our legs touched. *Lies are everywhere, sweetie. Stay strong. Mommy loves you.*

Fylox obeyed. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw his shadow rise above me. I didn't cower. Men like him didn't make me bow. I had spent years wasting away. I wouldn't allow it any longer.

"I want to tell you what happened to me if you want to hear it."

My heart yearned for what he had to say. I shut my eyes, feeling as if I was drowning. "Get out."

I cleared my throat, adding, "You could've told me without splitting my fucking head open. I'm done training with you. I don't want your hands on me. I don't want to hear your voice either. Whatever feud we have, I'm not ending it. I'd like to leave. I don't care what you do, but I want out of here. And I want to know what's happening back home. It's been too long."

CHAPTER 7

KAMILA



THIS WASN'T THE BEST TIME TO REMODEL A GARDEN. I'D BEEN told we were lucky that it hadn't started snowing yet. Yet, I couldn't stomach the chaos Fylox permitted in the backyard. I'd started cleaning up the leaves. It took me a day or two to get rid of every spare leaf.

Without having to ask for it, Fylox brought me a selection of seeds and soil. I sorted out the crops that would require a lot of communication with Fylox, and I picked the easiest ones. There was a foundation of wood for me to build my little garden.

Dressed in a monstrous brown winter coat, I went from pitchfork to shovel and round again. I let out my frustrations on the soil.

You're the most gorgeous girl I've ever seen in my life.
Shut up, cockroach.

I wasn't used to the cold, so I spent most of my time shivering and shaking. My lip was almost bloody with all my chewing on it.

"Are you finished any time soon? Dinner's ready," Fylox called from the house.

I ignored him. *Listen up, cunt. Get that smirk off of your face. You don't avoid me. When I address you, you come crawling to your daddy.*

Days passed, and I found myself outside from the moment there was sunlight until it faded. Barely eating anything, I let my passion take over. This backyard was nothing like what I

called mine at home, but I worked on it until it resembled something beautiful. It was soil and wood for now, but in a couple of weeks, the fruits of my labor would start showing.

After a week or two of slow and dragged out work, I had nothing left to do. Keeping up with the little unwanted weeds didn't take much time, so I found myself sitting out here in the cold, staring at nothing.

Once again, I had no outlet. Training with Fylox had distracted me for a while. Gardening had derailed my withdrawal symptoms. Doing nothing allowed the voices in my head to celebrate on the grave of my inner peace.

Traitor cunt. You'll pay! I'll sew you up. That'll teach you a lesson!

My shaking had become a constant, a nuisance I couldn't get rid of.

One day, Fylox stopped addressing me altogether. Going through the motions, I existed without paying him any mind. He didn't seem to care, which surprised me. In fact, he almost felt comfortable that way. At night, I sat by my door, eavesdropping on what went on outside.

Nothing. I heard nothing.

I had no idea what went on in Katantia or where Jordan was.

You're a clueless cunt if you think he's going to take pity on you. When the king gives an order, they obey. If I tell him to kill my daughter, he will. If I ask him to fuck my daughter until she's a sobbing bloody mess in my throne room, he will. Cunts like you don't get what they want.

Cunts like me didn't get what they want, no. I received what Aram allowed me to have. It was starting to become clearer every day. Aram had successfully shattered my mind. I left him and my home behind, yet I couldn't free my spirit from him.



“CAN YOU SAY SOMETHING OTHER THAN ‘I’M FINE?’” ALEX urged me. We sat at the dinner table, and I was munching away on my pasta. Alex and Fylox watched me. Fylox understood the new reality of our relationship. The wound on the back of my head had healed. My embarrassment hadn’t vanished just yet. I still felt like shit every time I saw them looking at me like I was a victim.

I was a victim. But I didn’t need them to remind me of the fucking fact when I tried to improve myself.

Alex didn’t understand that I was mad at both of them. “It’s been a month, baby. I brought you everything you need. I got your nice clothes. I got your red hair dye. Everything for you. We’re sorry you got in the middle of our dispute.”

I hadn’t accepted any of his bribes as adorable as they sounded.

“Do I look like I care about your material gifts? I have my own shit in Katantia. I grew up with every fucking wish granted.” Fylox flinched at the curse words. It pained me to see him like this. But I had to stand my ground. “All I wanted was to see my family. I saw them.” And I cried my eyes out that entire night. “I’m good. Let me know when Jordan sends a signal.”

I added, “Now, let me eat in peace, or I’ll just go into my room.”

Without dinner.

I had lost a bit of weight in the past three months that I’d been here. It was the dead winter, and we all wore thick clothes. The house was warm as fuck, hotter than I needed it, but Fylox was trying his best to suck it up to me for having me injured.

The boys didn’t speak for the rest of my dinner. They left me in peace. Their eyes were hard to avoid, so I kept my eyes on my full plate. Their gazes studied me closer than I wanted them to.

After their fight, Alex came to me, and he apologized. When he saw that I didn’t want to talk to him, he left. It took

him nine days to return. Meanwhile, I didn't speak a word to Fylox. I didn't even tell him good morning. I was past the state of pleasantries as he put it.

When Alex came back bearing gifts, he made up with Fylox. They hugged it out. I saw them reconciling from the shadows of the doorway that led to the living room. Then, they started their apology tour on my behalf.

With a heavy heart, I avoided them. I steered away from the sofa.

And now, here we were, a month later, and my grudge hadn't faded.

I played with the idea of Fylox telling me what happened to him. But then I remembered that he made my head bleed because he couldn't control himself over a simple conversation.

We were both damaged. We weren't a good match.

Whenever my mind was freed from the boys, I remembered the images of my brothers on the television. The news on Katantia had simmered down. My absence was being reported by a gossip channel. There were rumors that suspects of treason were being sought after. People whose names I knew were being chased after. The palace wasn't confirming or denying anything concerning my absence. My brothers were depicted going through the motions at work, photographed at social events. They weren't the same. My youngest brother appeared broken, and I knew I was at fault. There was an emptiness in his eyes. Aris was staying strong for him. He had a poised expression that didn't let anyone know his guards were down. They roared business as usual on the outside, but I knew better.

Feathers had been ruffled, and Aram was mixing his cards, ready to set a new deck.

I could feel it coming.



“WHO IS THAT?” ALEX ASKED AFTER A KNOCK ON THE FRONT door left us all cold in our seats.

Fylox gestured for us to stay silent as he quietly pushed back his chair to stand up. His right hand reached the back of his pants, and when he pulled out a gun, I shivered. I didn't know how to use one. I would be lost if they ever tried to shoot me like Jordan shot my guard.

Bowing his head in deep thought, Alex grabbed my hand, and I was tempted to pull away. I ended up holding his hand.

We didn't hear a gunshot. I barely heard the door open or shut.

My heart raced, but I was used to it by now. If we died here or somewhere else, it didn't matter. I was dead back home anyway. Aram was getting my grave ready for me.

When Jordan appeared at the doorframe, my eyes widened. I dropped the fork in my hand. My plate was still half full, but my appetite was suddenly only a secondary problem.

A girl was hiding behind him. I recognized her legs from a mile away. They weren't as long as mine, but they were fuller. They looked gorgeous in the boots I loved to wear in Katantia.

Fuck.

“Mandy?”

CHAPTER 8

KAMILA



MANDY'S EYES GLEAMED AT ME, WELCOMING ME WITH warmth. The rest of her body told an entirely different story. She was paler than ever as if she had been the one locked up in a house with a man who didn't exist.

I locked the door to my bedroom, and, for the first time in my stay here, I wished Fylox hadn't bugged my room.

"How is he?" I asked. My fingers shook in anticipation of news of my family. "Why are you here? How's everything in Katantia?"

Mandy's eyes roamed my room, taking in the clean details with big eyes. Eventually, they landed on me. I cocked my head. "What is it? Do you want something to eat? Talk to me."

A sad smile covered Mandy's face. "I don't know how he is because I haven't spoken to anyone other than my father or Manuel in three months. I left Katantia the day after you disappeared."

Taken aback, even my trembles stopped.

Mandy's shyly looked away, avoiding my fury. She didn't utter another word. I urged her, "Don't leave me hanging. Please. Talk to me."

No other words were spoken. She hid her face behind her hands, crumbling next to me. Her sobs gutted me. I welcomed her into a warm hug, hoping to soothe her, but she cried harder after that.

We sat there until it grew dark. I set Mandy up for a shower, giving her everything she needed, from towels to shampoo. Perhaps a moment alone under the warm spray would help her to feel better.

I stepped out of my room, but I had no idea where to go.

Did I imagine things? *You've always been a creative, sweetie. I'm so proud of you!*

I glanced at my door, and I swallowed. Fuck. Mandy was here.

“... I taught you better than that. I raised you better than that. What were you thinking? You know his state of mind, Alex. I'm disappointed in you.” Jordan's accusatory tone roared through the walls. I snapped out of my daydream, rushing into the living room where I'd heard the noise from.

“I apologize!” Alex blurted out. There wasn't much that upset Alex. His usual lightheartedness had turned into a defensive stare. He fought hard not to burst in front of his father. That was how much he respected him. “I apologize every day.”

“He wasn't the one who shoved me,” I commented, stepping into whatever they were discussing. With Jordan back, I realized how used to Fylox and Alex I was. They didn't deserve a lecture. Or did they? I'd just spent weeks not talking to them...

“Baby, please. Let him talk.” I gazed at them, one after the other. They were all dressed in black, hoodies, and sweatpants with matching Indianapolis logos on them. I noticed Jordan had shaved off his beard. This should have been a cozy get together, not a furious rant.

“And you call her baby? Do you have any idea who she is?” His gruff voice made me shiver. In our short time together three months ago, I never thought he could become this... Angry. Not even the cute beanie with the reindeer on it couldn't soften Jordan's image. He hadn't taken the beanie off, and hours had gone by since he'd first arrived.

“I know her better than the both of you,” Alex told his dad, and I softened at that statement.

“She’s a Katantian princess. She’s nobody’s baby, especially not yours.” My heart broke, and I had to bite back a sob that came out of nowhere. *Baby? Get the fuck out of here with that shit, cunt. I’ll never call you anything but cunt or cumdump. You might have the crowds fooled, but, in this palace, you’re nothing but my doormat. Maybe one day, I’ll get bored of you, so kneel and suck my dick like a good cumdump.* Those were the days. Back when Aram called me a cunt. Back before Aris left for Cambridge to finally finish his studies... Back when I let Aram do what he wanted without consequences.

“I think I’ve heard enough. You should go back to the city. Your game has been lacking these past couple of weeks, and I want you to get back on track. We can’t have any further attention drawn to you. The press is still gossiping about that time you showed up battered to practice. Are you trying to be that type of man? You’re not a part of this world, son. You’ve got a career. I never told you that you could come and go freely. What if somebody followed you? What if Spencer Rawlins knows where this house is?” Jordan’s stoic nature didn’t falter. His scolding made me feel uncomfortable. I didn’t want any issues. Fylox and I found a routine to avoid our problems. We ignored each other. Perhaps that was what they all should do to prevent this sickening tension.

“You taught me everything I know. I pay attention to my surroundings,” Alex argued. He was exasperated, but he didn’t speak up against his father. There was an underlying tone of respect to everything Alex said to Jordan. *Days like these, I want to beat you to a pulp, cunt. On days like these, I wish you weren’t in the spotlight. That would teach you some respect around here! Who do you think you are? Who the fuck do you think you’re dealing with?*

Jordan shook his head. “I don’t think it’s safe here anymore. You’re a star, a future Hall of Famer, Alex. She’s a wanted girl.”

“I’m a woman, last time I checked,” I interjected, needing to say something. My body shook again, and I had to take a seat at the dining table to avoid the curious gazes.

“A wanted woman, then. I will prepare for the next safe house. I won’t tell you where they’ll be, son. It’s for your own protection and theirs,” Jordan announced. I gagged at the idea.

“No.” I played that word back. I saved the intensity of that word in the back of my head so that I could listen to it whenever I wanted to bash Fylox’s head. He was human after all.

“Fylox, this isn’t for you to decide,” Jordan insisted. “We said to lay low, and you’ve had a celebrity come and go like social media or nagging news outlets don’t exist. Mandy’s father owns most of them. Don’t you think he’ll be the first to know if one of his employees senses something strange?”

He addressed Fylox. “As disappointed as I am in my son, you weren’t any better. I expected more from you.”

“She needed both of us here,” Fylox explained. Stoic face and good posture, he was the perfect soldier for Jordan’s nefarious activities.

“Why is Mandy here?” I asked, steering the conversation into scorching waters.

“This meeting is over. Go back into your rooms,” Jordan responded coldly.

“No, tell me why she’s here. She won’t speak to me!” I fumed.

He pointed at the guys. “Be up at seven tomorrow. You drive back to your mansion, and I stay here and deal with the repercussions of your actions.”

I was about to object, but Alex shot me a look that made me stop.



WITH CLOSED EYES, MANDY LAY ON MY BED, PRETENDING TO be asleep. I was sure she'd heard the argument in the living room. A sense of joy came over me when I saw the clothes and towels that I'd given her folded neatly on the cupboard next to the bed.

"What's bothering you? I only want to help," I whispered so low that I was positive I was the only one who heard the words.

"I don't want to talk. I want to forget."

"I know that feeling very well," I assured her. Taking a deep breath, I decided to be the mature woman everyone expected me to be because of my age and what I'd gone through. "Ever since my escape, I started hearing things. Memories of my past. Things I've never thought of before. It's like the dam broke, and whatever's broken free is adamant on poisoning my soul. I hear fights that I used to have with my mom, and I remember the sweet things she used to tell me. Those hurt the most. When I'm feeling the worst, I hear Aram in the early days of... You know, back when he started... raping me."

Her entire body twitched at the word, and I took a break from my heartfelt confession.

"Manuel."

"What did he do?" I asked, clenching my fists.

"My father's men picked me up when I arrived in Chicago a couple of days after you left. It felt like his entire cavalry was there to intimidate me, make me feel small and powerless." Mandy kept staring at my trembling hands, and I didn't know what to do about it. "I've been with him ever since. He locked me up in the room that I grew up in. It's abandoned now, the servants' quarter. My father is so paranoid that he doesn't let his staff sleep on his property anymore..."

I let her collect her thoughts while I processed what she said.

"Manuel joined me in that room."

“Okay.” I found myself speechless because I knew the look on her face. Betrayal and disappointment were old friends of mine. Once upon a time, I’d been the girl that Mandy was right now. Her innocence was gone.

“Manuel used me in that room.” Her voice grew icy, her body turning to stone. “I think... I think Jordan killed him. I’m not sure. I don’t remember how Jordan got me out of there, but I remember Manuel on the floor, bleeding out. I don’t like what I feel right now. I’m satisfied, but I ache. It still hurts, Kamila. It’s been months, and it still hurts.”

“Your stomach?”

“It’s more my abdomen now. The entire area.”

“And it’s not period-related?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Who are these people? Why are they helping us?”

“Travis and Jordan are old friends. I don’t know much more than that. Jordan knew exactly how business was run back when Travis still worked for your father,” I suggested. “Now that we are together, we could leave, you know. We just need to find some money. I don’t know how... There was an altercation between Fylox and Alex. I was caught in the middle of it, and I got injured. I’m still mad about it. My father and your father are looking for us everywhere. We just have to be careful. This is Travis’ doing, and I can’t bear the beating heart in my chest if that piece of shit is the one that saves us.”

“I never heard of a Jordan Winters in the past,” Mandy revealed.

“Things aren’t looking good. Fylox let me watch some television the other day, and I felt like shit afterward. Weston and Aris are going through the motions, but they’re pissed.”

“I miss him,” she blurted out.

I grabbed her hand, and I intertwined our fingers. “What happened between you two?”

“Nothing.” I cocked my head, judging her for keeping secrets from me. She sighed. “Between finding out that

Spencer's not my biological dad, that my mother was murdered by Travis on Spencer's orders, and that Weston wanted to keep me in Katantia to own me, I needed time off. Thinking back to it, I should've stayed in Katantia."

"You can't change what happened," I told her. "We'll get through this. First things first, I'm telling Jordan that we need a doctor for your aches."

"What's going on between you and the two..."

I smirked. She was a curious little kitten, wasn't she? Her pale and hollow state saddened me. "It turns out that wherever I go, I become a captive. The only difference is that when I'm in Katantia, I get dick."

"You've been here for three months, and you haven't had sex with either of these guys?" she whispered in fear that they'd hear her.

I chuckled, but it hurt like hell on the inside. *I'm the only one who gets to fuck that cunt. Me, and all of my friends. You'll never be loved, cunt. I gave you life. I've ruined you. I'll be the one that takes your life. Ugly bitch. I told you to get your hair done. I don't want to see that red shit!*

"But they look at you like..."

"Yeah, they feel guilty," I told her. "Guilty that they're keeping me here. Guilty that Fylox shoved me, even if it was somewhat of an accident."

"I think it's more than that," she contended.

I rolled my lips, shifting on the sheets. "Even if it were, I'm not going down that route with a guy who almost gave me a concussion. I've spent half of my life being fucked into oblivion by a guy I loathed. I don't need to add more to the list of shit Kamila has pulled in her lifetime."

We left it at that.

CHAPTER 9

KAMILA



MANDY WAS SLEEPING ON MY BED, SNORING LIGHTLY. SHE'D cried a bit before she finally fell asleep.

As I stepped out of my bedroom, I acknowledged that Jordan could jump out the next corner and reprimand me for leaving my bedroom in the middle of the night. He'd given us a specific order to go to bed.

I didn't let it faze me.

The house wasn't big. Besides my bedroom, there was one more and a small office space with an inflatable mattress. I knew Fylox was restless at night, and he usually swapped rooms every other night. When I passed by the small office space and the door was wide open, I hurried to Fylox's official bedroom with a heart that was dancing to its own accords.

Gently turning the door handle, I slid through the doorframe. I'd expected Fylox to be awake and Alex to be sleeping as he usually did, heavy and undisturbed by canons blasting, but they were both wide-eyed at my entrance. Their backs against the bed's headboard, they sat upright. Alex had his knees up and his arms across them. Fylox sat there quietly, unmoving.

"You should be sleeping," Fylox addressed me.

"I'm too horny for sleep right now."

Alex's gleamed up the room with his smile, and Fylox rolled his eyes. The bleach-blond guy responded, "I didn't need to know that."

“I’m just honest,” I told them. I approached the bed, sitting down at the edge of Alex’s side. His legs were long and so skinny that it would scare me if he wasn’t this tall. When we watched the games he played, I noticed that most of the players had slender legs. Their training formed their bodies like that. “I also came to apologize.”

“Baby, no.” Alex shifted, giving me a bit of space to sit between them. I was a big girl, and I barely fit between them, but we managed. “We should apologize. You didn’t do anything wrong. You even defended me in front of my father, which is usually a death sentence, but you’re special to him, so he would never hurt you.”

Knowing that Fylox wasn’t a touching type, I scooted closer to Alex. I was still mad, but I figured that I didn’t need to push the issue any further after Jordan’s lecture earlier. Sure, I still felt embarrassed by the victim imagery in Alex and Fylox’s heads, but I also knew that I couldn’t change that if I kept latching on to the past.

Alex put his arm around my shoulder, and I didn’t flinch. I welcomed it.

“I accept your apologies,” I let them know. “I need you to know that I won’t ever allow you to touch me like that ever again. If I start feeling any sort of fear that you’re about to get violent with me, I’ll leave. I don’t care how I’m going to do it and if I’ll cut myself while I’m bashing the windows, but I will leave. And then I’ll tell Jordan to take care of you because he seems very eager to discipline you two. It was hot on his part.”

“You find my father hot?” Alex asked. There was an underlying tremble to his tone.

“I’m Katantian. Anything with a dick is a target,” I replied, feeling funny.

There was a thick silence in the room after my comment.

“I offered your dad sex when he had me in the Chicago safe house, you know,” I revealed. “Sex and blowjobs, the real deal. He should be my type, you know. This mature, wise, old man with his beard and the cute beanie on his head. I could

kneel at his heel and feel worthy. He rejected me, and I feel delighted that he did.”

There was an unfamiliar sound in the room, and it came from Fylox. He let out a low chuckle while Alex was quiet as a nun, possibly scandalized by my statement.

I continued, “Is this what American men do? Deny sex? Is that a thing I should get used to here? All I’ve been getting since I arrived in this godforsaken place is rejection. I’m starting to think people only like me because of my title.”

“You’re funny, but I don’t find what you’re saying funny at all. Don’t be offended if I don’t laugh at your bad jokes,” Fylox said.

I cocked my head to glance at him. “I’m sorry for being mean to you this entire month. I should’ve taken the high road. There are other ways, more productive ones, to discuss an issue. You wanted to open up to me, and I shut you down.”

“I’ve had worse,” Fylox responded, and I believed him.

In a lighter tone, he added, “Alex is currently thinking of you having sex with his dad. You did that.”

“Why, oh, why?” I snuggled into Alex. “You should know I only have eyes for one Winters, and that’s the one who lets me pick movies while he makes his special cheat day pancakes.”

“I get cheat day pancakes. You get the good ones,” Alex reminded me.

I blurted out, “I feel safe with you two. I don’t want things to change.”

More silence followed.

“What’s next? I don’t want you to leave us,” I urged Alex. “We need to convince Jordan that we are good together.”

“Jordan isn’t easily convinced about anything,” Fylox argued.

Alex’s thumb traced my collar bone again. His arms were endless, and his fingers looked like magic. I inhaled, taking in

the citrus that followed Fylox around.

“I have an idea. I thought of it in bed, actually,” I confessed. More awkward silence. “No, I wasn’t touching myself inappropriately.” I’d done that quite often in the past, though. “I would never do that next to Mandy. She’s different.”

“You really need to learn how to filter yourself,” Fylox recommended.

Alex disagreed, “Nah, I like her just the way she is.”

“Anyway.” I continued, “We should get married.”

“What?” both men asked at the same time.

“Your dad mentioned that you have the press’ attention because you’re who you are. Well, I’m a missing Katantian princess. What better way to keep me out of danger than by letting everyone know who I’m with at all times?” It was a far-fetched plan, but it was an option.

“My dad also said Rawlins owns the media, baby,” Alex countered. “Then, there’s the league...”

“But does he own the league? Or social media users? Besides, I’m internationally known. People from all over the world will show interest once I make a comeback.”

“How I ended up with two Kardashians, I’ll never know,” Fylox uttered under his breath.

“What’s a Kardashian?”

Alex’s laugh filled me with joy. “We can’t go public. My father will have thought of that plan already. He’s not an amateur. If he says I need to go, I will. I don’t want to endanger Fylox’s or your life.”

“You don’t need to protect me,” Fylox interfered. “I can do that on my own these days.”

“I know. It feels better when I lie to myself that I can attribute to your safety,” Alex said.

“Fylox.”

“Yes, Kamila.”

“I’ve never heard you say my name.”

“You wanted to say something.”

I rattled myself awake from my swift daydream. “Yes.” I cleared my throat. “If you feel like telling me, I’d like to know what happened to you.”



“SAY SOMETHING.”

I couldn’t.

“Leave her be,” Fylox said.

“She’s been quiet ever since you told her.” Alex’s thumb caressed my forehead. “She’s feverish again.”

“Check her pulse.”

I flinched, stirring away from Alex’s hand on my neck. I already felt like gagging. My stomach was uneasy. If he touched me there some more, I would throw up.

“Should we tell Dad?”

“It’s better if he doesn’t know that I told her.”

“He’ll find out once he sees her like this.”

I inhaled, and they stopped talking like I was a little kid taking its first step.

“I thought we were both in a bad place, but you... I don’t even know what to say,” I blurted out. “I thought I knew how fucked up the world could be.”

“Baby, you grew up in a secluded country. Of course, there are things that you’ve missed about our world,” Alex said. His arm was wrapped around me. His fingers were trailing my upper arm.

“Unfortunately.”

“I want to help you,” I offered. Alex’s closeness soothed my inner turmoil. I needed them both. Fylox was the unknown, sharp and un-fuck-with-able, and Alex played the game by his own rules, treating me with care. “If there’s anything I can do, please, don’t hesitate to tell me. I understand what you’ve been through.”

“Don’t talk about it, and we’ll be fine.”

“I don’t want to be fine,” I insisted. Alex kissed the top of my head, and I felt tingly. I wasn’t wearing a bra. I never did when we weren’t training, and we hadn’t trained in a month. So when my nipples reacted, my thin t-shirt betrayed me.

“I’m fine now. The rift that I caused bothered me, and I wanted everything to go back to normal. If we push it any further, I can’t promise that I’ll remain calm,” Fylox warned me.

“He’s right. One step at a time,” Alex agreed.

Fucking Katantia. I missed it. I missed the freedoms I had. I didn’t miss fucking Aram. I wanted my house back, my plants. I yearned for my brother or brothers. Aris had started to become more tolerable as we got closer to my wedding. I closed my eyes, and I imagined myself on top of the palace, observing the beauty of my country, and I felt close to tears. My brothers and I had so much power, and we wasted it to play Aram’s puppets. I sniveled.

“Why? WHY, ARAM? Why are you doing this? You’re a monster. I can’t believe I ever even paid attention to you! Aren’t you ashamed of yourself? How do you sleep at night?”

“I sleep very well, buried in either your sloppy pussy or some whore’s hole.”

“I’m going to leave you.”

“No, you won’t.”

“I WILL!”

“Over my dead body, bitch. I do what’s best for my country. I don’t have to apologize to you. And you ignored me. I made you notice me, and then I tore the condom up to get

you pregnant. Three fucking times. I'd do it again, but you went and tore out your pussy!"

"I'd sterilize myself all over again!"

"Hey, now. Don't cry," Alex whispered, his thumb trailing my skin. I shook hard, but the boys didn't point it out.

"If we were in Katantia, we could be together, you know," I said, knowing that these two didn't know what to do with my explicit language. Expressing honest thoughts, as sexual as they were, was a taboo practice in this country. I owned my desires. I'd always owned them. My body had been a man's object all my life, but my desires were mine. I knew what I liked and what I despised. Nobody could take that away from me.

"We are together right now," Fylox pointed out.

"Stop it. You're not silly, Fylox. You know what I mean."

He sighed. "Unfortunately, I do."

"I can fuck her while you watch."

"Address me when you're discussing what you want to do with my body. I'm a new and improved version of myself. No more of that pussy shit." *You're weak, cunt. Stitches in your ass for what? Because a dick fucked you? What type of a Katantian are you?*

Fylox rolled his eyes.

"If he's allowed to say a curse word, then I am, too," I uttered in my defense. "Equal rights and all. Isn't that what all of you people preach?"

"Your smart mouth. I don't know what we're going to do with it," Alex responded, and there was something heavy in his voice. The lightness of his smile was gone.

I removed myself from Alex's hold. "I accept the challenge."

"Baby, stop."

"No. I accept the challenge. Anything you can think of putting me through, I'll laugh and express my gratitude at the

end. You don't know what I can endure." *So pathetic. I told you to train your ass. Dumb cunt.*

Alex commented, "You're insane, you know that?"

"I am. That's how they programmed me back home. Isn't that what you like? That's what he liked. I was a blank canvas for him to paint on. But what he did bred ugliness. There was never anything pretty about what we did." I exhaled. "I'm taking it all back, everything he took from me every time we did what we did. If that means I get to go on an adventure, then so be it. The difference between being crazy back home and being crazy with you two is that if at some point things go too far, Alex will snap me out of it because he cares."

"I'll always take care of you, baby." Alex reached out for me, pulling me into a hug.

"And I'll take care of the both of you. I don't know for how long we'll be in this situation, but if I don't exist anymore, then I don't want to exist with you two."

"Are you dizzy?" Alex asked, amused.

"No, not at all," I mumbled. "You know what I meant."



"WHY DOES EVERYTHING SMELL LIKE CITRUS?" I ASKED. OUR voices were lowered because the house was too quiet.

"Perfume or any sort of excessive aroma triggers him. Citrus is one of the few that he can stomach," Alex explained.

Fylox's eyes were closed. He pretended to be asleep, but he was doing a lousy job.

I let my hands wander around Alex's torso, underneath his shirt. We were restless tonight.

"I'll have to leave tomorrow."

"Please, don't," I pleaded.

"My father's right. He rarely gets things like this wrong." His fingers cupped my face. They made my face feel small.

His long fingers lingered on my skin like they were memorizing each crevice and wrinkle. “I have to do what’s right.”

“You can’t leave me here with them. Who’s going to brighten up my day?”

He didn’t respond.

“Touch me.”

“Are you sure?”

I nodded. “If you’re going to leave, at least give me that.”

“What about Fylox?”

“He can watch. I think he feels more comfortable with that.”

Fylox didn’t give us a verbal reaction, but I felt his presence next to me. Chills ran all over me, just thinking that he would see me in my element.

Alex lifted my jaw with his fingers, making me meet his eyes. I straddled him, feeling his hardness touch me where I was most sensitive after months of neglect. We stared at each other for a moment, and the heat inside of me spread, making me breathe heavily. His sea-green eyes reminded me of endlessness. I could get lost in them. When he leaned forward, my heart almost jumped out of my chest. I’d kissed before. That was part of the total package back home. But I’d never kissed a guy like Alex, and it showed when our lips finally met.

He tested the waters. His hand cupped the back of my neck, holding my head in a position that suited him. My hands were on his lower chest, trailing lines. He dived into my mouth with a thirst to quench, but he didn’t own me like I was used to. I could steer this in any direction I wanted.

I caused friction by rocking back and forth on him, his cock growing harder by the second. If he weren’t kissing me, I’d be drooling all over myself.

The turmoil of the past couple of months evaporated. All that mattered was the eager man beneath me. His fingers were

gradually nearing the one spot that yearned the most for them and the silently passive man next to us who made me wet solely by being there.

It was in my blood to be this horny. My family had created Katantia. We were the root of all evil if you asked the Westerners. Most newbie Katantians didn't last more than five years until their sex drive gave up, and they had to start taking sex enhancement pills. Not us. My brothers were doing fine. My father didn't even understand the concept of a blue pill and my pussy... Well, her excitement couldn't be contained.

"This can be my first time," I whispered against his lips. I could start anew.

"Not like this, baby. We can't. I'll touch you, but your first time will be on our terms and not while we're hiding from my father," Alex responded, his free hand on my lower back sliding underneath the loose t-shirt that I wore to sleep. I didn't remember whose it was anymore; I'd taken over their clothing, and I'd made it mine. I wasn't used to dressing down like this, and I felt uncomfortable at first. The boys let me know how little they cared about my appearance. Well, Alex did. During one of our first couch sleepovers, he said something along the lines of, "As long as there's a smile on that face and it's real, I could care a fuck less about what you wear. Besides, you're wearing our clothes. There's nothing hotter than you wearing our clothes."

"I want to fuck you. Today. Tomorrow. Whenever I feel like it. I want your cock inside of me. Is that so bad?" I asked. I had a distinct feeling that this was our goodbye, and it made me feel all sorts of lightheaded. If I had to seduce him into fucking me, I would.

My words caused a much-needed reaction. He grabbed hold of my hips, shifting us so that he was on top. His hands roamed all over me as he possessed my dirty mouth. My hands drifted to his back, digging my nails in. I didn't dig deep because I knew that his body was his temple in his career, and he was always around prying eyes. There was no need to draw more attention to him, as Jordan claimed.

I lifted my upper body so that I could yank my shirt off. I didn't wear a bra, obviously. In my new situation, I barely brushed my awkward brown hair. Alex's gaze absorbed my tits, taking me in like a man starved. He dived in. While he squeezed my flesh, I helped myself by rocking against his hardness.

When his teeth tantalizingly bit down on one of my nipples, I had to cover my mouth to muffle my scream.

Fuck, I'd missed this. I was ready. What the fuck did I have to do to get him between my legs? He was hard for me. Erections didn't lie, in my presence at least.

"You like that?" he asked, hovering above my skin like a magician ready to cast his next spell. I could feel his breath tingling me. My legs were wrapped around him, brushing us against one another.

I nodded. "You can do it again if you like."

"Ever so polite."

"Anything to get you to fuck me."

"Not happening, baby. Stop teasing." He shook his head, kneading my breasts with his hands. I could barely breathe out of excitement. I let out a groan, merely showing my frustration. "Take off your pants for me. Play with yourself."

"I want you to play with me," I pouted.

"Play with yourself," he insisted, sending a shiver down my spine. I reveled in being told what to do when in bed.

I slid out of my sweats in no time. My panties almost ripped in two when I tore them off my skin.

"Who gave you a razor?" Alex asked the moment his eyes took in my bare pussy.

"What sort of question is that?"

"A question I expect an answer to."

"Nobody," I responded in all honesty. His aggravated tone was coated in worry, and it made me so fucking hot for him. "I got a laser treatment back home."

“Fylox?”

I gasped.

“She’s telling the truth.” If Alex had me dripping before, Fylox’s nonchalant voice had me losing it.

“Go ahead then,” Alex said, sending tremors directly to my core. “Touch that pretty pussy of yours.”

I wasn’t a stranger to displays of my intimate areas. However, there was something different with these two in the room. They weren’t behaving like Katantian men would. They involved me too much in whatever it was we were doing. Restraint wasn’t something I was used to. My kind only showed restraint when dealing with foreigners. Mandy had told me that Weston took it slow with her before the whole ownership fiasco.

Like I had a shy bone in my body, I slowly guided my hand down my skin. Reaching my pussy, I realized that I was even wetter than I felt. I rubbed myself, watching Alex as he observed my hand.

I wondered if Fylox was actually present or if he had shut down. When I cocked my head to find out, he wasn’t looking at us.

That frustrated me. Here I was, naked and spread at their pleasure, and half of the receiving parties weren’t even looking at their present.

“You want him to see you, baby?” Alex asked, having noticed my head move. I gave him a nod. “Then make yourself come for us.”

I bit my lip, moaning in frustration. I explored my wetness, rubbing my clit. My body writhed when he put his hands on my knees. It was as much as he was willing to give me right now, and it fired me up when his thumbs started massaging me.

I came a couple of moments later as if it was the easiest thing in the world for me.

Actually, it was.

I wasn't prepared for Alex's mouth on my pussy. I gasped when he dived in. His warm tongue lapped at me, grazing every aspect of my wetness. My own hands were on my tits, squeezing and kneading. I rolled my nipples, chasing another orgasm that his tongue had expertly driven me right into. His fingers joined in. Long and not mild at all, he thrust two of them inside of my willing orifice.

It wasn't enough. I wanted more.

"More."

He added another finger with a smirk on his face that he soon hid behind my pussy. He nibbled and sucked on the tender flesh expertly. He almost made me forget how much I wanted to be fucked by his dick.

When I felt the mattress shift, my heartbeat raced in ecstasy. Fylox was here with us, passive but present. I pressed myself against Alex, and he obliged, giving me even more of that tongue of his. His free hand spread my body open for him. When the thumb of that free hand teased the bundle of nerves of my other hole, I lost control of myself.

I came for Alex. He nibbled on me as the aftershocks referred me into a state of rapture.

When he eventually removed his fingers and his mouth from my folds, he slapped my pussy. I would've done anything for him to fuck me right then and there. I didn't care if ten Jordans were in this house, ready to tear us apart.

"You'll sleep here tonight," Alex said.

I nodded.

"Between us."

I nodded again. It was a hard winter out there, but this house was warm. These boys never let me feel the cold.

"Naked."

"Gladly."

I was about to beg him to stay, but then I remembered who I was, and I sucked it up. There would be no more begging

after what we'd done tonight. If he had to leave, he should. There were more important things than sex out here in this part of the world.

I didn't have the energy to take a shower and wash him off of me just yet. We jumped under the warm covers, and I reached for his cock. But Alex wasn't having it. "Don't. Not today. I'm already restraining myself to the best of my abilities. Don't test me."

I accepted his plea. He sounded like he was in pain, and that thought comforted me, as strange as that sounded.

I was about to shift so that my back was to Alex's front when hands gripped me. Hands that had never grabbed me like this before. These hands tugged me away from Alex and into another universe. My skin blushed, but it was dark in this room. I doubted that they could see how much they affected me. One of his hands intertwined with mine and my mind almost exploded. He pulled those hands close to my chest, where he could feel my irrational heartbeat as he pressed me against his firm body.

"Good night, baby."

"I'll miss you so much." I had it in me to cry, but I didn't want to. I didn't want his last image of me being the tears on my face and the sobs that filled the room. I stayed quiet in Fylox's arms.

"Take care of her for me." He added, "And don't hurt her."

Fylox didn't give his best friend a response, but he gave me a physical one. If it was even possible, he pulled me even closer against him. I bit my lip, thinking of the hardness that pressed on me from behind.

Sleep in your expensive sheets. Do your coke or whatever it is that you snort up your nose. Dress up in those heels and tiny dresses, show off to your kingdom. But when I call, you come. When I call, you crawl to me. This cunt is mine. I made you. I've branded you. You'll never escape me. I'll get rid of you when I see fit, and, for the foreseeable future, you're to be mine and mine alone.

CHAPTER 10

MANDY



SUPPOSE THINGS HAD GONE ACCORDING TO JORDAN'S INITIAL plan. We'd still be holed up in the Indianapolis safe house on the outskirts of town, far out of civilization's reach.

But we weren't.

And it was my fault.

There had always been something wrong with me. After being screened for the first time in my life, I still didn't have any closure about what was wrong. My appointment with the doctor happened in the dark, in secret. In the after-hours, I was probed and touched in my most intimate areas.

Kamila held me throughout the tears. I cried; I knew that it was a doctor touching me. He had an oath to uphold. But that oath didn't help my tremors. It wasn't easy to trust after three months of gut-wrenching treachery.

The doctor refused to give us information on the day of my examination.

It was that bad.

After the doctor's appointment, Jordan removed us from the safe house. He drove us to Alex's mansion, firing all of his staff as a result. As a replacement, he filled up the yard with men who mirrored Fylox. Coldblooded soldiers that had seemingly come out of nowhere.

It was a drastic measure on his part. There was no plan behind it, initially. It felt like he worked on the details as we went. And we all hung on his lips.

I couldn't help but see a savior in Jordan. He was this unyielding presence in my life now, confident and commanding. Jordan could be mean and cold, but when he saw me weep in Kamila's arms, he left us alone. He brought me food that Kamila cooked in Alex's massive kitchen. I heard her music in my room under the covers, and she was in a kitchen that was three minutes away from me on foot. I could feel Jordan roam the hallway that led to my room.

Kamila didn't grasp the severity of my situation. Or she was just trying to lighten the ever-ruined mood. For her, the neglect I'd suffered under my father seemed... normal. Sure, she was upset that my lady parts hadn't been adequately protected. That was one thing that shocked her. But other than that? After enduring a rapist father, what would break Kamila?

Meanwhile, the rest of the household kept up with my sentiments.

Not even Alex smiled much these days, and it was tough to stomach that.

I didn't leave my allocated room much. I remained underneath my covers, scooped up with a book or two. Not that I could focus on reading. My body hadn't stopped hurting even after the doctor's appointment.

Days had passed, and we still hadn't heard back. And that meant bad news.

I was absolutely positive about that.

There was a light knock on my door. "May I come in?"

"Of course," I responded, but, in all honesty, I preferred my solitude.

Kamila slid through the doorframe easily. She closed the door behind her. She tiptoed her way to my bed as if the walls would tell on her being in my room. "How are you today?"

I shrugged.

"Would you like some pancakes? Alex made them earlier. He had to leave for work early, but a pile of pancakes was waiting for us when I woke up. Do you want some peanut

butter to go with it? Ice cream? Alex only has basic flavors like vanilla, but I'm sure I can work something out for you..."

"I'm scared," I blurted out, and my body started shaking all over. Kamila moved fast, pulling me into her welcoming hug. "What is wrong with me?"

Jordan came into the room. I was absolutely sure he was watching us from somewhere. He dressed like a shadow of the night, and he would be intimidating under different circumstances. But he wasn't to me.

He'd been the first face I'd seen after waking up in my new reality less than a week ago.

In a short amount of time, he'd done more for me than anyone had ever done before.

"Ladies."

"Could you leave us alone, please?" Kamila quickly addressed him, and I sniffled in her embrace.

"I just wanted to let you know we're target practicing outside. It's a nice day, and it would go to waste if you two stayed curled up in here." He offered this without any conditions. Stepping back, he gave us a curt nod before touching the door handle to make his way out.

"Okay," I dared to say.

"What?" Kamila asked.

"Let's go shoot some guns."

Kamila murmured something into my hair that I couldn't understand. Her hug got tighter and more urgent. Jordan watched our exchange patiently. Once we were ready to leave, he commented, "I didn't think you'd actually come out today. Is it the guns or the weather?"

"Guns. I haven't touched one in ages," I revealed.

Kamila gasped.

"What do you know about guns, Mandy?" Jordan asked with a playful smile.

I shrugged. “You’ll find out soon.”



“BUT I’VE NEVER EVEN TOUCHED A GUN. WHY DO I NEED TO learn how to shoot it? We don’t have that sort of stuff available for the public in Katantia,” Kamila argued, her hands crossed in front of her chest. Jordan brought us men’s winter coats, and we both looked hideous in the oversize fabric. But it kept us warm.

“Are you intending on returning to Katantia?” Jordan asked.

Kamila hesitated, but she shook her head.

“Then you need to know how to use a gun.”

“The next thing you know, you’ll be teaching us how to dispose of a body,” Kamila retorted, scowling.

“All in good time,” Jordan murmured as he reached for the firearms he intended for us. Fylox returned from the other side of the backyard, jogging it out. Kamila was staring at him, and if *I* noticed, Jordan wasn’t far behind.

Fylox had set up our targets fifteen yards away from where we were standing.

“Who taught you?” Jordan asked nonchalantly while sorting the firearms and checking that everything was safe for us to use. I watched as his fingers worked meticulously. Fylox joined him.

“One of the bodyguards. He took pity on me.” Fylox made a sound that sounded awfully like a snort, and I frowned. Kamila stared at Fylox as if the rest of us weren’t here, and it gave me hope that she could move on from Katantia.

“Which bodyguard?” Jordan inquired while counting the magazines of the firearms. “How old were you?”

“I never knew his name. He didn’t tell me. He had this massive scar on the side of his left arm. I remember him being part of my mother’s detail back when she was alive. He started

teaching me how to use one after I turned fourteen. Spencer had just started traveling to the middle east for longer periods, so there was nobody home to supervise me. He might have been my biological father,” I revealed, hugging myself for an ounce of warmth.

“Are you cold?” Jordan asked, and I flinched at the question. The coat he’d given me provided me with kept me warm. It was the memory that left me cold.

I shook my head.

“Words.”

“No, I’m not cold,” I responded, rolling my eyes. Jordan didn’t scold me for my behavior. Instead, he adjusted the sleeves of his black hoodie. Yes, while Kamila and I wore men’s winter coats, the actual men were out here in hoodies. They didn’t even seem affected by the cold.

“While we wait for the results of your examination, Fylox and I can teach you new things. Let’s start with firearms. It’s the first thing Kamila should experience as a tourist of our land, isn’t it?” Jordan commented, and I wasn’t sure if he was sarcastic. His face wasn’t that easy to decipher. “We can also continue Fylox’s workouts. We’ll be careful not to cause Mandy any further pain, of course.”

Pointing it downward, he handed me a handgun and magazine separately. “This is a Glock 19. Show me what you can do with it.”

“How do you know these sort of things?” Kamila asked from behind me.

“I had a good teacher,” I responded, feeling lonely amid a crew that cared so much for me. I inserted the magazine carefully, waiting for the click. When it came, I undid the safety. I pulled the slide back, aiming at the paper target Fylox had set up. Then I pressed the trigger.

I hadn’t done this in a while, practicing shots. In a way, it felt freeing. I had forgotten parts of myself in my time with Manuel. The bodyguard I used to train with disappeared after I turned fifteen, and I never touched a gun again until now.

Jordan explained things to Kamila, who had tons of questions about guns, safety, and their use. I didn't listen. I took a couple of shots. I emptied the magazine, wasting the ammunition almost. I couldn't stop. It felt good to have my hands on a firearm. It gave me a false sense of security. Guns didn't help in the fight against my father. He had thousands of them. His men were trained and bought to serve their one and only.

"She's good," Fylox commented when I handed him the handgun and the empty magazine.

"I didn't know you could do that!" Kamila exclaimed. Her fingers were trembling, but it wasn't because she felt cold. "That was scary but impressive."

"Now it's your turn," Jordan told her, and she let out a sound that resembled a squeal.

Her posture was perfect. She looked like the princess that she was even without the expensive clothing or elaborate makeup that she usually wore in public back in Katantia. She'd looked more sophisticated with her chocolate hair. Shooting guns and self-defense training weren't her first choice of after-work activities. She adapted to the self-defense training quite quickly. Still, I assumed that she only did that because Fylox got to touch her body all the time in a non-sexual way, of course, but Katantians... They were a different breed of people.

I'd grown up around weapons of all kinds. My father didn't touch them, but everyone around him did. Every single bodyguard carried concealed weapons. The only thing my father did was wear a bulletproof vest when people started protesting against his companies' policies. Every car he drove in was close to indestructible. The mansion and his private offices were regularly checked for bombs and all that good stuff.

Therefore, firearms didn't intimidate me.

Kamila, on the other hand? She didn't even want to touch one.

“You can protect me. I don’t have to do this,” Kamila repeatedly pleaded. It was a rare occasion to see her beg for anything. I observed her as her gaze fixated on Fylox, trying to convince the guy to give her a free pass.

He wasn’t having it.

“We won’t always be around,” Fylox said. Kamila let out an audible gasp, covering her mouth with her hand. She had a tendency to be dramatic and overtly honest. That was what I admired about her. She wasn’t ashamed of the things that made her unique.

Kamila urged him, “Don’t even say that.”

“Stop flirting with him, and do as he shows you,” Jordan ordered. He adjusted the beanie on his head. It had the logo of his son’s team in bright yellow letters on it. I’d noticed that he touched it way too often, and it wasn’t a sign of anxiety. He did it so that his hands had something to do while the rest of us wasted his precious time. “From now on, you two ladies get a new pet. Ammunition and aim. You’ll take it with you everywhere, and you’ll be very careful with the power it grants you.”

“I don’t want that power. I just want to be me. I have enough power already,” Kamila argued. Her arms were still crossed in front of her chest.

“Where’s that power that you have?” Jordan asked.

“What do you mean?” Kamila responded, swallowing.

“Show me the power you so proudly possess,” Jordan challenged her, and Kamila was on the verge of tears. The man never played around. After the initial days of getting to know one another, he showed his real face. It was one that demanded and received respect. He didn’t have any patience left for foolish behavior.

“Enough,” Fylox intervened, placing a hand on Kamila’s shoulder. She twitched in surprise. Not taking any shit, Jordan glared at Fylox. “I think you two should go inside. I’ll get her to do it.”

“Are you sure, Fylox?” Jordan asked. There was agitation in that voice, but he kept it on a leash.

Fylox nodded.

“Come with me, Mandy. It seems we’re not needed anymore,” Jordan said.

A moment later, we were back in the house. Fylox was using silencers, but I could still hear him shoot. Kamila’s squeals were so loud that they were audible inside the house, too. The neighbors wouldn’t hear a sound because they were miles away; Alex’s property was enormous.

Jordan sighed, disappointedly so. “She’s been with us for almost four months now. You’ve been here for almost one, plus the three months you spent back at home. We all need something to keep us busy. She needs to push her boundaries everywhere, not just inside of the bedroom.”

“That’s just how she is, though,” I responded, defending Kamila. “That’s how they grow up. That’s all they know in Katantia. Sex is their weapon for pleasure, humiliation, and power.”

“That sure isn’t the case over here. So she needs to learn that or go back from where she came from,” Jordan uttered. He reached the doorframe to the hallway. He turned to face me. More shots sounded from outside. “I know you’re having difficulties adjusting back to life in the States. That brother of hers messed up with you. Don’t look at me like that. Travis told me everything I needed to know. Plus, you cry yourself to sleep every night. I can hear you two chirping around about him. But you should know it’ll be okay for you, too. We’re all working together to get you, ladies, somewhere safe so that you can live without fear of being snatched away by your dads.”

“What about...” I couldn’t even utter the words.

“Whatever it is, we’ll get you back in shape,” Jordan stated, and there was no room for doubts in his voice. “You’ll be safe and healthy in no time.”

I nodded, acknowledging his statement. But I knew that there wasn't any place on this earth that we were safe in. My father had too much power. He was hiding in the shadows, for now, allowing me to play this little fantasy of freedom out.

But he was out there, lurking.

The same went with Aram.

They were biding their time.

And when they would decide that it was over, our adventure would reach its end.

CHAPTER II

KAMILA



FYLOX TOLD ME WHERE TO LOOK FOR THE PAINKILLERS THAT Mandy needed for the pain in her body, but I couldn't find them. I found myself in his private bathroom, digging around in every cupboard. The last time I had searched his things, I found syringes and dope.

Maybe I was taking my time for that exact reason. Perhaps I could find some and shoot myself out of this boredom.

A week had passed since Mandy's examination. Life went on, but now, we were locked up in Alex's mansion. He went to work every day. He was busy flying around the country to win his games.

I exhaled in frustration as I rummaged through the bathroom again. Nothing was more exciting than being horny all the time and not being able to do anything about it. Fylox's hands were all over me when we spent time together training. I studied him closely. He never touched Mandy the way he touched me. But he never went further with me either. He always left me hanging, as if he was playing a game of who's going to outlast who.

Upon my second browse of the cupboards, I found the painkillers and hurried to get them to Mandy. Her suffering had only intensified in the last few days, and I was ready to call her doctor myself and demand an explanation. What was taking so long?

Jordan and Fylox kept quiet on the subject, not wanting to upset us. But their silence fucked me up. When I tucked

Mandy into her bed at night, I stayed in her room to watch over her because she was so fragile. I was sure that Jordan spent most of his time guarding the hallway like his men guarded the mansion's gates.

Yes, we were surrounded by men in black. Jordan's soldiers with guns had appeared out of nowhere when we first arrived here. I shivered every time I saw them. They were replicas of Jordan. Broody, athletic and dangerous. They could crush you with their fingertips.

It took me some time to reach Mandy's room because this fucking mansion was bigger than all Katantia put together. How did Alex have this type of money?

"Here it is," I told Mandy, handing her the package of medication. She pushed aside her bedcovers, revealing her pale self to me. She held a concealed bottle of water in her hand.

Everything was neatly placed where it should be. There wasn't an inch of disorder surrounding us. Other than my Mandy's health issues, of course.

"I'm sorry," Mandy apologized, letting out a sob. She worked hard to keep her sadness under wraps in front of the guys. Every night, we talked about our families, and every time, tears formed in her eyes. We did that in private. It didn't help that I was here with her, a constant reminder of what shouldn't have been.

"Don't apologize. Ever. You're not feeling well," I insisted. I sat down on the edge of her soft bed. Alex pampered us; I'd give him that. I still wanted him here more than I wanted luxuries.

Mandy gulped down the water after placing the little pill on the back of her tongue.

When your mother died, were you out fucking that basketball player? Cunt, you should've seen the body of his sister. Oh, I mean when she was alive. She was a more fuckable broad than you. No wonder the mayor did her the way he did. I'd have done the same if she'd been on my radar.

Do you think I care that she killed herself? I only care because it fucks up my image! If you ever attempt to do that to yourself, I'll make your life a living hell.

“So while you were home...” I doubted that Mandy thought of Chicago as her home. “Your father never once bothered to get you under treatment?”

“My father doesn’t care. He’s got all the money in the world, but I barely ever received any health care,” Mandy said. She coughed for a bit, drinking some more water to calm down. “I... I should’ve gone on my own. There are so many ways to get things checked these days...”

“You did the best you could,” I assured her, but deep inside, I was aware that my bullshitting wasn’t helping. I pulled my knees up from the floor and close to my chest. “What do you want me to cook tomorrow?”

I shifted on her bed, reaching for her hand. I gave it a good squeeze when she didn’t respond. “I’m here for you.”

My words made her giggle softly. “You don’t have to be so mommy with me. Go have fun with Fylox.”

I sighed exasperatedly. “Fun and Fylox? That’s not happening anytime soon.”

After the laughter dried up, I left Mandy in her bed with her eyes closed, hopefully drifting away to dream of something beautiful.



EXPLORING THE MANSION BECAME EXERCISE. MOST OF THE rooms were empty of life, of any sign of Alex. Those that were full of his character gave me life. I breathed in his scent in his walk-in closet, gawking at all of his sneakers and other shoes. I ventured further into the closet, finding his outfits for formal events. He had a doll in his size, dressed up in a tux in a glass box. The tag on the clothing items was a famous brand. This was his way of preserving the clothes.

After spending a week in Alex's home, I realized that I wasn't even considered wealthy. Yes, we lived near the palace, but this place right here? That was a different ball game, as Alex himself would say.

I looked for Jordan and Fylox all over the house, the cellar, and their usual hiding spots in the office. They were nowhere to be found. Had they left us? Suddenly, my heart grew heavy, and my head spun. I swallowed. I took a deep breath. I heard movements from the backyard. They were light, and an average person wouldn't have heard them. But I just spent months with two paranoid men training me to pay attention to details. Of course, I started hearing shit.

I exploded, stomping out of the house. They were having a party without us. Pouting, I crossed my arms in front of my chest. I stepped in front of them as they sat there on the patio with beers in hand.

"So we're allowed alcohol now?" I blurted out. "Thanks for the invite."

"Join us, princess," Jordan suggested. He stood up from his seat, offering it to me. He strolled towards the house.

"Is he drunk?" I asked Fylox, curiously watching Jordan stumble away.

"I don't think he's capable of being drunk," he responded. His bleach blond hair was brand-new today. He never left the house, but he always managed to get his hair done the way he liked it. I barely saw the dark roots now. I preferred it when there were dark roots on his head. This bleach-blond look was giving me pixie vibes. Every day, he had it gelled back, although we weren't going anywhere. He had a scissor, a razor, and all the other equipment the men of the house never let me touch tucked away in his bathroom, and he used them on himself. He never had any hair on his face, which didn't help his youthful face. While I wrinkled away, he walked around like a breath of fresh air.

He was that pretty, but I knew what was behind his behavior. He had these mechanisms in his life that kept his mind out of a dark place.

Jordan re-joined us with another chair and one of the winter jackets in hand. He placed it in the middle, where he could safely lecture both of us. Then, he handed me the winter jacket. I thanked him for it as I put it on.

“Why are we drinking?” I asked, hoping that they’d offer me a bottle, too. My eyes wandered over the patio, but I didn’t see any spare bottles. Pity.

“You’re not drinking,” Fylox commented, taking a sip off of his bottle. He had kissable lips that I’d been eyeing for weeks now. It wasn’t just that Alex was gone. I missed him every day.

I was hanging on that one night, the last one. We hadn’t found the time to repeat it.

Neither Fylox nor Alex had fucked me. Something I still regretted. But they’d opened up. Fylox had told me about his past, at least a part of it. Alex had touched me, generously so. I’d slept in their bed, in Fylox’s tight hold. I felt like we could do anything that night.

However, one week later, we were here, at an impasse.

“It’s my sister’s birthday,” Fylox revealed. He didn’t say anything else.

Jordan broke the silence. “Birthdays are strange for us. Somehow, we never manage to be there for one another in our families.”

“Does Maia Callie know what we’re doing?” I asked.

Jordan shook his head. “Luis knows. That’s their dad. I told him what we were doing. He decided it would be safer for his daughter to think Fylox had left the city on one of his evidence of life cleansing trips.”

I nodded. “I still don’t understand why you guys bother with us. We’re just causing you more trouble... I know we keep going back to that subject. Mandy and I keep digging around, hoping that you’ll give us a direct answer.”

“She knows,” Fylox blurted out.

Jordan cocked his head in Fylox's direction. He was an amusing man to me. I found comfort in his presence. So far, he had shown us that he had integrity. What he promised was what he delivered. He lied by omission, but he never lied out front. At first, he micromanaged Mandy and me, but after a week or so, he developed a trust for us that allowed him to take a step back. I had to admit that he never pushed for anything that we couldn't do. He never asked things of us that he'd never do.

"What does she know, Fylox?" he inquired. Under normal circumstances, Fylox would sit upright and address his leader with the utmost respect. Today, he was semi-drunk, though. There was no other bottle here. Did he get drunk from one bottle, or was he having a Jordan cheat day?

"She knows that once upon a time, I was sold around like used furniture. That's what she knows," Fylox spat, gulping down some more beer. "I think you can tell her why we are doing this. It'll end the stupid questions."

Jordan sighed. He didn't look disappointed in anyone but himself. "I guess you're the siren that Travis warned me about."

"A siren?" I asked.

"She's not a siren. She was giving me the cold shoulder for a month after I shoved her. I owed her an explanation for my behavior," Fylox explained. He sat back on the chair, his legs spread wide. It was one of the most disrespectful postures he'd ever taken in front of Jordan. "And she's been pretty cool about it. She never asks any questions about it anymore. She doesn't have that pitiful look in her eyes anymore either. That's what we abused kids have in common."

"Excuse him, he's having a day," Jordan warned me. He shifted in his seat so that he was facing me. He placed the bottle on the floor. "The Castro family had enemies back in the day. Luis, Fylox's father, is a big-time criminal defense lawyer. Ever since... Fylox's father has trimmed down his business, but he still fears for his children's safety. Luis has pissed off a lot of people by playing by his own rules..."

Fylox interrupted him, “I’m not a child anymore. It wouldn’t be nearly as fun for these guys to abduct me. Plus, all these scars make for ugly merchandise. Then again, there’s a kink for everything these days, am I right? You Katantians know that the best.”

I shrunk in my seat, embarrassed at his question.

“Would you keep quiet the one time I’m asking you to?” Jordan asked without looking at him.

Fylox shook his head. “Nah.”

Jordan rolled his eyes. He went on, “It wasn’t a random abduction. They took him knowingly and they made him disappear without a trace. It appeared like a Hollywood plot, pompous and arrogant. Nevertheless, Fylox wasn’t spotted for months. We looked for him for years, and we never found any evidence that he was even still alive. The police couldn’t help us. They wouldn’t help us. So we went our own route.”

The scoff came from Fylox. I was perplexed.

“How did you guys get to know each other?” I asked.

“Fylox’s and Alex’s moms are friends. They sang together in Greece. They toured the States in the nineties... I met Alex’s mom back then, and we married pretty quickly. When the kids were born, they were naturally drawn to each other. Fylox and Alex were always protective of little Maia Callie, and she loved them both so much. When Fylox disappeared, both Alex and Maia Callie needed therapy. They were that close. They sensed that something was wrong even if their parents tried to sugarcoat it.”

“You’re telling the story as if you were there,” Fylox sneered.

“I was there. In the shadows,” Jordan responded, rougher than usual. “I didn’t have a place in my wife’s life in Alex’s very young years. We divorced early. But we’ll get to that in a second.”

Jordan glared at Fylox, urging him to shut the fuck up now.

“I’ve known Travis since I was a kid. He was my neighbor. He had a loving family and a career plan for his life. He was an only child and his family’s pride, but he never felt like he belonged. I grew up in the system, in a neighboring house that my foster parents had inherited. He was always the observant type. He knew every neighbor by name, and he greeted them, chatting with them about their day. He drove us to school when he spotted my sister and me walking to the bus. He secretly looked after us when the foster parents were absent for weeks at a time.”

Fylox crossed his arms in front of his chest, glancing at the yard instead of Jordan. He must have heard this before.

“Long story short, a day before his finals began, his parents got killed in a car crash. A privileged white kid like him couldn’t deal with that, so he sort of lost it for a while. He stayed at the house that neighbored ours, roaming around senselessly. One day, when my foster parents had another big fight over nothing, he grabbed a gun, and he came over, shooting them both. He grabbed my foster sister and me. We went on the run.”

“How old were you?” I asked.

“I was fourteen. She was ten,” Jordan revealed in a sober voice. He exhaled. “She was ten, and she’d been abused ever since she stepped into that house. I never found out until later when I forced the truth out of her. She’d confided in Travis, but she only trusted me with her truth after years had passed.”

He went on, “We were on the run for years until the case closed. There was insufficient evidence. They suspected Travis, but they were unable to prove it. When I turned nineteen, we came to Illinois. That’s where Spencer Rawlins found Travis Cross for himself. He scooped him up from the streets, and he turned him into what he wanted. A killer. An assistant. A thief. Anything he wanted, Spencer received from Travis.”

I inquired, “Where were you guys at the time?”

“Travis hid us from Spencer,” Jordan explained. “We’d become good at hiding our existence from years of being on

the road. He kept us tucked away until he decided to marry my sister the moment she turned eighteen so that she could have a better life than the one she had in hiding. I was told that I was free to do as I pleased.”

“Naturally, I went and got a girl pregnant. A Nigerian Greek one at that. She was on tour with some heavyweight star, passing through Chicago. Months later, she showed up with the baby in her arm. I gave up working odd jobs for little money, and I started helping Travis with his work. That earned me enough money to get the girl a roof over her head. Eventually, we married. She kept singing, but the baby held her back. I wasn’t the most supportive husband. I worked a lot, and I never gave her any time to herself. After a while, we separated. She found a new man, one that had a good name. I seized to exist for the public, going underground.”

“That’s when I pop in,” Fylox commented dryly.

“Yes,” Jordan confirmed. “I returned to my son’s life when his best friend was abducted, and his mother asked me to find the boy. It took me a very long time. I only involved Travis at the end as a last resort. His help around the end of the decade gave us the final push we needed. We found Fylox. We bought him from the last man that had him, and then we got rid of the guy.”

“That’s why we’re so indebted to Travis. He married Felicita, and he saved me,” Fylox uttered nonchalantly. “Wonderful. Simply wonderful.”

“Felicita is your sister?” I asked.

He confirmed it with a nod.

Felicita, make a choice. Should I fuck Valentina or Kamila? Who do you think has the tighter pussy? Who fits my cock better? No, don't be shy now. Stop crying. It won't get you out of here any faster. I hear your little daughter likes to dance? I can set up a pole in my throne room, and she can come by to show me her tricks.

I swallowed. I’d never heard Aram say that, but he might as well have said it. Suddenly, I felt sick. Valentina had been

so young when Aram had made Felicita choose between us...
“I think I should get back inside. I’m sleepy all of a sudden.”

“Of course,” Jordan claimed.

I stood up, and I rushed inside. I yanked the winter jacket from my body, and I hurried to my bedroom. As I turned the doorknob, a cold hand touched my shoulder.

“My bedroom. Now.”

I shuddered. Carefully, I inhaled. I exhaled. My shoulders were tense. My heart felt heavy. Each step I took was filled with uncertainty.

Fylox shut the door behind us. I couldn’t turn to glance at him.

“Undress. You’re sleeping here tonight,” he informed me with an eerie calm tone.

“I’m not...”

“Shut up and do as you’re told,” Fylox demanded.

I’d be lying if I said his commanding voice didn’t turn me on. He wanted me naked? I’d give him nude. I slid out of my clothes, leaving my panties on. Nudity didn’t bother me. He’d have to do much worse than that.

Cunts like you do as told. Ride my dick, just like that. Are you on the pill yet? Better get a shot unless you want to carry around your son and your brother at the same time. It hasn’t been done before, but I like being the first. I enjoy that I’m the only one who’s ever fucked your dirty cunt. I’ll be your last one, too.

Fylox took off his clothes, remaining in his underwear. He settled on his bed, patting the space next to him. I joined him there with my heart beating its way out of my chest.

“You know,” he began. “It’s interesting what Jordan said earlier. He loves his little sister so much. They don’t look alike. They don’t share the same name. But as far as they’re concerned, they’re a family, and families look out for one another.”

I nodded.

“Take your panties off.”

I did as told, discarding them. They were wet.

“If you touch yourself, I’ll punish you for it. I think you won’t like that punishment at all.”

“You don’t know what I like,” I countered, shaking. My nipples were erect. The throbbing between my legs was uncontrollable. I swallowed.

“I know much more than you think.”

I shuddered. If he used that tone on me one more time, I’d touch myself so that he could punish me to an orgasm. I could take anything he dished out. I really could.

Could I? Why did I shake harder than I ever did when Aram put his hands on me?

“Sometimes, I wonder what we’re doing here. We don’t need to babysit two spoiled rich girls,” Fylox spat, and I winced.

“I told you to send me away multiple times..”

“Nah. I like to see you squirm.”

“What are you planning, Fylox?” I inquired heaving. *Take my dick. Do you think you can refuse me? I’ll have that car you love so much towed. You can forget your home. You’ll live in the cellar, right here.*

Fylox exhaled. “You didn’t enjoy the guns as much as Mandy did.”

I shook my head.

“And you’re shaking like I’m about to rape you.”

“How dare you say that,” I scoffed, hating the fact that I was easy to read.

“I think it’s time we lay down some ground rules,” Fylox announced. He cleared his throat, and I flinched at the sound like a pathetic little bitch. “You like being told what to do.”

“No,” I countered.

“You can quit lying to me,” he insisted. I studied his long fingers. He had his fingers crossed on his abs. He almost looked like he was praying, but he didn’t believe in God. Not at all. “Your pride can take a backseat when you’re in my presence.”

“What are you going to do about it, huh? I refuse to take orders from you. We’ve been locked in one space for months now. I can’t... I just need my peace and quiet again,” I told him. All the blinking in the world couldn’t help what was happening right now. Fylox reached for my hand, and he gripped it. His touch was hot, sending bolts to my core.

“You like being told what to do. I like telling people what to do. It’s a coping mechanism,” Fylox explained.

“And?”

There was a light chuckle from his side, and I bobbed my head in his direction to catch a glimpse.

“We’re going to play a game.”

“What’s the price?” I asked.

“There’s no price. We play to silence the demons in our heads,” he replied, and I shuddered. “I know you have them. I can see them talking in your eyes. They tell you how worthless you are. I know the feeling very well.”

“I don’t want to bond with you over such banalities,” I commented, crossing my arms in front of my chest.

“Who says that we’re bonding?” The nonchalant tone of his voice killed me. It wasn’t a joke.

“What are the rules of our game?”

“There are no rules,” he revealed as if it was nothing.

“You people always have rules. Safewords. Come on. I won’t judge,” I teased him.

Fylox shook his head. “No safe words, like Katantia. It’ll make you feel just like home.”

What did Fylox know about my home?

CHAPTER 12

MANDY



THIS COULDN'T BE TRUE. I REFUSED TO BELIEVE WHAT THIS doctor had told us.

Jordan drove while I sat in the seat next to him, sinking into nothingness.

“Are you sure we can rely on them?” I asked. My throat was dry. The feeling of imminent danger had resolved into pure agony. “Maybe they’re trying to trick us into panicking.”

Jordan sighed. “No, they’re not lying.”

What made him so sure? This was my body, my pain. Why did it have to escalate? This was a simple stomachache. Occasionally, I threw up. I fainted. It was nothing special. I wasn't special! I was just another girl.

“You’re sick,” Jordan reminded me of the one thing I didn't want to believe. He took a turn, harsher than expected. I held on to my seat. “And we have to do something about it.”

“But how did this happen? I don't believe it...” I murmured. I knew the truth, but the truth was ugly. I'd rather believe the beautiful lie. Ignorance was the purest bliss.

“You said so yourself. You were barely examined by any doctor while growing up. There's a high possibility that this has been growing inside of you for a while,” Jordan explained.

Words evaded me, but I had to know. “So what do we do now?”

At the gates of Alex's gated community, Jordan rolled down his window, showing his fake ID to the guards. I didn't

speak. I pretended like I wasn't even there, staring ahead. Once we were moving again, Jordan spoke up, "We get more tests. I'm afraid you have to be hospitalized. You will be operated on, and we can't have you traveling back and forth. From what I know from this disease, start familiarizing yourself with the idea that you'll never have your own children."

After that statement, my mouth remained shut. I stared down at myself, and I despised that my body could hold such secrets from me. I despised myself for not doing anything about my pain earlier. I could've prevented this situation if I had just asked Manuel for help...

He wouldn't have listened.

It wasn't my fault. I had been a pawn for others to play in a bigger scheme of things.

"I don't want the operations," I told Jordan as he parked the car in front of Alex's mansion. The men guarding the place were more alert than ever. I caught some of their glances full of pity.

"Do you want to die?" Jordan asked.

I shook my head. "I won't die! I'm twenty. I'll get better. I'm sure there are treatments?"

Stepping out of the car, I missed Jordan's hissed mutters.

Kamila rushed out of the house, jogging in my direction. When she reached me, she pulled me into a warm hug. She didn't know yet. She still thought I was normal.

"What did the doctors say? Is everything okay?" The princess caressed my hair, nurturing me in ways I didn't know I needed.

"No, nothing's okay," Jordan muttered, joining us. His voice cracked. "She has fibroids in her uterus. They've been causing her pain all these months."

I felt Kamila freeze around me. Her warmth was still there, but she was absent. "There must be a mistake."

“There’s no fucking mistake!” Jordan yelled, and we both twitched at his anger. “I need a day to rearrange the plans. This changes everything.”

“What do you mean?” Kamila asked. As if she felt the sob that I held back, she grasped me harder against her body. She let me know she would protect me.

Jordan announced, “We can’t hide anymore, not with her in the hospital. We’re going public.”



“KAMILA’S BEEN DIFFERENT SINCE...WHAT’S HAPPENING TO her?” Jordan asked, readjusting the beanie he wore on his head. The day he asked for had passed. Plans had been made. I was due to arrive at the hospital tomorrow. This was my final day of freedom.

Fylox and Kamila were outside. He was trying to teach her resilience in the cold. She was taking it halfheartedly.

I was inside, stirring a simple pot of water on the stove. I couldn’t concentrate well enough to cook something more elaborate than pasta and a basic tomato sauce. I’d offered to cook today because I was growing tired of the inside of my room.

“Hello?”

I rattled myself out of my daydream. “Sorry. I don’t know what’s happening to her. Why don’t you ask her? She should know.”

“You’ve also noticed it?”

There was no use in lying. Jordan was the type of man who spotted a liar from miles away. “Yes.”

Jordan took a couple of steps, entering the kitchen. He stood very close to me now. I knew that he would never hurt me, but Jordan was also an unpredictable man. He didn’t like secrets in this household.

“So?”

“I don’t know what’s going on. Maybe she had sex with Fylox finally, who knows,” I muttered. Kamila’s coping mechanism was sex.

“That’s not it,” Jordan responded. “They don’t have any condoms. Fylox would never touch another person without a condom.”

“You’re especially familiar with his sex life,” I commented, furrowing my forehead.

Jordan rolled his eyes. “Not like that, kid. He’s a special case. That’s all I’m saying.”

I poured the pasta into the now boiling water. Jordan went on, “Don’t distract me. So, what do you know about Kamila’s sudden career in acting?”

“I have no idea. I swear,” I told him.

“Whatever it is, I’ll find out. I don’t like what’s going on.”

“You always find something that doesn’t please you,” I argued.

“You’re right,” Jordan agreed. “But I’m always right about that, too.”

He stood by the kitchen island, watching me cook. Jordan kept quiet today, but I usually heard him comment on Kamila’s cooking. He had firm opinions everywhere. Nobody complained because whatever Jordan told us to do, it usually worked out.

Today, even the simplest things were a challenge. There was this hot pressure at the back of my head, taking away my stability.

Whatever was wrong with my body, my father had always claimed so. Manuel had made sure that I knew that was what he thought of me. I couldn’t bear any children for him, he’d said. When in reality, he’d been the one with the problem. Perhaps I also contributed to the issue?

Half an hour later, the food was finished. It was my turn to set the table. They were all sitting there, patiently waiting. Dinner was the most exciting event of the day. Kamila kept us

entertained with her dramatic stories about her life while keeping it clean for Fylox. Jordan was obviously uncomfortable with her overt sexuality. Fylox... I couldn't really understand him. He seemed far off.

My hands shook as I served the pasta, but it was fine because they couldn't see. My back was turned to them as I prepared the plates. One after the other, I brought the filled plates to the table. When I carried mine, I almost lost hold of it. Tears threatened to escape my eyes, but I didn't let them.

As always, Jordan said a little something before we started eating. It wasn't a prayer. He wasn't a religious man. He simply expressed his gratitude for one more day of life. When we sat there in silence, listening to him, I was convinced that he could help us out.

Once that moment was over, and Kamila went on about her family, I remembered that our existence was hanging on by a thin thread. Once it was decided to cut it, we would be back in the past.

"... back then, grandma and my mom were the only ones that bothered with us kids. My brothers and I loved them both so much. It was the little things. I was homeschooled for my safety and because my mom didn't want my mind poisoned by the other Katantian kids. But I partied in secret. I'd always been tall. There was a time when I was taller than Aris and Weston if you can imagine that. Katantians have all sorts of kinks, but tall girls were an oddity."

Kamila always finished her dinner first, and then she started talking while everyone else still ate. She went on, "I remember when we went shopping, my mother had the streets emptied for us. She didn't want me to come in contact with Katantians. However, after she died, I found comfort in our citizens. I wasn't in the right state of mind. Aris was doing his own thing, having cut me off. He didn't even visit grandma anymore. Weston was in his own little depressive phase. He barely left his room. So I left the palace, and I wandered in the streets. The people knew me, and they didn't mistreat me. They didn't even touch my hand without asking for permission. They mourned her with me. I can't remember how

many people I cried with back then. It was a lot, and it happened frequently. Aram kept calling me to his office, demanding that I stop making a fool of myself in public. I didn't listen."

Kamila sighed, continuing. "It's my fault. I was an impressionable teenager. I could've done better. When things get tough, I remind myself that I need to make my mom proud. It doesn't always work, but I try to think like that. Her heart would break if she knew about my overdoses..."

"She probably does," Jordan commented, and Kamila twitched. "She also knows that you're a fighter."

I swallowed a bite of food, and I suddenly felt an urge to gag. Grabbing my glass of water, I gulped it down. Jordan noticed my struggle, but he didn't comment on it. I didn't want anyone to panic, but the pain in my abdomen was back. Only a couple of days until I'd be free of this pain. I had to stay strong.

I fought hard to breathe normally, my chest heaving.

"Is everything okay?" Kamila turned towards me, taking hold of my hand.

I shook my head. "I'm scared, Kamila."

PART II



CHAPTER 13

WESTON



KATANTIA

FOUR MONTHS AGO

I HADN'T HEARD FROM MANDY IN A WEEK.

Kamila was gone. She was plagued by rumors made up by cheap journalists. I couldn't read any of it anymore. I didn't want to watch the news.

There was a bitter afterthought to it all. I was left out of their plans. I had been the groom at the palace, stood up. That was one of the images that roamed the internet and the news outlets. That was what Katantians remembered now, their prince being stood up at the palace.

"Weston?" Valentina gently knocked at my bedroom door. That was a rarity. She usually burst in without a second thought. "Are you coming downstairs? Breakfast is ready. Maybe we should have that talk we keep delaying."

The truth was that I had nothing to say to Valentina or my older brother.

"Don't wait on me," I told her. I needed to drink some water. My voice sounded rough.

Valentina didn't give up. "You've barely left your room in a week. We're eating breakfast together. That's non-negotiable."

The corner of my mouth lifted. She wasn't allowed to command things, especially from me, but circumstances made it possible.

I heard Valentina's heels click away from the hallway, and I finally convinced myself to leave my room.

The media wasn't the only one that presented me as a soft loser. I was starting to believe it myself.

I made myself presentable and then headed for the dining room.

The light outside was too bright. I despised the house I lived in. It reminded me of who I was groomed to be, the prince who stood for Katantian values. I wanted to eradicate that part of myself.

When I entered the dining room, my senses noticed the food displayed across the dining table. Our staff had outdone themselves, serving us all types of homemade breakfast delicacies. Two male staff members stood by the door in their uniforms. They wore perfectly ironed white shirts, a light blue tie underneath a gray suit vest, and gray slacks. Their cufflinks were expensive. We had them custom-made for every staff member.

I smelled the coffee from afar. I took my seat at the table on the opposite side of my sibling and his wife. One of the staff members served my coffee. My eyes fell on the cuff link, and the Katantian emblem on it.

I was so distracted that I only noticed that we had a guest once the staff member was out of sight.

"Travis is joining us for breakfast," Aris announced, fumbling with his cutlery. My brother had greeted me, but I only took in what he uttered about my mother's murderer. I rarely acknowledged Valentina as Travis' daughter, but I saw the similarities as they sat close to each other. Valentina had Felicita's body type, but her eyes were Travis' eyes.

I lost my appetite. Murder wasn't appetizing to me. Aris knew, yet he still tolerated his wife's father. I could barely stand the sight of him.

My brother and his wife began their breakfast. The plates clattered, and the forks chipped. I remained unmoved in my seat.

We had never been shown the crime scene pictures, but we had been told every explicit detail. Pretense images of my mother dead in her bathtub disturbed my thoughts. A murderer sat at my table, and he ate off of my plates. I wanted to do something about it. Punch him. Strangle him. Break his fucking legs or something, and feel the satisfaction flood my veins.

“Weston, you know, my mom’s constantly at the palace now that Kamila’s out of the picture,” Valentina commented, sipping on her freshly pressed orange juice. Our staff stood at the door, observing us as we sat at the table that they’d filled.

Aris added, “That’s why we offered to keep Travis company.”

“What about his son?” I asked dryly.

“You know Ryan,” Travis responded. I hated the sound of his disgusting voice. He dared to speak in our presence? “He’s never around for his family when it gets tough.”

“It’s tough, huh?” I replied sarcastically.

“Weston,” Aris warned me.

It was enough of a message to Travis. He kicked back his chair, standing up from the table. I wanted the filth out of my home. Valentina wanted to prevent him from leaving, but Travis insisted, “It’s fine. I should get going anyway. I have things to do at the palace.”

There was no awkward moment of silence after he left. Valentina’s sobs filled the room. One of the staff members handed her a handkerchief with the Katantian emblem on it. Aris had to soothe his wife, placing a protective arm around her while whispering calming words to her. I couldn’t hear what exactly he said, but I felt his sharp eyes staring daggers at me. He had become better at being a husband in the past few weeks.

“What are we going to do?” Valentina asked, convulsing. “We’re all being watched. Everyone’s suspicious to the police. They’ve found the dead guard’s body in Chicago, and our street’s still crowded with guards. You still hate my father. My

mother's back to being Aram's bitch. What are we going to do now, huh?"

"It's Kamila that went missing," I reminded my brother's wife. "Not some irrelevant street whore."

"Watch it," Aris warned me, caressing his wife's hair smoothly.

"He keeps my mother by his side at all times," Valentina said, her voice trembling. "The staff claim she's following Aram around naked on all fours and on a leash. Colleagues say she gives him blowjobs in meetings in front of everyone."

"Go save her if that's so unbearable to you," I countered. I wasn't in the mood to feel pity for Valentina.

"If I were you, I'd watch my words," Aris advised me, taking his wife's side. "You don't want to go to work with a rearranged face today, brother."

Valentina dried her tears on the handkerchief. "I know it's difficult for you, too. Come out of your room and have a conversation with us. Kamila's Aris' sister as well. Mandy was my friend. We got along in the end."

"Who do you think you're talking to?" I had enough. I stood up and left the room before Aris could throw another warning shot at me. The staff members stood there quietly, observing the chaos.

On the stairs, I noticed that Valentina dared to follow me. "Weston, stop. Let's sort this out."

"I don't have anything to say to you," I hissed, like everything that had happened was her fault.

"Don't leave," Valentina begged me. Her makeup-less face showed her emotions without hiding her eyes behind expensive mascara.

"What are you talking about?" I asked her. She was getting emotional again, her sobs a desperate plea.

She continued, "I have a feeling that you're going to go after Kamila and Mandy."

“Yeah, right,” I scoffed, secretly considering the option. I had thought about it before.

“And I’m here to tell you that they’re going to be all right,” Valentina said. Sadness coated her voice. “We’re the ones struggling here. Right? Tell me that you see this. Mandy’s dad doesn’t care enough about her to cause her any damage. He discarded her here without any second thought. Aram is the one who we should be afraid of.”

“I’m terrified for Aris. He’s acting incredibly different lately, and I don’t know what to do about it,” she said skeptically. “Do you know why he’s changed? What’s happened to him? I’m still the same, right? I haven’t done anything to deserve his pity?”

“You should ask your husband,” I suggested.

“There hasn’t been a moment of peace and quiet for us since Kamila escaped,” Valentina reminded me. “Stay. Don’t go. We need to figure a way out of this mess together. Please, help us.”

Coldly, I responded, “I’m a Wraith. I don’t know what’s gotten into you, but you don’t have permission to ask things of me. Now go back to your husband and suck his dick like the obedient wife that you are.”

Reaching my room, I shut the door behind me loudly. I opened the windows because I needed some fresh air.

Mandy belonged to me. I had to get her back. That was all I could think of.

I approached my bed, only to find an unopened letter on it.

Carefully, I opened it.

“She’s safe,” the letter read.

It wasn’t signed by anyone, but I recognized Travis’ writing.

I trashed the letter. I’d taken a lot of hits these past few days. Travis taking care of the women that I should have taken care of was the final nail in the coffin.

Furious and admittedly hurt, I proceeded towards the palace.

CHAPTER 14

WESTON



SILENCE WAS RARELY FOUND AT THE PALACE. IT WAS ALWAYS crowded with people who worked here or were visitors. Today I witnessed the stress that a Katantian disaster like Kamila's escape caused. There were two groups of people in the palace—ones who were afraid of my almighty father and those who were not.

Things were looking down on us as an entity. We appeared pathetic from the outside. Research vessels kept violating our waters, and aircrafts loomed all over us, spying on the people and our government.

On the inside, we distracted our people by inflicting fear. If Kamila had gone away without a public departure, we wouldn't be creating this myth around her escape. She would simply be on vacation, and the palace would look for her in secret.

Now that Kamila made it a public matter, it had to become a spectacle. Otherwise, we would lose the trust and loyalty of the Katantians. They loved our princess. We had to make her departure digestible.

In the past week, I stayed home, not working. Instead, I only checked my emails. I read that people shopped more in the days that passed. They were preparing for the end. I read lots of hate mail from Kamila's friends. They knew that something was up. They were asking for a sign of life from her.

I wanted to message them that I wanted a sign of life from her, too.

From the border to the inner city's depths, our police intimidated the public. Aram had allowed them to use the few firearms that the police department owned. This was an extraordinary situation, and it required special measures.

Outside of the palace grounds, tensions were high. Strolling through the halls, I made sure to greet every person I came across, even if it was somebody I didn't know. People had to know I was still around. We weren't dead. My sister was alive. We just had to find her. Or not? I didn't fucking know what was better.

Every minute that passed meant that Travis was somewhere around here, a ticking bomb waiting to expose my home country. He was still breathing while my mother was thought of like a suicidal maniac.

Staff members waltzed around with straight backs and tense shoulders. Palace guards secured the premises. There was one at every corner. In times like these, the guards sprouted from everywhere. They were everywhere. Most of them were new faces, probably fresh out of Katantia's underfunded police academy. I recognized the old guards by their prime and fitted clothing. Black shirts and black trousers were coupled with navy blue ties. Some wore suit vests, but only the ones who were on outside duty. I caught some of the newer guards with wrinkles in their shirts. There was the occasional spot of dirt on their shoes. Normally, they'd be reprimanded for their embarrassing appearance. Our emblem was all over their clothes. But after my sister and Mandy, I found that I could give a fuck less about these guys and their clothes.

Instead of finding Travis Cross, I bumped into Aram. "Ah. It's you. Come to my office. I want to discuss some things concerning the anniversary."

It took me a while to get what he was talking about. Once we were in his office, I viewed the various posters with the number seventy in different designs. The Katantian logo

graced each poster. 2018 marked the seventieth year of Katantia. My great-grandfather, King Wraith I, had purchased the land from a bankrupt and crumbling British royal right after returning from the war.

Our great-grandfather achieved incredible things. Every year, on Katantia's creation day, we were shown photographs of what Katantia looked like when King Wraith I and the first Queen stepped into this land. My grandfather had just been born. He was a mere baby. There was an iconic photograph of my great-grandparents, grandfather, and their dog in front of the only house that once existed on this land. The dog died a couple of years later, and we never saw domesticated animals on Katantia ever again. To me, it seemed eerie, knowing that some years later, that house would be demolished and replaced by the palace as we knew it today.

"We're close to getting your pathetic sister back," Aram revealed, sitting down at his majestic desk. I didn't believe him. There was something phony about the way he said these words. "On New Year's Eve, I plan on hosting a big celebration for the year 2018. It's going to make up for the lost wedding party."

I noticed that Felicita wasn't around. Completely ignoring his anniversary plans, I asked, "Where's she?"

"She's licking the pussies of whores that have come in for questioning. Kamila has quite a variety of friends. It will be lovely to question all of them," Aram responded, shifting in his royal seat. He had shaved his face today, and he looked even younger than usual like there were no troubles in his world. My father was fifty-seven years old, and he was as self-absorbed as ever. "It's quite a pleasant sight. I've got a camera team on them."

I cocked my head. I didn't want to know what exactly Aram had Felicita doing after all.

"Anyway, what I wanted to talk to you about was your future girlfriend and potential wife. You need to replace Kamila right away. It will appear as if you're in control," Aram advised me. This wasn't my father speaking. This was

the egocentric king who wanted Kamila all for himself once she returned. He didn't move a finger. His hands were folded on the desk, and his gaze was on mine. "Kamila doesn't deserve the ring on her finger after what she has done."

Only I should judge that. Kamila was my sister, and I still loved her. I had things to discuss with her, but that didn't mean that I would leave her hanging when she returned.

"And Mandy doesn't deserve you if she doesn't want to become your Katantian whore," Aram continued. He hit me exactly where it hurt. "Women spread their legs and gape their mouths at the drop of your name, son. You can do better."

"Don't," I warned him, regretting the statement after it left my mouth. I didn't need my father to know another one of my weaknesses.

I could get into deep trouble if I physically damaged the King of Katantia, even if I was his son.

"Weston, she left you." Aram enjoyed this. The devilish smirk on his face revealed that he had plans with me. I could see it in his gleaming eyes. "Both of them did, actually. You're a Wraith, son. Honor your name. Do not let these sluts treat you this way. You leave women. They have no right to abandon you."

"I took Mandy to the airport. It was a mutual decision," I reminded Aram. "And your daughter isn't a slut. She's a princess."

"I know who she is better than you. You had a taste of her pussy, yet you didn't chain her to you. Foolishly, you sent the girl away," Aram reminded me. He mimicked me atrociously. "She manipulated you. Something's wrong in your head, Weston. You need to treat your problem. What type of a Katantian are you?"

I asked myself the same question.

"Mandy Rawlins is below you." I remembered how I told Mandy that I was the bad guy. "Do you really want to own trash? Wraith men own valuable objects. Look at my grandmother, my mother, and your mother. My grandmother

charmed ten thousand men to get us this palace. Grandfather knew exactly what he was investing in when he married his object. My mother was spiteful in her later years, and she certainly wasn't a good mother, but she was a good whore for the kingdom."

Grandmother was an exceptional woman that was tired of my father's bullshit. She was the only family member that was there for us after mom died.

"And your mother? She didn't want all of this at first. It took some convincing. She only agreed to marry me once Kamila was in her belly. Together, we took over the throne that was rightfully mine. She thrived next to me." Until she didn't. Something changed in my mother. She never went back to being the Queen that my father wanted her to be.

Aram went on, "They were jewels. The men in Katantia envied us because of them. They wanted our women's holes, their captivating faces, and our power. This palace didn't build itself, Weston. Mandy Rawlins doesn't have the beauty to be around us. She's just another silly girl, abandoned by her rich daddy. She looked so lost, son. She doesn't deserve the life that we can provide for your future object."

I envisioned Mandy unraveling beneath me while I fucked her. She was enthralling to me. I missed every cell of her body. She hadn't been around for long, but she'd left a lasting impression. Those eyes of hers held my future.

I'd convince her that she was born to be mine. We could do whatever the fuck we wanted.

"What type of Katantian ideal are you if you can't land the most divine woman out there? Besides, Mandy didn't grow up on our principles. I observed the tedious girl. You need an object that will satisfy your needs and understand that she is your possession. You have to breed. Our family needs to grow," Aram urged me.

"I've talked to Aris about this. He's taking the necessary precautions," Aram informed me. I doubted that my brother would allow Aram to dictate when he would have children

with his wife. "I'm looking forward to seeing Valentina pregnant. My son will enjoy her pregnancies a lot."

"What do you want from me?" I asked, annoyed. I hadn't taken a seat. I stood in front of his desk, letting him know I wasn't here to stay. I wanted out of the room. I had to find Travis. Aram had ordered the murder, but Travis had eventually killed my mother and Mandy's mother. We had both suffered because of that filth.

"I'll take you to the room I have Felicita in," Aram said, standing up. We began a journey away from his office. The palace guards watched us like hawks as we passed by them. On Aram's floor, we had privacy that wasn't there on the other floors where our politicians and lobbyists mingled. "Weston, must I remind you of how I got the throne? I won it by having my children. Your mother was exhausted after four years of constant pregnancies. It takes hard work to get where I'm at."

Not this talk again. I ran my fingers through my hair. I responded, "No, you mustn't."

"Then prove that you remember the story," Aram challenged me.

"Great-grandfather took over again the throne in 1987 because of grandfather's assassination. You and your brother had one year to compete for the throne. You clearly had the advantage of having a daughter and a son already. When your brother failed to marry and present offspring, and you added another son to your family, me, the throne was yours in 1988," I told him, bored. I was close to exploding. I needed out. "Did I miss anything important?"

"Yes," Aram said, sharply. "My brother vanished from Katantia because he was ashamed. He committed suicide soon after I became king, and Katantia began to prosper because of me. That's what disappointing sons do. Do you want to be a disappointment, Weston?"

The lies fumed away on his tongue. I knew the real story. The so-called brother hadn't killed himself as we'd believed for years. He became much more powerful than Aram could ever dream of being. Spencer Rawlins was a multiple

billionaire, and he didn't give a shit about anyone, not even his daughter.

We had money, but we weren't nearly as rich as he was. Katantia was an expensive land to uphold. We ruled over land partly owned by sponsors and the diverse people who funded Katantia for a yearly sex vacation.

"You should consider getting an object soon, Weston," Aram suggested strongly. His step was light and careless. His daughter was missing, and he wasn't worried at all. It fucked with my head. "I would hate to see anyone of you lose, but there's only one throne. You need to cement yourself as the rightful heir so that when I die, you immediately become king."

The lies rolled off his tongue so easily. He had no idea that mom had told us about her voluntary sterilization.

"Son, do you want to know a secret?"

I shook my head. He stopped at the end of the hallway.

"When your sister returns, I'm considering to resign from the throne and leave it to one of my sons," he revealed. I swallowed.

We finally reached the noisy room he kept Felicita in. I heard moans from outside of the place. Felicita was really going in.

"Who are these women?" I asked Aram.

"They are daughters of the most powerful men of Katantia. I think you're familiar with some of them. Kamila is good friends with them. I've brought them in for questioning because I want to coerce their stupid fathers," Aram explained. "They need to be taught respect. Kamila might have disrespected me, but I won't allow anyone else to ever do so again."



I PICKED ONE BLOND GIRL THAT I DIDN'T KNOW AND TOOK HER to one of the palace's fancier rooms, away from Aram. She felt honored to fuck me, and she proved it by continuously addressing me as Your Highness. She asked me questions about how I enjoyed sex and what particular positions I liked.

She undressed for me, and I should have warmed up to her. There was nothing wrong with her.

I ordered alcohol and several sex toys to make the hour I had with the blonde more pleasurable.

Applying butt plugs or dildos on her was no fun. Her holes were stretched out and ready to take whatever I desired to dart in them. My dick got semi-hard and refused to go harder.

“Is it me? Do you want more moans, Sir? I'm sorry...”

I interrupted her, “Get dressed. Go back to your waiting room. Tell them we fucked.”

“But we didn't! I'm a disappointment. I know. Daddy says I should get implants...” the girl stuttered.

“Just leave,” I replied curtly.

She left me alone soon after that.

I decided. I knew what I wanted. I owned Mandy Rawlins, and she held a permanent spot in my thoughts. I had finally understood that I wouldn't be able to get rid of her. What I had told her wasn't a lie. I was never going to enjoy another woman again.

I'm coming for you, Mandy.



ARIS ENTERED MY ROOM IN A FRENZY. “WHAT THE HELL, man?”

The clicking and clattering of the hangers had alerted my brother.

Not paying him any attention, I kept going through my closet. If I was going to leave Katantia, I had to take my best

pieces with me.

“Where are you going?” Aris inquired. His face was red, and the veins were threatening to explode.

“I’m leaving. I’m going to take back what’s mine,” I revealed. “You better do it, too.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Aris was confused. “I have a wife. I’m...”

“You’re pathetic,” I blurted out. “You’re fucking the daughter of mom’s murderer. Now you’re even having a baby with her.”

“Who told you that?” His glance sharpened.

“Who do you think?”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.” I went on, “Do you even want a kid? What kind of parent do you want to be? Do you aspire to use your child before it even takes its first breath?”

“What’s gotten into you?” My strong brother slammed the door shut behind him. He marched to the middle of the room. He would intimidate me if I were anyone else, but I had nothing to lose from him.

“Divorce your slutty wife. Make sure that when I return with my rightful woman, the Cross filth will be out of Katantia,” I told him.

“Keep Valentina out of this. It’s not her fault,” Aris warned me. I could see the anger rising up in him. He balled his fists. “I’m not getting a divorce. You should stop taking whatever you took because it makes you fucked up.”

I laughed bitterly as I began fitting my suits into my suitcase. I would definitely need to iron them once I landed.

There was a hesitant knock on the door.

“Can I come in?” Valentina asked.

I said, “No.”

“Yes,” Aris overthrew me.

Valentina entered. Addressing Aris, she said, “I told you, didn’t I? He’s leaving.”

“You won’t find them,” Aris said. He took his wife’s hand. Something about that gesture alarmed me. Was he trying to protect her from me? “Kamila’s probably left Chicago already. What makes you think Mandy will want to talk to you?”

“Wait, what did you do to Mandy?” Valentina asked, her curiosity taken the best of her. She stepped closer, eager to hear what I had done to insult Mandy. “Did you hurt her? I swear...”

“There you have it, Valentina. Your best friend fucked the other prince on Katantia. Do you feel dethroned yet?” I spat. I was tired, and I only wanted to pack my things. My plane was waiting.

To my surprise, Valentina didn’t throw a bitch fit. Aris glanced at her, and from that one look, she held herself together. I had never seen such teamwork from my sibling and his wife.

Valentina dared to ask me, “What have I done to you? Why are you treating me like this?”

“Are you fucking serious?” I addressed Aris. “Get your bitch out of here. In fact, I want you both out.”

“You know what, Weston?” Aris’s calm cracked. “You don’t get to talk to my wife like that. I’ve tolerated enough of your bullshit. My wife grew up here. She doesn’t know any other way to be a woman. Your whore grew up in the States, and she still gave it up to you like an average Katantian whore. She didn’t even blink!”

“Aris...” Valentina tried to stop my brother from talking, but he kept going.

“I love my wife. I own her. We’re in love. Do you understand the concept? I don’t think you do. You wanted to marry our sister like it was a contractual agreement!” Aris thundered. I knew my brother was energetic, but this was his anger talking. “I hope you find Mandy. You know why?”

I didn't reply. I had a bad feeling about what he was about to say.

"I want her to refuse you. She's better off without you. I didn't get to know Mandy, but she's not made to handle your bullshit. You think Kamila's the sick one? With her drugs and her daddy issues?" Aris added, "Just look at you. Have you seen your room? You're a ghost. You should've been dead years ago. In fact, you died when grandma died, and Kamila had her first overdose. You've been aimless ever since. Now you found yourself a whore, and you think you're worth something again. Fuck you. You don't get to insult my wife anymore. I want you out of this fucking house by tomorrow."

"Don't worry, dickhead. I'll be gone by midnight," I responded.

Aris finished his arsenal of bullets and left my room, holding his whimpering wife close to his body. In my empty room, I stood petrified.

It was like the heat had left my body.

CHAPTER 15

WESTON



FOUR MONTHS LATER

If you leave, you won't be welcomed back, son. If you go, you'll return in a casket, and you'll be buried right next to your grandparents, the ones you love so much. If you leave, your sister and your pathetic little girlfriend will be brought back, and they'll be my new test subjects. I'll give them a slow death after they've produced my next line of male heirs. I promise you that.

WITH VALENTINE'S DAY APPROACHING, BUSINESS WAS ONCE again booming. International guests were ready to return to our shores for an unforgettable weekend of debauchery in one of our Hole Stores. Nothing screamed romance more than the working girls with their mouths open for your husband's cock. Rich westerners, go figure.

"The research vessels have left our waters," Travis told me. He exhaled. "Aram has communicated with Spencer, and we'll be sending in another crew, seismologists instead of exploration geologists."

"Seismologists? What is that?" I asked, distracted by the fly behind him. How had it come in here? There were no open windows...

"Did you really ask me that question? Do the words tectonic plates mean anything to you?" Travis rolled his eyes when I shook my head.

“I’m better with numbers. Geography was never my thing,” I said.

“It’s about earthquakes. Every other year, there’s an earthquake. We need researchers to study the situation to prepare ourselves if a big one hits us. The palace has the most up to date protective measures, but the rest of the population is hanging by a thin thread.”

“We never suffer a lot of damages...”

“Sometimes, I think you hate your job. Anyway. The make-believe whorehouse downtown wants to expand,” Travis informed me, and his patience swindled. I spent more time in my palace office these days than anywhere else. I slept in my sister’s house after having been kicked out of my own. I hadn’t made amends with my brother. I rarely saw him anymore. Aram had us work in different units. We were both fighting for the throne in his eyes. If we saw each other as enemies, we’d destroy one another like he and his brother had done. “They want a beach club on the East and South Side. They say foreigners like the concept a lot.”

“There’s no fun in a fake whore,” I commented, bored out of my mind with the bullshit job I had. I sat back on my desk chair, my gaze falling over Katantia. My office was right underneath my father’s. He wanted me to succeed. That was what he always claimed, but he had a funny way of showing it.

If you leave, you’ll return in a casket.

“Foreigners find comfort in a fake whore. Real ones make it a sad affair for the wife. If the wife pretends to be the whore, the less kinky husbands don’t have to feel so ashamed,” Travis explained. He had a tablet in his hands, scrolling through the emails of the day. The man had always worked closely with my father, and now, he was my wingman. I didn’t want him here. I’d told my father often enough. He didn’t listen, of course. Instead, he assigned Travis as my new assistant and advisor.

Now, I had to face my mother’s murderer every day, and I could do nothing about it.

“We sell real whores. If the foreigners are too pussy to deal with that reality, they should fuck off,” I snapped. My phone rang. I ignored it. I was too busy being pissed off at Travis to pick up the phone right now.

“Your father won’t like that attitude. We need all the foreign tourism we can get,” Travis warned me.

“My father can go fuck himself.” I added, “You, too, by the way.”

“I know. You remind me every day.”

Travis wasn’t afraid of me. The only man he feared roamed around comfortably upstairs, fucking whores and Travis’ wife. My mother’s murderer wasn’t easily intimidated.

“Approve of everything you think will get us more cash, all right? I could give a fuck less right now,” I responded, losing my patience.

“Do you want me to leave so that you can brood some more on your own time?” Travis asked.

“If you’d be so kind, yes.”

Everything you have, son, I can take it away from you. I made you. I made all of you. You exist because I allow it. You’d be nothing without my name or my power. Show gratitude to your father. I made it all possible. If you step outside of my country, there’ll be a debt to pay, and you’ll pay it with your burned bones. No, I don’t need you, son. I have my Kamila. I have your pathetic Mandy. They’re out there. If you leave and I get my hands on them, there’ll be no holds barred.

“Well, I’m not kind. I think you’ve used a different set of words to describe me in the past.”

“Indeed.”

“If you want my advice, which you don’t, and I understand that, I’d suggest that you stop moping around in here and start taking action,” Travis advised me. “You won’t find solutions here. Kamila owned the people of this country. She was loved... She’s still loved by them. You need to go out there and become one with them.”

“I don’t want to. I want Kamila and Mandy to be safe,” I retorted.

“You’ve never had to work a day in your life,” Travis uttered, turning off the tablet on his lap. I rolled my eyes. “You had everything served to you on a silver platter. You’re an ungrateful dick—a spoiled one. You never suffered. You never had to want for one thing in your life.”

I opened my mouth, but he went on, “Don’t bring up your mother. That’s not what I’m talking about right now. You’re not the first man with dead parents, Weston. You sit here in your lush office, and you look at me as if you want to reach over your desk and kill me. Guess what, son? You’d be dead the moment your fingertip touches my skin. You have no discipline. You know no authority, and you certainly have no loyalty.”

“What are you trying to say?” I asked, trying to keep a straight face.

“Your sister had much bigger balls than you’ll ever have. Every day, she risked her life. She danced with the devil. She went out there, and she got to know her subjects. She also did as the king pleased. She took risks. She knew exactly what to sacrifice so that she’d get the desired outcome. You have no concept of such a struggle,” Travis preached. His eyes glimmered with disgust and hatred. “You will never succeed. Your father has failed you. Out of all of his offspring, you’re the biggest letdown. Aris is growing into his role as a husband and future father. Kamila is... She’s out there somewhere, fighting for her life. While you’re here, bitching around and complaining that things aren’t going your way.”

“You’re not my father,” I spat at him. “You can save yourself the lecture.”

“I wouldn’t want to be a father to such an entitled prick.”

“You really think you’re cute, don’t you?”

“Your father doesn’t care enough about you. He won’t listen if you complain to him about me being mean,” Travis commented. “In fact, he’ll applaud me for disciplining you.”

He stood up from his chair, the tablet in his tight hold. “Take action, or you’ll be the next one that dies. And it won’t be because he ended you. It’ll be because you ended yourself.”



“WHERE’S THE GIRL?” LEE ASKED AS I ENTERED HIS TATTOO shop in broad daylight. He welcomed me with open arms. The waiting customers’ mouths gaped open. Some gasped. All of them gawked. Music filled with bass played in the background, attributing to the rough look of the tattoo shop. “Does she like her tattoo? Does she want a new one?”

I shook my head. “She left a while ago. It’s just me.”

“Let’s go talk somewhere in private then?” Lee suggested. I shook my head.

“I’m here to see how you work. I’d like to get to know some people,” I said.

Lee raised his eyebrows, tilting his head to the side. “Who are you, and what have you done with Weston Wraith?”

I shrugged.

“When did you start doing charity work?” Lee asked, leading me further inside of the shop and away from the waiting room.

“About a week ago,” I responded. “I’ve been making the rounds for a couple of days now. I have a thousand friends on an app called SexNote. I hear that’s a big achievement.”

Lee nodded, chuckling to himself.

I spent the entire day at Lee’s workplace. It was a busy spot, customers coming in without any breaks of peace. Husbands came with their objects to brand them. There were women, some of whom I recognized because I remembered faces well, that came here to get other types of tattoos. They were working women in whore houses, Hole Stores, or big corporations without husbands, making ends meet on their own.

“Why did she leave?” Lee asked.

“This life wasn’t for her,” I told him. My eyes fell on the silenced television that kept playing while music blasted through the speakers. Lee and I were observing as one of the best tattooists of Katantia drew a picture of a slender woman with a baby in her hands on a man’s left arm. That was his dead wife. She’d died at childbirth.

“Can we turn the volume up?” I gestured at the television.

“Sure,” Lee responded, reaching for the remote. The music quieted while the television was made audible.

“Fuck!”

“That’s the princess!”

“Who’s that guy?”

“Weston?”

I stood there, frozen. My eyes were set on the television screen. That was my sister on it, standing next to a tall black man in a suit. She was dressed in a long black dress, and her hair was brown. The last time she’d been brunette, she still had the pimples of her teenage years on her face.

She held on to the man as if he were her shield, her protector... Her lover.

“The former Princess of Katantia has released a statement, Wendy! She’s engaged to MVP Alex Winters. They’ve known each other for some time, having met through mutual friends. We assume that she fled her country to be with him. Who wouldn’t want to date this specimen of a man? Handsome. Kind. Ambitious!”

Something inside of me plummeted.

“He’s next in line for a championship ring! Kamila hasn’t been spotted in Indianapolis, but sources say she’s already moved into his mansion. Their wedding is coming soon.”

For a moment, the only sound I could hear in the room was my heavy breathing.

Then, relief filled the room. People clapped. People shouted. Lee turned it off, realizing that it wasn't doing me any good.

I swallowed. The room had turned quiet. Everyone's eyes turned to me.

CHAPTER 16

DOESN'T EXIST



I DIDN'T SEE COLOR.

I meant that with every fiber of my being. No, this wasn't a race issue. *Sit back and enjoy this message on a phone that's been made by slaves.* The concept of race was one I felt familiar with. My mother was Afro-Greek. Something she proudly declared in front of anyone with ears. She'd met a Cuban-American businessman while he was on vacation in Greece. Mykonos, to be exact. Mom didn't have too many fond memories of Mykonos, but she always claimed, "I met the father of my children there. It'll always have a special place in my heart."

Am I boring you already?

The fact is my mixed race wasn't the reason why I didn't see color. That sentence weighed tons, and I never spoke of that sentiment to my family and friends. Most of whom were of black descent. I was black, although I didn't look the part. *The sun never sees him. He likes it that way...*

No.

I didn't see color because all I saw was red.



I SPENT THE REST OF MY AFTERNOON LOOKING AT PICTURES OF black widows while Jordan and Alex argued with Kamila, their voices thundering throughout the house. Mandy this.

Mandy that. Money floated through this space, pressuring my friends and family into uncomfortable decisions. Alex had the means to keep Mandy safe. He could help her get the treatments she needed, but Kamila was a bitch about it.

She wanted to be with Mandy to help her through her health issues.

Jordan didn't plan on allowing Kamila to expose herself to the public yet. Mandy was alone at the hospital, undergoing intensive treatments for her uterine fibroids.

I sat on my bed, clicking on websites that would have the authorities knocking on my door. If they ever figured me out, that is.

Where could I get a black widow? That would be an excellent pet to have.

A knock on my door made me hiss. I put my phone away, scowling. "What is it?"

"I'm bleeding."

"What do you mean?" Who had hurt her? Would I twist a neck before the night was over? I needed the thrill. I rose from my bed, and I opened the door for the princess. Cozied up in one of Alex's sweats and shirts, she rushed by me, settling on my bed. Her red hair brushed my pillows, and I knew that I'd have to change sheets if I wanted to fall asleep tonight.

"My period."

"Give me more than two words," I demanded from the spoiled princess.

"I might be going through a miscarriage," Kamila blurted out, tears erupting from her, and like a volcano, she burned me.

"A miscarriage," I repeated, contemplating.

"Aram."

"And you just realized it? You've had periods. You told us all about them," I reminded her. Signaling her to get out of bed, I led us through the mansion. Next to his indoor

basketball court, Alex had set up an entire pharmacy for himself. Kamila never walked in a hurry, but today, she slowed me down even further. It took us ten minutes to move from one space to the other.

“They weren’t normal. They felt light... I know some women occasionally bleed during pregnancies,” Kamila explained, panting lightly as if talking was a chore.

“This is absurd,” I argued. She was delusional. There was no other way to explain it. I’d get Kamila’s blood and urine sample to be sure.

Typing in the code at the door to Alex’s live-in pharmacy, I let us in. Kamila didn’t feel like standing, so she took a seat on the floor, trembling all over the place and distracting me from the task at hand.

She needed to die a slow death.

But that was a story for another day.

“Do you feel sad?” I asked. This was a question ordinary people asked when ill-fated things happened. I memorized it, and it was part of my small talk routine.

“No, I don’t,” Kamila uttered. “I just want to know what I can do to stop the blood and the pain. This child would’ve been sick. I never wanted to carry his baby...”

“You’re not pregnant, Kamila. Get that silly idea out of your head,” I warned her. I drew her blood expertly, watching the fluid flow with curiosity. What would her blood taste like? Would it sweeten my tongue, or would I find its bitterness appalling?

She peed in a cup in front of me without any sense of shame. I checked her temperature and blood pressure. There was nothing unusual there.

Grudgingly, I gave her a painkiller. If Jordan and Alex were gone, I wouldn’t have. But since they were here, the spoiled brat could tell them I neglected her. I didn’t want that. Jordan had to believe I had Kamila’s best interests at heart, even if his intellect told him an entirely different story.

We retired to our rooms that night, and the next day, I sent one of the men outside to have the samples checked. A couple of days later, we received an untraceable phone call from our contacts. Kamila hadn't been pregnant, but she had an iron deficiency. Luckily, Alex's live-in pharmacy had a series of vitamins and pills for Kamila.

She was stressed out because of her hospitalized friend.

Who cared?

I didn't.

Kamila clung to me like I could save her from Jordan's demands. I didn't plan to intervene with Jordan's plans. She hung out in the gym when I worked out on my own. She sat on the floor while I scanned the depths of the internet for malicious activities. She observed me while I tried to cook.

"I've made a decision," Jordan claimed one day. We sat at the dining room table about to feast on steak and potatoes.

"It's not just your decision," Alex intervened. "I pointed out that Kamila suggested a public marriage."

Kamila's head snapped upward. "What about it?"

"We think it would do you good to get some fresh air. I want to announce that you're my fiancée. We could attend a charity event together soon." Alex didn't touch his food. His gaze was directed at Kamila, his one and only. I wanted to cut out the part of his brain that had fallen for the evil red.

"Would you agree to such an arrangement?" Jordan asked.

Kamila nodded. "Definitely. I'd love to get out there again. Yes, please."



KAMILA RUBY WRAITH SAT ON A DESK CHAIR, FUMBLING WITH one of Alex's orange sweatshirts. She wore the sweatshirt as a dress. In front of her, voices came out of an electronic device she didn't know how to use. The Princess of Katantia had all the riches she desired, but she barely knew how to use a

mobile phone. Much less a laptop. Back home, she'd been more preoccupied with the king's dick over electronics.

Being the loyal servant of Jordan, I set it up for the Princess of Katantia. She'd watched me with curious eyes, soaking in every information that my body gave out. She wasn't getting much out of me.

Now, I stood there, on the other end of the room, observing her. She shook. She never stopped shaking. She thought we didn't notice, but that was a testament to her naivety.

We noticed.

We couldn't do anything about it.

Jordan and I agreed that she was still suffering from withdrawal symptoms, coupled with anxiety over her departure from Katantia, worry about her family's well-being, and her abstinence from sex.

It filled me with joy to see her in pain. I woke up to witness her struggle, to see her feel what so many others dealt with. Every day, it was the medicine I needed. In contrast to Kamila, I didn't need the drugs I stored. I took pleasure, or whatever you wanted to call the malicious sense of satisfaction inside me, from the simplest things. Humiliation. Self-doubt. Tension. Revenge. Pain.

And Kamila Ruby Wraith was suffering from all of the above. Most of all, pain.

"To present you as Jordan Winters' fiancée, you have to follow protocol," the male voice from the laptop claimed. The picket-fence, three dogs, five children, a house in the suburbs man wasn't what Kamila was used to, rough and authoritative. This man wasn't half as imposing as he wished to be, but Kamila bought into it, nonetheless. Sheltered from the world in the past three months, two weeks, three days, ten hours.... I wasn't sure about the seconds. I'd lost it there. Kamila had lost sense of herself. She was fading away, away from her source of power.

"You mustn't provoke," the man stated. "There's no room for that in my client's career. He has goals that he will reach

before he's thirty. He needs to focus. You can't mess with that. You can't cause an uproar with your antics."

"Antics?" Kamila asked, lifting her brow. She looked wilder now than she had back when I'd picked her up from Alex's game. In the safe house, she hadn't paid a lot of attention to her looks. Ever since we returned to civilization, she'd attempted to become the Princess of Katantia again, but she was more worried about Mandy's condition than her own royal looks. I wished that she looked like Kamila Ruby Wraith again. A return of her red hair would help the narrative in my brain.

"Yes, antics. Your entire existence is a list of antics. Alex Winters isn't a sexed-up bad boy. He's the good guy who ends careers with his immense talent. That's the route we're going with." I heard a shuffle of documents. "We've arranged appropriate clothes for you. Your make-up will be done by somebody we trust..."

"I do my own make-up," Kamila interfered. She'd raised her voice, but the man ignored her.

"No, you don't. Now, we have to rearrange the way you behave and what you say. It would be best if you let Alex do the talking. He's trained, and he knows what to say to reporters." More noise from the end of the line, hushed comments, crumpling papers.

"I'm trained as well. That's all I did back home," Kamila informed the man. She smiled, proud of her royal etiquette. I scoffed.

"Your training is useless."

Kamila's face fell. I took a mental picture of that.

"To be a basketball player's fiancée and later on his wife, you mustn't be provocative. Know your place. It's in the background, along with his trophies. You dress nicely. You speak eloquently. You don't raise your voice, and you don't show your skin. Sex is never spoken of, but you must look desirable. His fans must want to fuck you. They must envy him but not too much. You're the white fiancée of a black man

in a black business run by white men. You take the backseat on all matters, and you pray that you don't cause a scandal that requires your man to defend your honor. We don't need a black man defending a sexed-up white, rich woman in the media. That's not the kind of attention we want. First and foremost, he's a man who will be an idol for a bunch of little kids across the globe sometime very soon. But he doesn't want to alienate his community, his identity. Is that understood?"

The Princess of Katantia's eyes were wide. Her lower lip trembled, and I could sense the thoughts swirling around in that nasty head of hers. "What can I do?"



"FYLOX?" ALEX ASKED. HE WAS STILL IN HIS CUSTOM-tailored suit. He smelt like her, and she reeked of us, which confused the fuck out of me. She had hurried away the moment we returned to the mansion.

The charity event messed with her.

And I was there for it. I memorized every twitch, doubt, tear.

"What's going on with her?" Alex asked. My friend had mutated into a lovesick puppy, worried and invested in the princess' well-being.

"She can't deal with her new role," I told him. That was the truth.

"You call this a role?"

I nodded. "Your PR team made sure she knew the script."

"I don't want her to play a role. She's good the way she is. This is insane. We said she'd be my fiancée. I thought she wanted it. She's been with us for months, and I've never seen her this distraught..."

It was mean, but I had to do it. I used Alex's care, and I twisted it for my own gain. "Then we should allow her to get her hair back in red. She'll feel more comfortable."

“Yes, for sure.” Alex rubbed the back of his neck. “We’ll be doing this a lot in the future. She needs to be herself. That’s all I want...”

Me, too, brother. *When Kamila Ruby Wraith is herself, I can hate her freely.*

A loud distant shriek made the world move fast.

For different reasons, Alex and I sprinted in the direction of the hysterical voice. Alex wanted to save the princess. I wanted to kill whoever dared to harm her. Only I had the right to hurt her.

This was a compound in a gated community. Our men stood outside. How had there been an intruder?

Alex must have ignited the alarm because it started blaring, numbing my ears. Climbing the stairs, we headed for Kamila’s space. Alex didn’t carry in public; he left it to us. I had already drawn my gun, and I was ready to extract blood, watch it flow. It would look nice on Kamila’s skin. I couldn’t wait.

The princess’ door was ajar, and I could hear her pathetic pants from all the way out here. I stepped ahead of Alex because it was my job to protect him. He was the athlete, the celebrity, the talent—the precious son.

Kicking the door open, I wished to find the intruder in an uncompromising position. I wanted him to choke Kamila. Perhaps he could threaten her life with a knife? Maybe he’d knocked her out upon her scream...

What we found wasn’t a he.

It was a she.

One of Alex’s ex-girlfriends. The hideous one from somewhere in New York, where he’d gone to college. He’d been on and off with her for years. I grew tired of her shy and timid nature after ten minutes of watching them from the shadows.

“I... I punched her the way you taught me,” Kamila stuttered, gesturing at the body on the floor. I noticed that the

woman on the floor had cut her hair off, and her eyes were sunken. There was blood flowing out of the woman's nose but not enough. Kamila hadn't murdered. Hadn't she learned anything in my presence? I sighed. "Who is she? What's she doing in my room? She called me a whore, and that's an insult here, so I... I'm sorry!"

"No, you did well," Alex assured her. He stepped over the unconscious body of his ex, and he pulled Kamila into a hug. She shook so hard that I felt tempted to use a tranquilizer on her. "Holly and I stopped dating a while ago, but she hasn't acknowledged it yet."

"What?" I asked, dumbfounded.

"She's been, let's say, obsessed with me ever since I started playing for Indianapolis," Alex revealed. I couldn't see him blush, but he tilted his head, trying to sway us with his timid smile. I didn't buy it. He had played with his safety. That wasn't a joke.

"And that gives her the right to storm in here?" I asked. Kamila frowned at me while hugging Alex back on the floor next to Holly, panicking and overthinking. Of course, Alex had an ex. He'd told me about all of his previous relationships, the one-night-stands on the road. He was a single man in a business with a lot of whores involved. Groupies were everywhere. There was no limit for these men. "You told me you two were on and off."

"We haven't been on since my rookie year," Alex told me. Kamila and Alex stopped embracing, and I felt a wave of relief in my body. I stepped back, deflecting. "She has the code to the house. She comes here from time to time to find solace."

"Get. This. Bitch. Out. Of. Here." We turned around, and Jordan stood there, out of breath and ready to kill us all. Of course, we hadn't heard him coming. Not even I had. He cursed in front of me, and he only did that when he couldn't keep it together. "We're updating the security system, and we're installing new passwords. Is there any other charity that

we should know of? For fuck's sake, Alex. Are you trying to get Kamila killed?"

"She's just a girl. She doesn't mean any harm," Alex commented, rubbing the back of his neck. Again.

"Just a girl?" Kamila stood up from the floor. "You underestimate the power of pussy. When I meet my owner, he'll be mine. If any other, excuse me, Fylox, BITCH dares to touch him, she'll be dealt with accordingly. This person... Holly? She seems smitten by you."

"Stop talking. We have to remove the body. Is she dead?" Jordan asked, scanning Holly from afar. No, she wasn't dead. She was breathing, barely. The shock of seeing the Princess of Katantia in Alex Winters' home hadn't worn off yet. Hell, I was hardly used to her presence. "She's not dead. We're calling an ambulance. Or better yet, the fucking police. She's going to a mental institution..."

"That's a little overdramatic," Alex commented.

"Which part of 'we're a shadow organization' don't you understand, son?" Jordan asked. In his sunken eyes, I saw that the Kamila project was getting to my boss. Jordan had aged in the weeks we'd spent with the Princess of Katantia. She sucked the life out of us. "And I have to rehabilitate my men. They obviously didn't see this coming. Now, I have to teach them how to handle stalker bitches..."

"She's not a bitch." Alex rose from the floor. My best friend was done smiling for the day. We'd soured his mood. "I forgot to tell you. I haven't spoken to Holly in months, and it skipped my mind that she might come back for another visit. I barely spend any time at home, so she never bothers me personally. She goes through my clothes or memorabilia. That's all."

"She's still going to a mental institution."

"No."

"She is. It's over. Any other stalker won't be so lucky." Then he turned to Kamila. With a softer tone, he added, "You looked miserable out there. I'm getting you red hair dye. I

know what the PR team said. They're right, but you don't have to change. You're a decent woman, caught in a web of tragedy."

I wondered whether Kamila was afraid of spiders. I wasn't. Spiders had been my best friends when I was a child. They talked to me when nobody else would. Would my friends be so kind to Kamila? Or would they help me scare the shit out of her?

CHAPTER 17

QUEEN PENELOPE WRAITH



THIRTY YEARS OLD

SPEECHLESS, MY DAUGHTER STARED AT THE RED DOT ON HER panties. She couldn't stand still. She dropped them on the floor like they were a disease she didn't want any part of. Her gaze lifted to me, asking me questions I had coached myself to answer.

My two boys didn't need me like this.

Kamila was special. She understood things that weren't meant to be understood by a pre-teen.

"Take a shower. I'll get you pads and tampons. You can decide what you want to use, sweetie," I told her, gulping down the sob that threatened to emerge. I'd been in Katantia for twelve years already.

"Can't I make it stop? I don't want to bleed. It hurts. Is it really normal to bleed? I feel dizzy. It surely can't be normal. Mom, please, help me," Kamila begged me, and I didn't know how to deal with her outburst. She aced all the tests that I gave her. Some days, she was more in tune with her lessons than I was, and I was supposed to be her teacher.

"You'll have to live with this now," I said. It felt hard to breathe when you believed you were a failure. "Remember, we talked about this in biology."

"Yes... But we were referring to other girls. I'm special. You always stress how special I am." I couldn't ignore the pout on her face. She looked like me when I was her age.

Weston did, too. They were almost identical. Meanwhile, Aris had taken after his father... “I don’t go to school with the others. I have my own house. No man will ever be my owner. I get to choose what I eat. What about all of that? I’m special. You said so. You never menstruate. I’m your daughter, so I’m special.”

“I don’t menstruate any more because I had my children, and I...” How did I say it without breaking her little heart? “I removed an essential part of me, and, now, I don’t have to worry about that anymore. Not everyone can do that since it’s a dangerous operation, reserved only for emergencies.”

“I don’t believe it. I’m sure Daddy will allow me to remove my essential part, too. Is it your uterus? You don’t have to sugarcoat it. I know the terms,” she responded, lifting the corner of her mouth at me. Her father would never allow her to undergo a procedure like I had. I’d done it in secret, and I’d paid dearly for it.

“You might have all these privileges, but, deep down, you’re just a little girl. Now, you’re a young woman.” I didn’t want to be here. I wanted to leave this country, but I couldn’t. My children came first. I had to protect them. If I left, Aram would harm them. He would jeopardize everything I’d tried to build with them. “As a young woman, you have responsibilities. This is one of them. Clean up now, and pick what you want, pads or tampons. We’re going to Euphoria to celebrate.”

“What’s there to celebrate? I’m in a sour mood, and I hate my life! I feel like throwing up,” Kamila responded, exasperated. Her face was red, and I could see her sweating. Her arms hugged her belly. “It hurts.”

“We can go shopping after Euphoria?” I offered.

“Can’t we get a puppy? I promise to walk him,” she urged me. She’d been asking for one ever since she learned what a dog was. “And feed him. Clean him! Or her. Everything. It’ll distract me from this pain.”

“There are no pets on Katantia, sweetie.” None of the animal kind, at least. “Daddy has banned them. Perhaps when

you're older, you can convince him to lift the ban. For now, there isn't a household of this land that has domesticated animals."

She frowned, crossing her arms in front of her chest. "I hate this. Why don't Weston or Aris get to bleed like this? Life's unfair. This needs to change. It's unacceptable!"

"You're not even a real teenager yet, Kamila. What will I do then? You're too opinionated for your own good, sweetie." I stepped back, giving her more space. Reaching the doorframe of her room in the palace, I added, "But don't you ever change. I'm proud of you. You'll make the best princess one day."



"YOU GIVE LOVE A BAD NAME!" KAMILA AND I BELTED OUT the song, windows down and speakers blasting. We didn't have an escort of bodyguards because Aram believed that his citizens would never harm us. Up the hill we went, the stick shift up the mountain exhausted my hand and my legs.

"A BAD NAME!"

After Kamila's shower, she'd brightened up. She joined me in the car, and I drove around the inner city for a while. Kamila enjoyed watching Katantians go about their day. She asked questions about them, the collars, the tattoos, the tears, the glory.

I answered as vaguely as I could.

She knew the concept of Katantia, but it still appeared like a bad joke to her. I'd taught her that way. Perhaps, I could change the practices of the land until she grew out of her teens. Perhaps, I could make this world a better place for my daughter.

Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps.

In the end, I couldn't change anything.

Aram made sure of that when he impregnated me against my will. In my late teens, the trajectory of my life changed. My parents had moved to Katantia to live out their sex dreams when I was sixteen years old. They left me in California with a grandma that was busy attending Hollywood galas and premieres. While graduating from high school and applying to UCLA, I distracted myself from my loneliness. On and off, I visited my parents in Katantia. They paid for all of my expenses, and I was mesmerized by the exotic peninsula in the Arabian Ocean. I partied hard with the locals. I was used to it. The 80s in LA had prepared me for decadence.

One day, I stumbled upon Aram Wraith, not knowing who the fuck the tall man with the silver eyes was. He looked like the leader of the band, fucking groupies left and right.

Naturally, I fucked him, too. Not wanting to catch any of his sex island diseases, I only fucked him with a condom. It wasn't a one-time thing either. He alerted my parents. They shipped me off to the palace to spend the rest of my family vacation with the Prince of Katantia. I was high as a kite throughout my stay there, courtesy of Aram Wraith. I wasn't one to say no to a high, but he ruined drugs for me. My memories of my time at the palace were blurry. I never once met the king, the queen, or his younger brother.

Quite literally fucked into oblivion, I was trapped in a haze.

Eventually, it was time for me to go, and I spent my flight back home, puking my guts out. When I returned to LA, it took me a couple of weeks, but I found out I was pregnant.

After briefly considering abortion, I decided to raise the baby on my own.

That was until my grandma ratted me out to my parents.

They told the Katantian palace.

The palace sent the cavalry to pick me up, uprooting me from UCLA, a university I had studied hard to get into. I left behind my entire life, and I became the prince's wife because I carried his baby.

The prince didn't react well when we found out that the baby was a girl.

"Mom? We're here," Kamila commented. Worry didn't look good on my daughter's face. My sons never worried about a thing. The world was theirs. But this little girl? She had mountains to climb in her life, a horde of obligations to tackle. "Are you feeling fine? You seem sad. You didn't even skip the 'Bed of Roses' song that you hate so much."

I hadn't even noticed that it had played.

"I'm fine, sweetie. It's one of my headaches," I lied to my baby. I should love my sons more than I loved my daughter. That was what everyone expected. But I couldn't resist my daughter and her energy. She was a little version of me. She had the fire that Aram had extinguished in the 80s.

"Can I get a smoothie?" Kamila asked. We locked the car, and we hurried into the newly refurbished Euphoria. As soon as the staff noticed that we had arrived, their moves became more hectic.

Kamila and I sat at our usual table with the prettiest view of Katantia. The night sky was dark, and the city lights were blinding. She was enthralled by the lights and the splendor. I couldn't stare at it for too long.

My gaze drifted towards the owner of Euphoria.

He was on his way to our table. At the age of Kamila's father, he was more youthful than Aram. Kindness radiated from him like it was in the air he breathed.

"What do we have here?" he asked, and Kamila turned to face him. She knew the royal etiquette, and she was kind to everybody on this island. "How was your day, ladies? Any news from the palace?"

Kamila shook her head, glancing at me. I was the grown-up. I had to conversate with this man. "No news, I'm afraid."

"I can never get anything out of your mother," he commented, smiling at us like he was genuinely happy to see us. "The usual, I suppose?"

“I’d like a smoothie, please! The fruity one,” Kamila chirped.

“Do you still make your waffles at this time?” I asked.

“For you two, we’d do them anytime,” he responded. “Chocolate sprinkles for our American woman? Syrup for our future princess?”

We nodded, and he retrieved to the bar.

“Do they really have to import the stuff they decorate the waffles with? Why can’t we grow it on our own? Is it that difficult?” Kamila asked, seemingly over her period pain. I hoped that she wasn’t one of the girls who suffered a lot during their periods. I wished that it was a one-time thing.

“Yes, sweetie. Daddy has import deals with all the important food companies and their CEOs.” They spent their summer vacations here with us, fucking their brains out at Pussy Buffets, Crack & Nut, and whorehouses while their wives and children enjoyed our child-friendly beaches. “It’s much cheaper that way. We have to spare expenses.”

The smoothie and the waffles arrived. I sipped on my tasteless water as my daughter munched away on her waffle, delighted at the foreign tastes on her tongue. Sweet or salty waffle dishes and other American habits of mine were rarely welcomed on Katantia, stamped as too exotic and luxurious even for the queen of this place.

I would love to take my children home and show them my world. Kamila would love the sunshine in California. The boys could take on surfing... “Mom, you’ve got that look again.”

“I’m sorry, sweetie,” I responded, shaking myself out of my nightmare. There was no way out. The day I let that fucker inside of me, that was the day I signed away my life. I had no idea that he was hunting for a bride. He had so many willing victims. Why the hell did he end up choosing me to grow his seed inside of me?

I should resent my children. But I didn’t. I never could. They were the only innocent beings in all of this.

“Kamila?” I caught my daughter with a spoonful of chocolate in her mouth. I hadn’t touched my waffle, so she took a bite from mine. She chewed, nodding that she’d heard me. I had to get this off of my chest. My parents might have abandoned me in California with a grandmother that couldn’t care less. But I wouldn’t do the same. I wouldn’t be comfortable with my child being sucked into a mess that I rode into freely. I didn’t come here out of my free will but still. I had a responsibility. “Listen to me, sweetie.”

She swallowed her bite, sipping on her smoothie. Then she said, “Yes, of course. What’s up?”

“There are tough times ahead.” I’d taught her the word euphemism. She knew the concept. My parents had been found dead shortly after I got married to the future King of Katantia. My babies’ grandfather was assassinated in his kingdom. There are a lot of coincidences in Katantia, and I can’t help but be wary. “We have to stick together. You, your brothers, and I.”

“What about Daddy?” she asked, knowing exactly what she was digging up.

“Let Daddy worry about himself. He’s the king.” Sighing, I continued, “I’ll always be here for you, you know that?” A quick nod. “And I love you the most. I’ll be by your side forever. Even if you think we’ve lost our connection when you’re mad at me when you hate me for giving birth to you in this country... I’ll never leave you. I know I don’t have much to offer but my word...”

“Mom, everybody loves you. What are you talking about? Everyone we meet is head over heels for you!” Kamila interjected. She withdrew her hands from the table. “I love you. I could never hate you.”

“Listen to me. You have to think of yourself. Nobody else will. These men in your family... Even when I tell you to keep your brothers close, what I mean is that you keep control of the situation. They think they have a right to own you. Well, they don’t. You’re my daughter. I didn’t want you to live here,

but you do. I'll have to live with that. Be selfish, sweetie. When it's between them or you, I hope you choose yourself."

Kamila shook her head in disbelief. Her frown didn't sit well with me. I gave her mixed signals. I was very well aware of that. One day, I preached the gospel of family. The next, I told her to be a self-centered bitch. "I'm special, mom. I know. I will never forget."

"Good. Now, eat up, and we'll go buy records from the vintage store downtown."

We ate our food, drank our refreshments, and paid the bill. I didn't leave bills for Aram to trace. I paid in cash even after the owner insisted that our meal was on the house.

"You can be really strange sometimes," Kamila commented with a chuckle as she put on her seat belt in the car. "Should I be worried that you'll turn into grandma?"

I laughed it off. But it wasn't funny. Kamila's grandma had been vilified ever since her husband's assassination in the year Aris was born. I'd laid the groundwork, so I could never become public enemy number one. Like Kamila said, the people loved me.

There was one person that didn't.

King Aram Wraith.

CHAPTER 18

KAMILA



ALEX'S OFFICE WAS FILLED WITH TROPHIES, JERSEYS, AND signed sports memorabilia. The trophies and the basketball jerseys were his, but the signatures on the baseballs, sneakers, and tennis rackets were from other people, names that I didn't recognize. Every day of this wicked week, when it was time to come in here and discuss the updates, I found myself lost in the history that this room held. Images of Alex with various people graced the walls. His genuine smile lightened up each frame. I took it all in, and my heart crumbled.

Jordan hadn't made it easy for Alex. He hadn't been around for his son when he was very young. But Alex turned out resilient and genuinely happy nonetheless.

Rape? That's not a word in my vocabulary, cunt.

Fylox, Alex, Jordan, and I were assembled in front of the desk, sitting in separate chairs that we'd brought over from the meeting room close by. After his practice ended, Alex had joined us in sweatpants and a hoodie with his team's logo on them. In any other circumstance, I'd be happy. But I wasn't.

Jordan rubbed the back of his neck. "We might have to go underground."

"Dad, I've publicly made a commitment to the Princess of Katantia," Alex reminded him.

"Let me worry about that. You're a renowned basketball player. You haven't married her yet. You could have any other bride in the world. You won't be crucified for switching partners," Jordan argued. I twitched, feeling a lump in my

throat. I was close to tears, and Alex noticed. He put his arm around me, drawing me to his body. He planted a kiss on the top of my head, and he reassured me that everything would be okay.

If experience had taught me one thing, it was that Alex had a target on his back now. After Jordan decided to take my plan of engagement, things changed.

I started feeling unsafe. Random noises made me jump. Every shadow terrorized me.

But I knew that it wouldn't.

"Mandy's been at the hospital for weeks now," I blurted out. "I haven't seen her ever since she left. Why are you keeping me away from her? Why can't I be with her? She needs me right now. She doesn't have anybody else! Did you separate us so that I don't see the state of the hospital? Will I be upset at her care?"

"I'm not as rich as Rawlins, but I got enough money to keep Mandy guarded and safe," Alex guaranteed. His hold provided me with comfort and security, an irresistible drug, so I removed myself from him.

Fylox didn't say a thing. These days, he'd taken it upon himself to exist even less than he usually did. He sat next to us, gawking ahead and into thin air. He sat upright and stiff like he was Jordan's soldier, which he technically was.

"We're paying for her medical expenses. My doctors are keeping everything under control," Alex added. "There's no need to make a big fuss about it. We need to think about the future."

"Can we find Manuel and kill him? Is that too much to ask? He isolated her from the world!" I blurted out, exasperated. Usually, a fibroid of that size would be visible in a yearly scan. Since Mandy was mostly kept inside, the uterine fibroid inside of her grew without anyone knowing about it. Not that Manuel cared! "I'm sorry for cursing, Fylox."

"Been there, done that. Manuel's dead," Jordan claimed, and I shuddered. Of course, he'd killed him when he brought

Mandy to me. “Her father is also to blame.”

I nodded. “Aram’s a dick, but he provides for everyone in Katantia. I don’t know how, but the gynecology departments of our hospitals are top-notch. I’ve been screened ever since I got my first period. I get a Pap smear every year. I can’t believe Spencer had her unprotected like that. This is outrageous. It’s not even that he didn’t have money to get her to the doctor’s.”

The men quieted. I could hear the dishwasher from the other end of the mansion. That was how quiet they were. I swallowed. “She’s like family. I’m worried about her. Spencer Rawlins is allowing us to think we’re in control. It’s what Aram does, too. They’re coming for us. If that means that we go off the grid once she’s healthy again, that’s what we do. I’m down.”

Jordan had something to say. I felt it bubbling from inside of him. It was right there, fighting to come out of his lips. But he kept his mouth shut. Defeated, he gave me a nod. “I’ll be going to visit her now. I’ll update you later tonight. Don’t do anything stupid while I’m gone.”

Why did he sound reserved?

The three of us nodded. We were Jordan’s subjects, playing the parts he prepared for us. It wasn’t a tedious job. At least, we were confident in our leader. His plans always worked out.

“Please, give her a kiss on my behalf. I miss her, and I’m sorry that I can’t be there for her,” I told Jordan as he prepared to step out of Alex’s office.

Jordan gave me that look of declaration. The one that said, hey, it’ll be fine. “We might be able to get her to join us here if the surgeries go well.”

I swallowed. “Yes.”

Quietly, Jordan left the office. We could hear his steps out in the hallway. It was just us three in this house. Alex had fired the staff that worked for him, cleaning and cooking for him. Nobody was supposed to know Fylox was here. Even if we

had guards lined up, they wouldn't stand a chance against Spencer's well-oiled and supremely funded machinery that was out for our blood.

I sniffled. Alex's hand caressed my newly refurbished red locks of hair.

"Dinner will be served in an hour. Be there," Fylox announced, getting to his feet.

"Maybe we'll need some more time. What do you think, baby?" Alex asked me, his thumb picking up some tears on my cheek.

I shook my head. "I'll be fine."

"It's getting tiring to ask for her permission all the time. That's not how this game is played," Fylox complained.

"If you want to touch her, hurt her and belittle her in my presence, that's what you need to do," Alex stated determinedly. There wasn't a hint of fun in his tone.

"Alex, it's okay. I asked for it," I blurted out, sobering up. I untangled myself from his protective hold. My gaze drifted from one man to the other. "I know you don't understand, but that's what I need right now. I'm having cravings and what Fylox is providing me with is a much-needed distraction."

"I can fuck you into oblivion, baby. You don't need him. I can make you forget everything that's bothering you," Alex reminded me, pleading for me to change. I couldn't change, though. Aram had groomed me into this sick person with twisted tastes.

"I know you can, but there are things that I can never forget."

"Go work out if you can't handle it," Fylox suggested. He didn't judge his best friend. In fact, they didn't judge each other at all. I was the issue for Alex. He probably masturbated to a molded-to-perfection version of Kamila. One that didn't itch for a high. One that could shut up and play the game when required. One that would one day have his kids and keep his bed warm.

“This isn’t about me,” Alex responded. His eyes never left mine. “I don’t like what you allow him to do to you. I can’t ask you to stop. I’m just going to learn to understand your needs and listen to what you say.”

I sighed. “Why the fuck are you so perfect?”

“Somebody has to be in this story,” Alex replied, flashing me that heart-melting smile of his.

I wished that a smile could solve all of our problems.



“I KNOW HOW HE GOT INTO.... THIS,” ALEX COMMENTED, gesturing at me kneeling on the floor beside the dining table in one of their black short-sleeved t-shirts. “But how did you get into it? Did your father... Is that one of the things he did?”

“She’s not supposed to speak right now,” Fylox responded on my behalf. I kept my mouth shut as Fylox had ordered me to. On the heated floor, I knelt beside his chair, my flat palms resting on my naked thighs. I wasn’t wearing any underwear. The heels of my feet touched my ass, and my toes were curled. My chest was puffed out, without a bra as always, but my lower back wasn’t bent. My proud posture would make any Katantian man drool. Fylox approved of my excellent position, but he didn’t shower me with compliments. That wasn’t his style. He was a man of few words.

Mandy had been gone for weeks, and we had found a new routine. For a couple of hours every day, when Jordan left to visit Mandy, Fylox and I played. We couldn’t shoot guns. He was bored with teaching me how to punch him when all I did was gawk at him in lust and fear. We were stuck inside Alex’s mansion without any connection to the outside.

“But how can you like to do such things? I’m sure that’s brainwashing,” Alex uttered. I didn’t look at him, but I could hear his frustration. It was the same thing every day. He held onto the cutlery with such force that you could think he was ready to stab Fylox with his knife.

But he would never stab his friend.

“She never said anything of being your... I can’t even say it. That’s some white people shit right there,” Alex added.

“It’s a coping mechanism, and it doesn’t help if you keep shaming her.” I could envision Fylox rolling his eyes. I wasn’t allowed to look up. My gaze focused on their feet below the table. I had a thing for tall men, obviously. I could stay here for a little while longer and feel this lack of responsibility seep into my bones. “And you should know people of all races do this.”

Fylox noticed that I twitched at Alex’s words. He addressed me, “Climb unto my lap. It’s time for dinner.”

I did as told. As he expected me to, I spread my knees once I sat on him. He liked the possibility of access, although he barely ever touched me. I kept my hands to myself while he supported my lower back with his hand underneath the fabric of my shirt. My nipples peaked through the shirt. His free hand fed me the bites that he had precisely cut for me.

Alex studied us, trying to make sense of what was going on, but I didn’t look at him. When I sat on Fylox’s lap, I was allowed to look at his face. So I did. I prayed that his cognac eyes got me drunk. He had a face to remember, pretty as fuck but those eyes of his housed the devil. Those eyes had seen things that not even I could envision, and I had a pretty shitty background, Aram, and all that jazz. That hair of his was still bleached blond. Jordan hadn’t brought him new bleach in a couple of weeks, so the roots grew darker and darker.

I parted my lips, and Fylox filled my mouth with what he had cooked for today, oven-baked chicken marinated in oregano and lemon with potatoes on the side. He’d done a reasonably good job today. The first time we did this, I deemed it appropriate to comment on his lack of cooking skills. That had earned me a punishment that had astounded Alex. I still felt my cheeks burn as I sat on Fylox’s lap. Something hard poked at me from below, but I chewed and swallowed like I didn’t know what it was. This game Fylox and I had decided to play was full of rules.

We didn't particularly like each other, but it gave us a release that four months in solitude had spared us from. Fylox's hatred for me and loyalty towards Jordan helped him accept my proposal of a game. Of course, Alex had demanded that we only play in front of him, but we didn't. That wasn't how this game was played.

The truth was that Fylox could never hurt me more than Aram. He had lived through some fucked up shit. I didn't deny that, but Aram's actions had scarred my brain. His name was ingrained on my skull. My DNA was full of that man.

Alex felt comfort, knowing that he could be my hero.

However, he didn't know I was beyond saving. My time was almost up. This little game Fylox and I played? That was just to pass the dull time until everything blew up in our faces.

CHAPTER 19

WESTON



THE HOUSE THAT I'D GROWN UP IN SEEMED FOREIGN TO ME, although every material detail inside of it had remained the same. The changes had occurred in the people living here. There were no more palace staff members roaming the hallways and the kitchen.

Valentina was pregnant and... glowing. Her belly wasn't showing just yet, but Aris informed me of the pregnancy when I stepped through the door frame. He wasn't wearing the usual freshly pressed suit for work. He was in sweatpants and a shirt with our high school's name on it, for whatever reason. He escorted me to the living room as if I needed directions.

I sat on the opposite side of the now happy couple. A coffee table separated us. There were books and magazines sprawled all over it. Hot tea was boiling close to the edge where Valentina was sitting with her legs over my brother's lap.

"We heard. I'm so sorry, brother," Aris began, breaking the silence that I was too distracted to break.

"There's nothing to be sorry about. None of this is your fault," I assured him, running a hand through my hair to hide the trembles. "Kamila wanted out. I should've seen it coming. I knew her best, or so I thought. I just hope she's happy."

"Well, everyone knows how much I love my husband," Valentina commented, inspecting her polished nails. "But that man next to Kamila... She went off. He's so sweet that it's unbearably hot. He makes you come with a smile, I bet."

“Easy there, hormonal monster,” Aris playfully warned his wife. His hands rubbed the soles of her feet, and I stared at them like they had grown six arms.

“Do we know what’s wrong with Mandy?” she asked. Her face soured because she wasn’t that fond of her super daddy anymore. Valentina turned a blind eye to a lot of things in her life, but these past couple of months, she’d started to come out of her shell of protection. “My father’s been quiet about her.”

I shook my head. “Travis knows something, but he’s not letting me in on anything either.”

“Weston, are you okay?” my brother inquired, furrowing his brows. He stopped moving, observing me closely.

I didn’t respond.

“Weston, please. Get out of whatever’s going on inside of your head,” Aris urged me.

I didn’t know what he was talking about. Nothing was going on inside of my head. There was an eerie blank, begging to be filled with color.

“I’ve accomplished nothing. I’m a nobody,” I blurted out. “My... Aram is right. Travis is right. I don’t deserve Mandy. She doesn’t want me anymore, anyway. I’m a puppet in the kingdom’s games, nothing more.”

Valentina rolled her eyes. “Stop buying into what Aram says. He knows exactly which buttons to push. I say ignore his stupid words and focus on what you can improve about your situation.”

“She’s right,” Aris agreed. “Without us, he wouldn’t have happy citizens. We provide opium for the people, brother. Aram needs us. He’s a mean piece of shit that only got the throne because he impregnated mom. Katantia has faced multiple bankruptcies because of him. Things weren’t going well in the nineties and noughties. People were leaving Katantia, Weston. We’ve made them stay. Kamila has a whole cult out there, praying to their shrines of her. They love her. They want her back.”

“I doubt she’s ever coming back,” I replied, defeated.

Aris asked, “And that makes you sad?”

“No, obviously not.”

“Kamila has somehow managed to get friends with money. Hopefully, she can get over what we found out...” Then he remembered that his wife was sitting right next to him.

I took a deep breath. “I’ve made a decision.”

“And?” Aris wondered.

“I need you to tell me to stop. That I shouldn’t do it.”

“If you want to drag us to a Hole Store, then, yes. We’re not joining you. Aris is on house arrest until the baby pops out. And even then. No more Hole Stores for the foreseeable future...” Valentina mumbled.

“It’s not that,” I interrupted her. I exhaled. It was time to tell them. “I’ve withdrawn some of my money, and I’ve hidden it in safe places across Katantia.”

Valentina widened her eyes. “Why would you do that?”

“Aram threatened that he would take it all away. I made that money. I get to keep it.” I inhaled sharply. “I’m going to find Mandy and bring her back.”

“That’s not a good idea,” Aris replied dryly. “It’s not your job to take care of Mandy. For all we know, she’s somewhere sipping Tequila Sunrise. You shouldn’t mess with Spencer.”

“Just admit it,” Valentina commented nonchalantly. “My best friend’s pussy got you all worked up. You want to put a ring on her finger. Just admit it. We won’t judge.”

Aris looked at me. I looked at him. We shared a wordless moment. There wasn’t anything to say in front of Valentina. I respected Aris’s will enough not to cross the line and tell Valentina shit she didn’t need to know.

“Brother, she’s not from around here. That gesture you’re thinking of won’t leave her all buttered up. She’ll be mad at you for ages,” Aris warned me. The intense look in his eyes told me to lay low. “You can’t fly her over here when she just left voluntarily.”

“She left four months ago,” Valentina corrected. Unabashed, she went on. “I’d swoon.”

“You grew up here, babe. You’re a different breed,” Aris told her, tickling her toes. She jumped at the touch, letting out a burst of wholehearted laughter.

“I have a bad feeling about Mandy’s radio silence,” I revealed. “She’s vanished, and I want to know what the fuck’s going on.”

“You’ll regret it,” Aris commented. “Don’t turn her into Mom 2.0.”

I knew. Fuck if I knew.



I’LL ADMIT THAT MY FOLLOWING COURSE OF ACTION WAS A BIG *fuck off* to my father and, consequently, my uncle. Perhaps my sister, too.

I wanted the illusion of control. It had been taken from me, and I took it back.

When I told Travis that I intended to bring Mandy back to Katantia, he finally opened his mouth. He let me know Mandy had been in her father’s *care* for three months until one of his associates took her away. He told me that Mandy was sick, dangerously so. Travis warned me that it was a matter of life or death.

I was supposed to leave her alone.

But I couldn’t.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Travis asked me for the thousandth time. He ran through the equipment contracts that I was about to sign. The sun was setting in my home country. Travis and I were one of the few who were still at work. “You could just leave her in the States where she’ll have the best care.”

“Yes, but I don’t want to. She’ll come here, and my people will treat her.”

“You’re going to give Aram ideas, son,” Travis warned me. He squinted his eyes at a detail in the fine print of the documents. “This will turn out to be a costly operation. You won’t get this money back.”

“Mandy will be the first to be treated in Katantia. The equipment we’ll buy will stay for the next patients. Yearly, we fly hundreds of women with cervical cancer, fibroids, and endometriosis to foreign countries for treatment. It almost feels like hysterectomies are illegal here. It’s time to invest in our own hospitals,” I explained, pushing back my desk chair. I had cleared my desk. My laptop and hard drives were in Kamila’s home now. Once Mandy returned to my shores, I wouldn’t leave her side.

“Your mom...”

“What?” I urged Travis. He ran a hand through his hair.

“She had a hysterectomy behind your father’s back. She knew that your father would want more children. She flew to India, and she had it done there. It was the last unsupervised trip she ever had,” Travis revealed. His words confirmed what I knew. My mother’s life had been a complex bundle of despair. I knew that I had to give other women the option of hysterectomies on Katantia. Mom would approve.

“Aram won’t like this hysterectomy venture,” Travis added. He sighed, setting aside the documents. He handed them to me, and I signed one order after the other. “And Aram doesn’t react well to things he doesn’t like.”

“I know. I’ve been made aware,” I responded. I placed the pen on top of the stack of documents once I finished. “I don’t care. My sister has a new man. Mandy has been diagnosed, and now she needs treatment. She’ll have it here. We’ll start with everything she needs, and once her treatment is done, we’ll open the hospital wing to the rest of the population.”

“I repeat. It’ll get expensive.”

“And I don’t care. I’ll spend every last penny in my bank accounts,” I retorted. I needed the discussion to be over.

“We’re a country based on sex. I’m bribing all of these doctors to come and help us keep the population safe. End of story.”

“You’re also making a spectacle of your own family,” Travis reminded me. We never openly discussed Aram and Spencer being siblings in palace quarters.

I rolled my eyes. “When will she be here?”

“Mandy Rawlins will arrive in two days once all the equipment has shipped from Germany and China. The private Queen I hospital is preparing the east wing for remodeling as we speak. After Ms. Rawlins arrives, the doctors we’ve hired will confirm her diagnosis. Then they’ll ask her what she wants to do, which is ludicrous since we’re basically abducting the poor girl.”

“We’re not abducting her,” I corrected Travis. No, we weren’t abducting her. I was bringing her back because I couldn’t join her out there. I needed to know she would be okay.

“Will you keep her here after all of it is done?”

I didn’t respond.



I HAD OPTED OUT OF WEARING A SUIT TODAY. FOR TODAY’S events, I wore plain jeans and a long-sleeved black shirt. There was no need for a jacket. The winter had come and gone in December.

There was a light breeze on our shores, but I didn’t feel it. In fact, I could stand here in swimming trunks, and I wouldn’t give a damn. I was nervous for the first time in forever. The last time I’d felt this way was when my sister left me hanging in front of the wedding guests.

Mandy would probably spend some time hating me. I expected that.

The airport had been cleared. It was only me waiting for Mandy to arrive. I hadn’t told my brother or his wife because

the fewer people officially knew about this, the better. If Aram knew what I'd done, he hadn't put a stop to it.

The plane had landed about ten minutes ago, and the guards were bringing Mandy to me any minute now. I glanced at the clock on the wall of the arrivals hall. I hadn't brought a driver with me. She preferred it when I drove.

The sliding doors were tainted, so I couldn't see, but I could definitely hear the steps approaching. I tried to play down the goosebumps that decorated my skin. Travis was right. Adversity was a foreign word for me.

When the doors slid open, I blinked twice. Mandy walked in the middle of five guards that I had chosen for this operation. She was smaller than them, but as they moved, I caught glimpses of her face. She looked at the floor. Her eyes were sunken, and her skin was pale.

The doors closed. The formation of men that surrounded Mandy loosened up, revealing her to me. Her hair was pulled together in a ponytail. She wore gray sweatpants and a white hoodie with Indianapolis stamped over her chest in orange letters. Her shoes were snow white and flat as per usual.

She lifted her gaze, meeting mine.

Mandy stomped towards me. When she reached me, she was out of breath. She'd only taken a couple of steps. She spat, "You're unbelievable."

"Welcome back," I told her, unable to take my eyes off of her. She had become even more fragile.

"What did you bring me here for?" she inquired, flaring her nostrils. "To kill me? You could've done that in Indianapolis."

"I would never harm you," I said. The venom in her voice fueled me. "I brought you here to heal you."

She rolled her eyes at me.

CHAPTER 20

KAMILA



AFTER ALEX HAD A VIRTUAL MEETING ABOUT HIS SPONSORS and brand partnerships with his management, he joined Fylox and me in the movie theater on his mansion's second floor. I had been allowed a breather, and now it was back to game time.

Alex took his seat next to Fylox. The caramel recliners were just the right amount of soft and hard. I could imagine myself falling asleep while the movie we'd picked played. However, I wasn't going to sit on one of those chairs for the next two hours.

Jordan wasn't due home until after the movie finished.

I walked over to Fylox, sinking to the floor in front of him. Between his long legs, I sat, and I waited for further instructions. I tucked a strand of red hair behind my ear, and then I placed my flat palms on my thighs.

"I want her to watch this movie with me," Alex told Fylox.

"Too bad."

"Seriously, man?" Alex added, "You have her every day while I travel the country."

"I didn't exactly have her. She's not mine. We're only playing a game, and your bickering is sucking the fun out of it." Fylox's precise words cut me, making me bleed. I took a deep breath. He didn't lie. We hated each other. I burdened him with my presence. Now Mandy was sick, and she needed additional attention. We were a nuisance for these men. A little game to take the edge off was more than welcome.

“I want her to be mine.”

My heart plummeted. Thank the heavens that I wasn't allowed to speak. I didn't want to break Alex's heart. I wasn't what he envisioned. My reputation made it seem like I was trained for the monsters he was up against. That wasn't true. At home, I had been trained to appear in front of the public. But it wasn't anything that I didn't believe in. I enjoyed talking to the citizens of my home. I promoted our values with a heavy sexual undertone.

When Jordan brought us to Indianapolis, he was determined to have me appear in public with his son. Before we'd gone to a sports fundraiser that Alex had been invited to, his PR team set me aside, and they tried to rewire my brain.

I wasn't used to it.

I couldn't stand next to him and let him play the prominent role.

I'd grown up being the center of attention.

Sure, I was on my knees in front of Alex's best friend. Yes, I liked being degraded. But I didn't let the public see me that way. It was an allure that I'd created in Katantia. Not even my brother was allowed to see me on my knees for anyone.

“Do you want to sit on somebody's lap for the duration of the movie?” Fylox asked me.

“Whatever you say.” He didn't ask me to call him a particular name. I was glad. I couldn't envision myself calling Fylox ‘sir.’ That was too surreal.

“Sit on mine. You can sleep in Alex's arms tonight.”

I nodded. “Okay.”

Fylox helped me up from the floor, his fingers causing goosebumps to erupt all over my skin. The oversized black t-shirt I wore didn't leave much to the imagination of the two men in the room. He was big enough for me to pull my legs close to my chest as I sat on him. He didn't mind my weight on him. He didn't budge if I accidentally kicked him. His hand

was on the armchair and on my lower back, touching the skin under the shirt.

Alex let the movie play. We were fancy fucks over there in Katantia, but private home theaters were a new concept for me. I was used to private home sex dungeons instead.

The men watched the movie. I'd made Fylox download one with Jennifer Lawrence. I had been the one to pick the movie, but my attention was on Fylox's face.

Since we moved to Indianapolis, he shaved his face every day. I wanted to reach out and touch it, but I knew that it freaked him out. Cursing, scents, and body contact were a few things that triggered him. I was allowed to sit on him because he had given me permission to do so. He had control.

When the movie finished, Fylox's eyes finally met mine. "I should've made you watch the movie."

"What's going on here?" Jordan asked, and I jumped out of Fylox's lap like a bitch in heat. "What's she doing on your lap?"

"Dad, it's not what you think..." Alex tried to calm his father down. Jordan stomped towards us. I actually felt the ground move.

"Have you been fucking behind my back?" Jordan inquired, drawing his eyebrows together. "Is that why you're all weird these days, pretending to be flirty with him and all that? I smelt it from a mile away. You had sex with her!"

I shook my head. "I haven't had sex in four months, Jordan. Relax. I also haven't changed. I'm still the same old me, raunchy, dirty, and uncontrollable."

Fylox and I hadn't ended tonight's game. I knew that I would pay for my little outbreak, but I didn't care. I stormed out of the private movie theater, and I hurried into a random bathroom, locking the door behind me.

Panting, I sunk to the floor. I hugged myself for comfort.

Something was wrong with me again. I felt my heart pump hard in my chest, telling me to get the fuck up and cause some

damage. What would happen to Jordan if he found out his sister was my father's whore? He'd hate me.

Alex wouldn't even want to see my face anymore.

"Baby, come out. My dad overreacted as always. He had a stare-down with Fylox, and he took his outrage back," Alex said, knocking on my door. "Are you okay? You've been sad all day. Are you sure that you want to keep playing with Fylox?"

Sniffing, I rose from the floor. My eyes were filled with tears. Snot left my nose, and I didn't even bother to wipe it. I unlocked the door, letting Alex step inside. When he saw my puffy eyes, he started comforting me, pulling me in for a hug. I removed myself from his touch, heaving. "I like playing with Fylox. It's who I am, Alex. I'm a whore. I like the most depraved things in bed. I'm sure Fylox hasn't even started playing the game for real. There's so much more he could do... I know you think I'm this glorified sex doll. I might even be that for someone in this country. But that someone isn't you. When Mandy's out of surgery, we're leaving. Your dad was right when he sent you away."

Hurt soaked his face, and that genuine smile of his was long gone.

"You're not a sex doll to me," Alex argued.

"Then I'm something you wish to protect. I must seem fragile to you."

"I like you, Kamila. Is that so hard to believe?"

Defeated, I responded, "There's not much to like about me. I'm ruined. My father destroyed me. People like Fylox and I, we're not sane. We'll never be. You're the most precious person I know. You deserve much better than me. I'm sure you'll find it, too."

Without another word, I left the bathroom and headed for the kitchen. To keep me busy, I started baking a chocolate cake. Jordan could bring Mandy a box of it to brighten her day. She liked chocolate a lot.

"She's not there," Jordan said, joining me in the kitchen.

“Who?” I asked nonchalantly.

“Mandy.”

I froze. “What do you mean?”

“I sent her back to Katantia. Weston has orchestrated an entire hospital wing renovation for her sake,” Jordan revealed. I saw red. “She’ll be safe with him watching her closely. He’s paid a bunch of doctors from all over the world to move to Katantia to treat her.”

I felt nauseous. “She was about to get over him. She was this close to moving on, and you sent her back to him? How dare you? Why didn’t you consult me?”

“This was a matter between Weston, Travis, and I,” Jordan said.

“You know what? Fuck you,” I spat at him. I glanced at the digital clock on the wall. My cake would be done in ten minutes, but with Mandy back in Katantia, it could burn for all I cared. “What am I here for? Are you waiting for the right time to send me back, too? Are you biding your time, waiting on that fat paycheck?”

“There aren’t many people on this earth that I answer to, but when Travis calls, I listen. I went through the logistics of the plan, and it sounded right to me. Mandy’s safer over there, far away from her father. Now, we only have you to protect. I suppose we should start packing up. We leave tomorrow.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” I blurted out.

“You were just telling my son that he’s better off without you,” Jordan responded, tilting his head to the side. “You were ready to leave.”

“I don’t want to leave with you. I don’t want to stay here. I want to go,” I told him.

He chuckled. “What did Fylox do to you?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re lying. I noticed it way back when it started. What did he do?” Jordan insisted.

Fylox and Alex joined us in the kitchen. I let out a sharp breath, my chest tightening. I didn't look at the guys.

“Are you going to tell him, or do I get the honors?” Fylox asked. His gaze was directed at me. “I know you're close to telling him. Just do it.”

CHAPTER 21

WESTON



MANDY DIDN'T CRY WHEN THE DOCTOR STEPPED OUTSIDE TO give us some privacy. We sat by a clean desk in a messy office filled with unopened boxes. I moved heaven on earth to get her here. I dragged all of these doctors here, too. The blond woman with the pixie cut hair that had just walked out of these messy four walls hadn't had time to unpack. She'd arrived only a day ago. We'd brought her here from Sweden.

"What do you want to do?" I asked Mandy tentatively.

The doctor, Ms. Bengtsson, had talked us through the procedure. Back in Indianapolis, Mandy had undergone multiple scans. Alexander Winter's people were thorough. Ms. Bengtsson was Katantia's new resident gynecologic oncologist. She'd looked at the tests' results that Mandy had been through in the past weeks, and she suggested that we take a minute to think about our options. Her options. She'd emphasized that they were Mandy's options.

"I don't understand," Mandy blurted out, rubbing her eyes. "In September, Kamila's doctor screened me."

"Which doctor?"

"A mute woman. They never told me her name," Mandy responded. She swallowed. "Why didn't she tell me? This fibroid must have been there at the time I was screened."

"I'm guessing Aram pays that woman whoever she is," I told Mandy. I'd have to look into that doctor, kick her out of my country if need be. A sudden flare of anger teased the cells of my body. "Do you want to do the surgery?"

“Oh, now, you ask me what I want?” she snapped at me. I wasn’t afraid of a lot in this life; my father, another family member’s death. Her sunken red eyes were added to that list. She didn’t want to eat. She didn’t sleep. “You know what I want? I want my father to die a slow and painful death. I want Manuel to rot in hell. I want you to leave me alone. I want to go back to the States, grab a steering wheel, and drive off into the desert. Alone, so that I can die in peace without anybody ruling over me like they own me. That’s what I want.”

“I don’t own you,” I reminded her. “You made sure I’m aware of that.”

She gestured around us. “This entire charade screams ownership. I was fine in Indianapolis. Kamila was there. Alex and...”

“Who? Did you meet someone?” I asked, pathetic and urgent.

She squinted her eyes at me. “Unbelievable. No, I didn’t meet anyone. I’m just not supposed to talk to you about certain things.”

Mandy stretched her neck. Then she glared at me. “If you need to be in the hospital, do that. I don’t want you near me, though.”

“You don’t have anyone to support you. Let me help...”

“You’ve helped enough. I had people in Indianapolis,” she responded sharply. “Grant me that wish. I want to be alone right now. I’ve always been alone. I’ll be alone now, too.”

She added, “And thank you. Obviously, you want a thank you. Perhaps you want me to get on my knees and show my gratitude. Maybe you want a pity fuck, too?” She scoffed. “Who knows, after my surgery, when I’ll be all doped up, and in pain, you can come and have your way with me. You won’t even need a condom. Glorious, isn’t it?”

“Mandy, I...”

She interrupted me, “Just go.”



WHEN MANDY SAID SHE WANTED TO BE ALONE, SHE MEANT IT. She didn't allow anyone to visit her in the days that led up to her surgery. She didn't grant us permission to visit her afterward, either. Valentina and Aris had been made aware of Mandy's situation and its severity. They'd come to see her, but she told the doctors and nurses to refuse all entry.

They obeyed. Doctors walked a thin line in my country. They carried an inevitable frustration when dealing with us royals. The ones in the private hospital might have been the only ones that didn't follow royal orders.

I left my work at the palace, and I spent every day wandering the new east wing. Construction workers were speedily progressing the vision of the Queen I hospital's architect and mine. In a couple of months, this project would unfold all of its prestige to the Katantian public, just in time for Katantia's seventieth anniversary.

The doctors didn't provide me with updates on Mandy's health as often as I'd wanted them to. They knew that I wouldn't fire them, so they obeyed when Mandy told them to keep quiet. I'd taken her choice away when I brought her here, but I'd only done it to help her out.

With a coffee in hand that one of the royal-loving nurses had provided me with, I sat in the empty waiting room. There was a television in here. One I hadn't authorized. The bill would pop up on the stack on my desk at the palace. It had been brought here to keep me company. It didn't help. My sister was once again off the grid. Her boyfriend showed up on sports channels, annoying the fuck out of me with that attitude he carried around. His genuine face bothered me. His eloquent speech troubled me. His success bothered me. Everything about him irritated me—most of all, the fact that he had my sister.

I was upset that my sister had found safety somewhere else because I'd failed her.

“Mr. Wraith?” a gruff male voice addressed me. His hostility towards me was evident in his choice of words. Mr. Wraith? I wasn’t Mr. Wraith. Citizens of Katantia addressed me as Weston or Your Highness.

I raised my eyebrows, exhaling. “Are there any news?”

“She can be taken home. Ms. Bengtsson has requested multiple check-ins for the next two months, though. We’ve compiled a file for you to read through. You’ll find the appointments, medications, and other information in it,” the man told me. “If you have sexual intercourse with her right now, you’re increasing the chances of her getting an infection. Therefore, I strongly urge you to refrain from that.”

The malice in his voice rang bells in my ears. I’d done this to myself. I’d crafted this reputation of mania around me. Now, I had to live with people accusing me of being cruel. I nodded. “Anything else?”

“Get her to talk to a therapist. She’s blatantly refused to attend a single meeting.” The man led me out of the bleak waiting room, down the freshly painted hallway, and into the private room that I suspected had hosted Mandy for the last two weeks.

As I stepped into her view, she didn’t look at me. With a blank face, she sat in a wheelchair. Her clothes were neatly folded on her thighs. Her hands gripped the fabric intensely.

The pressure in the back of my head returned. It overwhelmed me to see her like this. We hadn’t known each other for too long, but in the time we’d spent together, I had never experienced her as cold as she appeared today.

Ms. Bengtsson soon joined us, explaining the fine print of Mandy’s release. I listened, and I asked questions, much to Mandy’s dismay. The doctor gave me her phone number, the new one she’d purchased for her stay in my country, and she asked me to be patient with Mandy.

Once we were out of the hospital, I helped Mandy out of the wheelchair. She all but murdered me with the look of wrath in her eyes.

“Where are you taking me?” Mandy asked as soon as we hit the highway. “The palace is the other way around.”

“We’re going to my mother’s vacation home,” I told her, stealing a swift glimpse at her. “I figured the palace wouldn’t be a good place to recover in.”

She didn’t say another word.



WE ARRIVED AT THE VACATION HOME WITH THE SUN STARING down upon us. I parked the car in the garage, and before I could help Mandy out of the car, she opened the door for herself. Holding on to any surface she could grasp, she stumbled away from me.

I took a deep breath.

Then I exited the car with all the medical documents in hand.

When I heard a loud shriek from inside the house, I ran, following the noise. Past the hallway, I entered the living room, where I found Aram standing by the window that overlooked the front yard.

“Ah, nice of you to join us,” Aram said plainly.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, approaching Mandy. Her face was red, and her hands were trembling. When I touched her shoulder, she flinched, shoving me away.

“I came to wish my niece a speedy recovery,” Aram commented. There was a numbness inside of me, one that I couldn’t shake off. Of course, he knew. His eyes studied the living room, eventually landing on me. “Your mother loved this house. It reminded her of simpler times. Days when her parents were still living with her in SoCal before they abandoned her to move to Katantia. She put a lot of effort into making this place home. In fact, she put a lot of effort into making every place outside the palace home for herself and her children.”

“Get to the point,” I urged him, my patience running low. Mandy shook beside me.

“I gave you an ultimatum, son.” He inhaled through his teeth, his silver eyes scanning me. He gestured at Mandy and me. “You certainly went above and beyond. You’ve outdone yourself, making your pathetic little girlfriend infertile. Good for you. I didn’t think you had the balls to go that far.”

“He didn’t make me,” Mandy interfered. “I had to do it. It was my choice.”

“Silence,” he thundered. “You don’t talk in my presence. You’re not even a woman anymore. You’ve lost your purpose at... how old are you? Twenty? Twenty-one? You might as well go ahead and kill yourself since you don’t want to be a whore either.”

Mandy scowled at Aram. I balled my fists.

“Clever, what you’ve done. Unnecessary but clever. You see, Mandy’s safe from me. You can come to the palace and fuck your brains out, for all I care. She’s now less of a threat to me than a fly. Not that she ever was, my niece.” Aram smirked at Mandy, and I wanted to grab a knife and butcher his face. “I’ll get your sister. Her fate’s still the same. But my little niece? She can die on your dick. My other son is producing my worthy heir. You can waste away in here.”

“And? Are you done preaching your shit?”

“Son, I’m not done in any way. It all just began. You need to buckle up.” Aram cleared his throat. “It’s time for a little story, don’t you think?”

CHAPTER 22

KAMILA



UPON PUTTING ON OVEN GLOVES TO REMOVE THE ALMOST burned chocolate cake from Alex's hyper-modern oven, I placed it on the kitchen island. The men were studying me hard. Father and son looked like mirrors of each other if you took out the fact that Jordan was straight-up miserable most of the time. Fylox didn't open his mouth. I said I would finally tell them what had been bothering me, and he respected that.

I stared at the cake, speechless.

I didn't know how to process what my brother had done. Knowing that we could've taken care of her just as well here in Indianapolis... It rubbed me the wrong way. However, I also factored that her father was this close to taking her away from us. Perhaps it was a better idea to have her isolated in Katantia. Nonetheless, I still felt like shit because they hadn't consulted me. At all. I couldn't even begin to imagine what Mandy felt like.

So I started talking, and when I finished, Fylox and I gazed at the Winters men like we were expecting an explosion.

It didn't come.

"That's what had you worried?" Jordan asked. He didn't sound furious with me anymore. He had gone back to the Jordan I'd experienced back during our first days together when we watched Alex play basketball on the television and in the arena.

I nodded.

Jordan turned to Fylox. "And you also bought into it?"

“Why aren’t you shocked by this?” Fylox inquired, drawing his eyebrows together. He was clearly mystified by all of this.

“Do you take me for a fool, Fylox?”

“No, sir.”

“Do you think I wouldn’t know my sister’s predicament?”

“I didn’t know what to think, sir. You were so carefree when you talked of her.”

“Do you always know what your sister is up to?”

“Yes, sir.” Fylox only called Jordan ‘sir’ when he had fucked up. It hadn’t happened much thus far in our acquaintance.

“Where is Maia Callie right now?”

“She’s with my mom, shopping for groceries.” How the fuck did Fylox know that? He stated his sister’s location so bluntly as if it was customary to be your sister’s stalker. I couldn’t wrap my head around calling Fylox a stalker, though. His intentions weren’t those of a stalker’s.

“And my sister is in the palace, in the king’s quarters,” Jordan revealed, not baffled at all.

Astounded, I took a step back from the chocolate cake in front of me. I didn’t care much about it anymore. I wouldn’t eat it. My appetite was gone. What was happening right now?

“I’m not a fool. Aram thinks he’s clever, but he’s not. His time will be up soon.” Jordan glanced at me, and I avoided his eyes. “We’ve made sacrifices over the years. Felicita knows the dangers of what she’s been tasked to do.”

No, I fucked them unconscious. We can talk freely. Yeah, I know. My cabinet is frustrated over the recent developments in the East. We can’t rely on our allies, but we can rely on our enemies. I don’t care about anything but this palace. Even if half the country’s population were to be killed in a bombing, I could still find new residents from all around the world to fill their spots. I don’t see the need to prepare my citizens for war.

I need new people under me. They all think Kamila's a fucking goddess when all she is is a used cunt.

“How can you have me around, knowing that Aram rapes your sister?” My temperature was so high that I saw stars. I could barely stand. My heart was palpitating.

“It's not your fault. Aram and Spencer play people like chess. You're not to blame for your father's actions. I know it makes you feel better when you think you have power, but, in all honesty, you don't,” Jordan commented.

“Dad.”

“No, it's true, and she needs to hear it. She lives under the illusion that just because she is the Princess of Katantia, she's somehow better off. All of this...” He waved his hand around. “This means that she doesn't have any power. I don't blame you for wanting to feel better. What Travis did to you and to Mandy... I haven't forgiven him for taking your mothers, although he didn't have a choice. He's going to pay for his sins for as long as he lives.”

Fylox sighed. Alex murmured under his breath. I stood there, not knowing what to do. The walls were caving in on me.

“If you're safe and happy, they pay.”

I swallowed, wiping sweat away that formed on my forehead. I grabbed the surface of the closest kitchen island for support.

“You need to tell me what's going on between the three of you because I'm old, and I don't understand what it means when you flirt with my son, but you sit on his best friend's lap. I'm confused,” Jordan revealed. He grabbed some plates from the cupboard. “Let's eat some cake while you explain yourselves to me.”



THE MEN SAVORED THE CAKE, BUT I DIDN'T MANAGE TO BRING the fork to my mouth. The cake was in crumbs all over my

plate, and I played with it like the spoiled princess that I was. We sat together in the elaborate dining room that was as big as the entire ground floor of my home back in Katantia. The table was long as fuck, but we only occupied one corner of it. Jordan sat at the top, of course. The guys on the one side and me on the other.

“I don’t know what you want us to explain,” I blurted out. “We don’t even know what we are.”

“You’re okay with her and Fylox?” Jordan asked his son.

Alex nodded. “You don’t have to understand everything, Dad.”

“I have to when it’s life or death. I need to know whether the dynamics have changed. A man in love will do things differently...”

“I’m not in love,” Fylox uttered. He put down his fork next to the plate that was squeaky clean, not a single crumb dirtying it.

“Okay, buddy,” Jordan responded, not entirely sold on Fylox’s statement.

I let out a harsh breath. “In a perfect world, we’d fuck all day long in all sorts of variations because I’m a filthy whore who will let anyone do just about anything to her. Is that what you want to hear?”

Fylox flinched. I’d pay for my curse words later. I couldn’t wait.

Jordan shook his head. “Stop being so defensive. I’m not judging you. I’m just asking. I’d appreciate it if you watched your tone.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Sit across my lap,” Fylox ordered, and goosebumps erupted all over me.

“What? No. Not in front of Jordan...” I mumbled, secretly considering it. I was already squeezing my thighs together in anticipation.

“Sit across my lap. I won’t ask you again.”

“Or what?”

“Or I’ll have Jordan present for your punishment, and I know how much you hate being publicly humiliated,” Fylox warned me. I swallowed.

“You don’t have to do that. I would never... That’s kind of disgusting,” Jordan commented, defensibly lifting his hands in innocence. “Son, you... You watch them?”

I took a deep breath, and then I pushed back my chair. On my way to the other end of the table, I felt their eyes on me, and it made me more nervous than I had ever been. Doing this in front of other people reminded me of Aram, and me thinking of Aram while upset didn’t do me any good. I hoped that Fylox hid his medicines tonight because I was in a horrible mood. My itchy fingers wouldn’t say no to a taste of the forbidden.

I took a seat across Fylox’s lap. My legs touched Alex’s thighs. He made a move to caress me, but Fylox stopped him. Fylox’s hand supported my lower back above my shirt. He didn’t want to get too raunchy in front of his boss.

My mind went to places. I wanted to throw up, but I had barely eaten anything today. Fylox and I had skipped breakfast to swim in Alex’s massive indoor pool, another luxury that I knew little about. We didn’t believe in pools in Katantia. We had the ocean. Pools wasted water, and we couldn’t have that.

I closed my eyes and thought of better days, back when mom taught me how to swim.

Just breathe, sweetie. I’m so proud of you.

A knot formed in my stomach. She wouldn’t be too proud nowadays.

“Open your eyes, Kamila. That’s not how we play. You’re present when we do this,” Fylox demanded fiercely. “Have I given you any reason not to trust me? Do you think I’ll touch you inappropriately in front of Jordan? Have I given you the right to think that low of me?”

I obeyed his command, but I rolled my eyes.

“And you need to stop rolling your eyes. That’s disrespectful.”

I crossed my arms in front of my chest, feeling a hundred pounds of sadness weigh me down. If I opened my mouth, I’d start crying. I needed a smoke. I needed something.

“You remember when I told you that the men... and women who bought me had peculiar tastes,” Fylox began, addressing Jordan. His fingers draped around my knees, massaging them softly. “I can’t quite get rid of them. I don’t like playing the subservient role. If your son knows where I go when I’m alone, you probably know, too. I don’t have sex with these girls. I barely do these days, but that’s beside the point. This power play relaxes me, and apparently, it does the same for Kamila.”

“She doesn’t seem relaxed,” Jordan observed.

I scoffed.

“Kamila,” Fylox lectured me.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t really be the happy go lucky type of bitch that all of you seem to think I am right now.” I stood up from Fylox’s lap, shoving aside his hands. Alex got up as well, alerted by my outburst. “I’m not happy. I’m depressed. My friend is gone. You... I don’t fucking know, okay? You could’ve told me that you knew about Felicita and Aram. And you didn’t have to be so cross about me being... You could’ve told me what you were planning with Mandy. She’s my family. I’m sorry, but I can’t play right now. I don’t want to play in front of Jordan. That’s not me.”

Acting is a fundamental part of life, sweetie. The faster you learn that the better equipped you’ll be.

Fylox wanted to say something, but Alex didn’t let him. “You’ve done enough.”

“I don’t need you to stand up for me,” I barked at Alex. “Stay here. Discuss my sex life with your dad some more. I’m out. I should go drown in your pool or something.”

I stormed out of the dining room.

“You can’t say shit like that and leave!” one of the men called after me.

It took me a couple of minutes, but I ended up at the indoor pool. Taking off my clothes one by one, I remained in my underwear. No bra. I let out a mirthless laugh.

Climbing into the pool, I embraced the temperature of the water. It wasn’t too cold or too warm. I hadn’t brought a towel, but the room was sweltering. I wouldn’t get cold easily.

“Sweetie, I have to tell you something.”

“I don’t fucking care!”

“Don’t raise your voice at me, Kamila. I’m warning you!”

“What will you do, huh? Exile me to my villa? DO IT. I can’t fucking wait to live alone, away from all this shit!”

“Why are you acting like this? What have I done wrong? I just want to have a conversation with you.”

“I don’t trust you! You lie. You manipulate people! You’re a bitch just like Daddy says! Ouch. That hurt. Fuck!”

“I’m... I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to do that. Kamila, please, let me get you some ice.”

“DON’T TOUCH ME!”

After swimming a couple of rounds to distract me, I halted in the middle of the pool, and I let myself float. Tears burst out of my eyes, and my chest heaved. I took deep breaths in an attempt to stop sobbing. I was becoming a pathetic mess.

“I didn’t ask you to sit on my lap to make you feel uncomfortable,” Fylox said, startling me to death. I hadn’t heard him enter the pool room. “I wanted to display what we did to Jordan in a PG way without the innuendos.”

“Well, I felt uncomfortable,” I responded dryly. “It reminded me of my father and how he used to play with Felicita and me in front of his friends.”

“That wasn’t my intent. I apologize,” he said sincerely. I kept floating, not wanting to look at his pretty face right now. “Jordan asked because he wants to know if he needs to take additional precautions. We have to explain to him what’s going on between the three of us. He thinks you’re stringing along his son. He doesn’t understand the... complexity of the situation.”

“What’s so difficult to understand? I fuck who I want to fuck,” I spat.

“Not right now, you don’t.” He added, “Watch your language.”

“Yeah, exactly. There’s nothing to explain. Alex fondles me every now and then. You’ve never touched my pussy. You pinch my nipples, and then you leave me hanging. I haven’t had any action in months. What’s there to explain?” I blurted out, my frustrations getting the best of me. They weren’t used to people like me. I didn’t feel ashamed of my complaints. I grew up like that. I had everything served to me on a silver platter.

“Get out of the pool, Kamila. Don’t threaten to drown in it ever again.”

“We’re not playing right now. You can drop the act.”

“I’m not playing with you. I mean it,” he insisted. “Get out of the pool.”

I couldn’t resist his voice. The demand in his tone had me all sorts of worked up. I hated my hormones, my irritability. I was bitchier than usual. I hoped that Mandy was doing okay. If she had made a return to Katantia, my brother would take care of her. He knew how much she meant to me. I knew how much she meant to him. She would be all right.

As for me? That was a question for another day.

I climbed out of the pool. Wet panties, dripping tits and all; it was probably a sight for sore eyes. I would’ve liked to see that from afar. Self-love. That was what had got me through the past few months of abstinence.

“What’s got you smirking?” Fylox asked, handing me a towel. He didn’t look at my body when we weren’t playing. He kept his eyes on mine.

I patted myself dry. “Nothing. Something Katantian.”

“Dress up. Jordan wants to talk calmly and without judgment. We’ll handle this like grownups.”

I nodded.

It turned out that Alex and Jordan were waiting outside of the pool room. I took a couple of steps back, startled, and I ran into Fylox’s hard body behind me. Taking a deep breath, I began, “Fylox is right. Power play relaxes me when it’s in a confined and controlled environment. Alex has asked to be present whenever Fylox and I play to help me out if need be. Fylox and I aren’t in love.” It gutted me to say that. “Alex and I aren’t in love.” Alex’s face fell. “I can’t speak for them, but I’m interested in both of them.”

I felt such a relief to finally speak about it openly.

“I’m incapable of love and all of that... BS. I like what we’re doing, stretching the rules of conventional dating and relationships. I think Fylox enjoys it, too, although he doesn’t show it overtly. Alex likes thinking he can save me. We all get what we need. Nobody’s being hurt. I’m not sleeping with anyone, to my dismay. That’s that,” I told Jordan. “You can rest assured I won’t ruin your son for your future grandkids. I’m just a phase.”

“You’re not a phase,” Alex assured me.

“Okay, kids. I think I need to let you talk it out between the three of you. I get what’s going on. Polyamory, or something? That’s a concept I can work with. I think.” Jordan skeptically gazed into nothing. He didn’t frequent *thinking*. He was the man who knew it all. “Let me know when you’ve worked out a situation that works for all three of you. If you need condoms, let me know. We don’t need her getting pregnant.”

“Dad,” Alex urged his father. “You’re kind of embarrassing us right now.”

“Why does every sex talk end in us feeling like teenagers?” I asked. “You should be able to discuss this without blushing like you’re some kids that just learned what a blowjob is.”

“You’re not in Katantia anymore, sugar.” With that, Jordan left. I could have sworn that I heard him chuckle as he strolled down the corridor.

“Should I empty the pool? I really didn’t like it when you threatened to drown in it,” Alex told me.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be such a brat. I don’t feel very well right now. I don’t know where any of this is going. I have a terrible feeling.”

Alex took me into his arms, and I embraced his warmth. My gaze landed on Fylox, who leaned against the wall. His eyes never left mine.

“You’re not a phase, Kamila,” Alex informed me gently. “I don’t think of you as a charity case. I’ve listened to everything you said, baby. I’m studying your every breath, and I want you to know we don’t have to put any labels on what we’re doing. Fylox would be more comfortable that way, too. But you need to stop undermining yourself. We’re both interested in you...”

“Don’t put words in my mouth,” Fylox interrupted his friend.

“You’re not interested?”

“I care. That’s it.”

“That’s Fylox, for he would like to fuck you, but he’s in his head too much,” Alex explained. He rubbed my shoulder, and I snuggled myself closer to him. “If it were up to me, I’d marry you right now. We’d finally get to consummate our marriage and all.”

“I didn’t know you were religious. Would you like for me to get on my knees and worship you?” I addressed Alex, but my eyes were on Fylox. My words were directed at both of them.

“Now that Mandy’s in Katantia, I think we should go through with the marriage.”

“You do?” I asked, full of hope.

“Yes.”

“Fylox?”

“I don’t care whose wife you are. When we’re playing, I own you.” I shuddered in excitement at what that entailed.

“That means he kind of likes you.”

“I understand Fylox. He and I, we’re kind of cut from the same cloth.”

There it was. A tiny smirk graced Fylox’s face. The man I embraced chuckled, and I felt it in my bones.

Alex suggested, “Let’s cheer you up a bit, shall we?”

“If you would only listen to me...”

“I don’t want to hear anything you have to say, liar.”

“I’m not a liar to you. I’m your mom!”

“FUCK. THAT.”

“I met your father at a party. After we had consensual sex, he started raping me. He drugged me, and he raped me.”

“AND? YOU’RE A LIAR! Daddy says you’re delusional!”

“I didn’t want to raise you here, Kamila. You have to believe me. I’m sorry that I keep you inside all the time, but it’s for the best. You’re vulnerable out there. People want to abuse your power. You have to be protected!”

“I’m fucking glad I grew up on Katantia. I wouldn’t have it any other way. I’m the fucking princess. Everybody loves me! Now, tell me. Am I grounded in my villa, or are you going to throw me in the cellar for disobeying your sorry rules?”

CHAPTER 23

WESTON



ARAM TOOK A SEAT ON THE SOFA AS IF HE HAD BEEN HERE before, knowing all the tricks. Well, this was the first time he'd stepped foot in the vacation home my mother had built for my siblings and me.

Stunned, Mandy gawked at him. She didn't move to sit, but her knees shook. Her fists were balled, and her skin was scarlet red after having been pale for so long.

"Make yourself comfortable," Aram ordered, gesturing at the sofa. His gaze drifted over Mandy as if she wasn't even there. Did that calm me? No, it was fucking rude.

Mandy muttered something under her breath as she moved to sit on the other end of the sofa, as far as possible from my father. I sat down in between them. I addressed my father. "Say what you need to say and leave. Mandy needs to rest."

"Although I don't care what this... thing does from now on..."

I interrupted him, "That's Mandy. She's not an object."

"Isn't she?" Aram smirked. "I see. You've already begun the search for a new object, a fertile one. You'll be keeping her here as a secret, then? Clever. I wouldn't have had it any other way. But... Wait. I had three kids, and I never surrounded myself with infertile... Things."

I rolled my eyes.

"You don't have to defend me," Mandy muttered under her breath.

“Did I give you permission to talk?” He shook his head. “Therefore, shut up. You’re not my sibling’s daughter, so you can get off your high horse.”

Alarm bells rang a sweet homecoming tune in my ears.

Aram chuckled. “But you know that already, don’t you? Spencer is my brother. Mandy Rawlins isn’t my niece by DNA. Spencer has recognized her as his daughter, but she’s not his kid.”

My father’s eyes scanned the room, landing on the framed pictures near the television. “Amalia had you with one of her bodyguards. She cheated on my big brother a lot, so we don’t know which bodyguard fucked her bare. When Spencer found out one of his employees started spending a lot of time with his daughter, he had him killed, of course. I believe she was, what, fifteen or sixteen? The foolish man made the mistake of asking Spencer to take the girl on trips across the country. He either wanted to fuck her, or he was her real father! He signed his death sentence right then and there.”

“You lie,” Mandy spat. I could feel her pulse without even touching her.

“I don’t, and I’m really glad. One less failure in the family,” Aram insisted.

Mandy swallowed, eyes wide.

The king revealed, “Spencer will be visiting Katantia soon, officially. I know he wants something he can’t have.”

“And what’s that?” I inquired.

“Our legacy, son. He wants what’s ours. He wants Katantia.”

Mandy commented, “That makes sense.”

“Would you shut up, or do I need to have you removed from the room?” Aram said, not giving a fuck. “You’re irrelevant in person. I get bored just looking at you.”

I moved, but Mandy grabbed my arm, holding me back.

Aram went on, “She’s lucky she’s infertile and sick. Or else I would’ve impregnated her, and she would’ve carried the kids of our future. She gets a free pass, the infertile whore. A silly girl that’s lost in limbo. With all of this...” He gestured at her body, judgment, and cruelty dripping from his eyelids. “She won’t go anywhere. She better enjoy her time as your sidepiece. I know you can do better. You’ve had such prime pussy in your life.”

Mandy scoffed.

Aram stood up. “You know, my father wanted Spencer for the throne. He was young, but my parents always admired him more than me. He performed great in school. Popularity came easy to him. He was a natural, presenting himself as a prince since his early teens. My younger brother was more beloved than me! He bewitched our parents to believe in him while I was left behind.”

Aram was flustered, talking about his family. After all these years, my father was still haunted by his inferiority complex. He went on, “They thought his modern vision for Katantia would be the perfect step forward. So I took matters into my own hands. The Katantian public might have been drugged up sex addicts back then, but they wouldn’t let a childless man on the throne. I fucked a lot of women, taking my time to choose who would be the next Queen of Katantia.”

“I don’t want to hear this,” I interjected sharply.

“When I stumbled across your mother, Weston, I noticed what a fine slut she was. Perfect mouth. Fuckable body. Holes juicier than a Hole Store! I took her home, and I spent two weeks rutting into her. I let her go home to California...”

“Shut up,” I urged him. I knew the story. Mom had told me. She’d trusted me with her pain.

“I let her go under the illusion of safety. She thought she was safe, but I had planted my seed inside of her. I dragged her back home by the hair, didn’t I? After she gave birth to Kamila, a birth that I didn’t witness because why would I even bother. I never wanted a cunt. I wanted a son! Once Kamila was done with, I fucked her some more. Of course, she

stopped wanting it. She never wanted it in the sixteen years of our relationship. How does that make you feel, son?"

Mandy's hand was wrapped around my arm, holding me back. I'd never let go in front of my father. But he had never discussed my mother's pain so openly. I needed an outlet. Somebody had to pay. I was ready to combust.

"Aris was born right after your pathetic grandfather was assassinated, and my fate was sealed. You know why? My grandpa and grandma knew how to appreciate me. They pushed me to marry your cunt of a mother and to fuck more sons into her. She was the ideal wife for a king, and I never let her go."

"Katantians wanted a competition for the throne because the morons loved my father like they love Kamila, but my grandfather knew that I deserved the throne. I got the keys to the country, and Spencer left with his tail tucked between his legs, changing his name. Once upon a time, he was Taron Wraith. When he left, all images of him were destroyed. Homes were raided to accomplish this feat. Katantia mourned Taron Wraith, and he won't have a resurrection on my watch."

"I don't appreciate that you wasted all that money on the new wing in the Queen I hospital. Mandy Rawlins isn't worth it." Mandy shot daggers at him with her eyes. "But I also acknowledge that we can now charge our citizens for these expensive treatments. In hindsight, we will be able to earn from it. Good thinking on your part, which is a rare occurrence in itself."

Aram chuckled some more, amused with himself. Nobody else was laughing. Mandy shook, and I barely kept it together. "You think you've got balls, son? Do not threaten me. I told you that I would put you in a casket, and I won't hesitate to do it. You'll sleep peacefully right next to your grandparents and your mother. Only you'll never wake up. Your pathetic girlfriend, whom you can once again fuck without the guilty conscience that your mom instilled upon you, is safe. But your sister isn't. She's still out there, and it's only a matter of time until she returns."

My father's face was full of disgust as he glanced at us one last time before leaving the house.

"Mandy..."

"I'm going upstairs. I need space," she announced.



THE SUN WAS OUT, AND THE WIND WAS LOUD ENOUGH TO cause a headache, but that was just my exhaustion speaking. I could hear the waves crash on the beach.

The vacation home's veranda was as long as the actual house. Under a wide beach umbrella, Valentina and Aris sat opposite me in their swimming trunks. They occupied the gray outdoor sofa that was almost as old as Valentina. You couldn't see the furniture's age; they had been under wraps until Aris and Valentina started coming over two weeks ago.

Aris leaned back, his arms wide open on the cushions behind him. Valentina's legs were spread across his lap, a fine pedicure coating her nails. She gazed at the sky while hugging one of the red pillows from inside the house. There was a hint of her pregnancy, but her belly wasn't that round yet.

"Do you think I should go tell her to join us?" Valentina asked.

"No, it's fine. I don't want to push her," I assured my sister-in-law.

"She knows we're here. If she wants to see us, she can come down. I hear women have a hard time readjusting after surgeries like that," Aris said, his eyes fixed on his wife. Valentina tugged the pillow closer to her at the mention of Mandy's surgery.

"I feel terrible for..." She sighed. "I don't even know how to approach her right now. Every day, it's the same thing. I don't want her to think I'm bragging or anything. I'm not. I'm very sad that... I can't wrap my head around the fact that she was healthy months ago, and now she can't have kids."

“Babe, that’s why we screen people here,” Aris explained. He moved one of his hands to his wife’s legs, massaging them. “We make sure that we detect illnesses like that early on.”

“Yeah, because you want babies that’ll pay for the future king to host parties of debauchery in the Main Hall,” Valentina uttered. Aris exhaled, amused. I sat there, baffled. The dynamic between them had shifted. “I can’t imagine what she feels like. I can’t sit here like this.”

She got up from the sofa, stretching. “I’ll go upstairs and ask her if she wants to take a swim with me.”

Neither Aris nor I objected.

I heard Valentina’s sandals as she left the veranda, reentering the vacation home.

“What did Aram say?” Aris immediately asked, leaning forward.

“The same thing he said two weeks ago. His narrative doesn’t change,” I revealed, feeling bloated. His kid hadn’t even been born yet, and I felt a deep sense of love for it. It had our blood. Therefore, it deserved our affection and protection. “It’s bad. They want our home, brother. What are we to do?”

“Spencer won’t have it,” Aris declared. “Aram... We shaped this country. He can’t take it from us.”

“Spencer has resources that we can’t even dream of. If he wants to, he can march mercenaries and tanks through our borders,” I said, rubbing the back of my neck. “Then there’s Kamila. I don’t trust the people she’s around. What if Spencer paid them? What if she’s walking into a trap?”

Aris shook his head. “What choices do we have?”

“We can leave, go underground,” I suggested.

“And watch our country go to shit under Aram and Spencer’s petty bitchfights? Brother, do you have no sense of responsibility towards our citizens?” Aris countered.

“What if you have to choose between your own flesh and blood, your child, and the citizens of this country? What if it’s do or die?”

Aris grew silent.

“Or we can stay and defend the land with Aram. Play along with his charades and bow to his threats. Our women will still be in danger, pregnant or not. Absent or in his bed.” My gaze drifted upstairs towards the windows of Kamila’s room. “Once she heals entirely, and the after-therapy is done with, I’ll send her back where she came from. She doesn’t want to be here.”

“I’m sorry,” Aris said. He genuinely was. He’d wished for Mandy to deny me, and now that it was actually happening, he realized how cruel his words had been back then. My brother was a man fueled by his energetic charisma. He was a passionate man, more so than me. He had channeled his energy in the wrong people before he fully committed to being the husband his wife deserved. Now, he was officially pussy-whipped, no more Hole Stores for him.

“Aram needs to go,” my brother realized. The words were barely audible, but I had heard him very clearly.

“We can’t...”

“Look at Grandpa.”

“That was the work of our enemies,” I reminded Aris.

“They say it was the work of our enemies. Then Aram says Grandpa wanted Taron or Spencer or Rich Daddy, whatever the fuck his name is, for the throne. Great-Grandpa was still alive and pulling strings. Think about it,” Aris insisted. The conspiracy was brewing there, between us. I had an open ear for sounds from inside the house, but Valentina’s sandals hadn’t yet announced her return. “And the gossip sites blamed it on Grandma who, as you would agree, would never hurt a damn fly. She rarely even ate meat.”

“What are you saying?” I asked, exhaling.

“We have a murderer in the family. Let’s put him to use.”

“You’d have your father killed?”

“Wouldn’t you?”

I sighed. Treason. We were discussing treason. “I’d do it myself if I could.”

“With him gone, we have the country to ourselves. We can rewrite the laws, make them more Westerner friendly. Go mainstream. If we were more liberal friendly, we wouldn’t have such a bad reputation in the West. Or in the East, for that matter. China has banned our name in their search engines. Think about all the possibilities. Tourists cramming our shores and all the social media presence we’d attain.” Aris seemingly had thought all of this through. His eyes were glistening in hope. “I won’t have my son or my baby girl grow up the way we did. That man is a walking bomb waiting to go off.”

“Imagine Valentina having a girl,” I blurted out, leaning back on my seat.

“I do. Every single day.”

“And?”

“I almost cry like a fucking loser at the mere thought.”

CHAPTER 24

KAMILA



ALEX'S MUSCLES WERE CAREFULLY CRAFTED THROUGH A regiment that controlled his eating and his workout habits. He never missed a beat, and he meticulously followed his schedules. The day after my breakdown, he took some time off.

Jordan was in the cellar, working with electronic devices that nobody could track. He was researching *things* about safe rooms like the ones in the Jodie Foster and Kristen Stewart movie, Fylox explained vaguely. We didn't hear or see him for the entirety of the day.

"I could never grow tired of seeing you like this. Maybe you should always accompany me when I work out," Alex suggested, approaching me. His skin glistened in sweat. He and Fylox had just played a one on one game on the indoor basketball court. Another luxury that I had no idea about. If I knew that I could have the spectacle of two men dripping in sweat in the privacy of my own home, I would have asked for it years ago. Instead, I wasted my time in Hole Stores, whose primary clientele was men who sought out pussy for sale.

I sat on the side of the court on an uncomfortable bench. Next to me, there was a stack of towels and a bunch of water bottles, opened and unopened.

Alex grabbed one of the towels, and he dried himself off. In the background, Fylox practiced his shot. Alex crouched down in front of me, glancing at me like I had a million secrets he couldn't wait to uncover.

“Fylox gives you a run for your money, I see,” I commented. Alex smirked, and Fylox stopped dribbling.

“He’s not competitive with me,” Fylox called. He jumped, shooting his shot. He scored. “He loses on purpose.”

“Really?” I inquired, tilting my head to the side.

“What can I say? My heart is big,” Alex responded coyly.

His smile was back, warming me up inside. I needed that desperately. I couldn’t give in to my bad habits. My fingers trembled whenever my thoughts drifted to the treats I could take to make myself feel better. Alex’s property was huge. It was bigger than all three of the houses on my street back in Katantia. I could sneak into the room Fylox where he hid his stash, and I could steal...

“Baby, that was an interlude for you to make a joke about what else is big about me. Have you lost your humor?” he asked, scooting closer to me. He was now between my legs, looking up at me with his heartwarming eyes.

“I want to get high,” I told him. His eyes widened. “I’m not very focused on what’s big or not right now.”

“Fylox?”

“We’re under strict orders not to give her anything,” Fylox stated. He picked up the ball, and he dribbled once again. He was imitating moves that Alex performed on the television. I remembered them although I had no idea about this sport.

“Pretty please? With a cherry on top? I’ve been clean for four months and a couple of weeks. I deserve a little something,” I begged, feeling utterly pathetic. That heart of mine didn’t want to stop thumping nervously. My skin erupted in sweat, and my limbs shook. I found myself back in square one. “I won’t bother you again. I’ll be gone for a couple of hours, and then when I return, I’ll be back to my good self.”

Alex grabbed my knees, pulling them further apart.

“We could give you something else, you know.”

“Trust me, I know.”

“Stop this nonsense,” Fylox said nonchalantly. He held the ball in his hand, stepping towards us. “You’re just moaning around because you’re furious that Mandy is gone. You’ll be fine in a couple of days. I’ve seen it before.”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s not every day that your loved one ends up in the hospital, awaiting their surgery.”

“Oh, she’s had her surgery, and she’s fine now,” Fylox revealed, and my jaw dropped. I crossed my arms in front of my chest, pouting. Fylox threw the ball into the carriage, where all the other balls were accumulated. Then he sat down next to me on the bench. “Pouting isn’t a good look on a princess.”

“A princess doesn’t like being lied to.”

“We’re not lying to you. We’re just omitting the truth.”

Alex rubbed my knees with his hands. They cupped me and then some. His fingers were long as fuck. “Let’s go take a shower.”

“I like my privacy, thank you very much,” Fylox announced, picking up one of the water bottles. He emptied it. I gawked at his Adam’s apple bopping, and I felt little to no shame.

“What if we played?” I proposed.

“You don’t like playing in the bathroom,” Alex reminded me, but I shook my head.

Fylox dropped the bottle. He stared at me. I stared right back at him. There were no words exchanged. I didn’t want to trust Fylox, but I did. And now he knew.

“Pick her up. Let’s go take a shower.”

“Together?” Alex asked, confused. “But...”

“It’s for her. I won’t be triggered. I’m good,” Fylox reassured Alex, but I felt the doubts seeping in.

The friends nodded at each other, and before I could utter the word threesome, Alex picked me up and threw me over his

shoulder. I kicked at him out of reflex. When his hand groped my ass, I stopped moving, and I bit my lip.

Alex waltzed out of the court with ease in his step. “You and he have more in common than you realize.”

“Yeah?” I was breathless, panting on top of him as he carried me around. I had never been manhandled like this; I was too big for anyone in my periphery. Not even Aram had ever tried to carry me over his shoulder, and I had done enough shit to piss him off.

“Fylox usually breaks down if I’m there. He has flashbacks or something. He gets delusions that I’m there to attack him. He doesn’t see me. He sees somebody else,” Alex explained. He started climbing the stairs, and I feared that I’d hit my head against the wall. As if he felt my fear, Alex minded his step, cocking his head to the side to check on me.

The walls outside of his trophy room slash office were covered in historical figures. I had studied some of them, like Martin Luther King Jr. Alex promised to teach me about all of them like he’d taught Fylox after he returned from his abusers.

“And you’re telling me this to prepare me for another hit in the head?” I deadpanned.

“No, baby. I’m telling you because he’s giving you a piece of him, and you’re doing the same. You both have a weak spot for bathrooms, I guess.” He halted in front of the bathroom with the wholesome view of his backyard. He never used it because his private quarters were on the floor above us.

“Bathroom crazy, yay.”

“That’s kind of insensitive,” Alex said, putting me down. I held onto him because I felt dizzy.

“Are you going to punish me?”

“I won’t,” he promised. “But I know somebody who would love to put you over his knee.”

I bit my lip.

“You should do it sometime,” I suggested, planting a kiss on his strong neck.

“Spank you?”

“Yup.” I nodded against his skin. Now, we both needed a shower. I was coated in his sweat.

Alex let out a chuckle. “Maybe I’ll spank you once you’re my wife.”

“That’s very gentlemanly of yours,” I responded, giggling to myself.

I removed myself from his hug to inspect the bathroom. The walk-in shower was large, and it would definitely suit all three of us. Everything inside of this house was gigantic. I had some adjustments to make once... I would never return to Katantia. I had to finally understand that concept.

While I checked the cupboards for soaps and towels, Alex stood there, observing me. I found the cupboard filled with soaps and shampoos. “Oh, I found a razor!”

Alex cursed underneath his breath. He stepped forward, gently removing the razor from my hold. “But we put all of them away...”

“I know where you stash everything. I’m an inquisitive person,” I told him, rummaging around the cupboard for anything with a scent. There wasn’t a single scented product.

“I thought Fylox watches over you while I’m gone.”

“He’s not my babysitter,” I replied, picking out the shampoo. I stashed it inside the shower. I pulled the oversized shirt I wore over my head, leaving my upper body exposed.

“We need to get you some pants. My dad...”

“Your dad wouldn’t look at me sexually even if you put me in a thong in front of him,” I assured Alex. “I tried.”

“Don’t remind me.” It amused me how much it bothered him. I liked teasing him. He should know I only wanted him and Fylox. His dad had been part of my post-Aram rebellion. Alex added, “It’s just... It’d be more respectful. It’s different out here. People aren’t as comfortable with nudity as you are.”

“Leave her be,” Fylox said, announcing himself. My heart jumped out of my chest. We found ourselves in a room full of mirrors, and I still didn’t see him coming. Alex didn’t even flinch.

“You need to stop scaring me to death,” I blurted out.

“No pants.”

“I think I should wear pants,” I countered. “I don’t like disrespecting my elders.”

“Don’t let my dad hear you call him an elder...”

“But you like disrespecting the ones who own you?”

“Hm...” I cocked my head to the side, licking my lower lip. “I don’t see any owners here. Owners fuck their objects, you know.”

Alex’s chuckle filled my ears. He slid out of his basketball shorts, and he walked into the shower without a worry in his head.

Back and forth, I rocked on the spot that Alex left me in. I waited for Fylox to give me a sign. I’d never done anything remotely erotic in a shower or a bathtub. They were taboo in my family. My mom was found dead in one. I swallowed. Fuck. I shouldn’t have thought about it.

I lowered my head, regretting that I had removed my shirt. I took a couple of steps back with the intent to let the men shower alone.

Fylox intervened. He grabbed me by my neck, and he, more or less, shoved me backward until my skin touched the cold tiles of the shower. Alex watched us, ready to come between us. My eyes wandered to Fylox, whose hold on my neck was giving me life.

His cognac eyes turned dark. I wanted to drown in them.

“Don’t mind us, Alex. Do your thing. I have a score to settle with our household’s disobedient brat.”

I snickered, and the hold around my neck tightened. I let my fingers wrap around his strong hand. His touch was warm

and lethal. He embraced my lower back, dragging me along under the spray of the shower with our clothes on. Naked Alex gawked at us, trying to make sense of what was happening. I could hear him think this was some *white people shit*, and I didn't blame him one bit.

I shut my eyes, leaning my head back and taking in the water.

“Open your eyes,” Fylox demanded. I did. “I’m trying to decide what to do to you.”

Nodding, I took both of the men in. Alex was trying to act like he was showering, but he was too busy eying us. He was worried that we'd do something we'd regret. To be completely honest, the look in Fylox's eyes scared me.

Just a tiny bit.

Fylox hadn't taken off his clothes as he stepped under the spray, so his clothes stuck to him. His white shirt became see-through, revealing the hefty amount of scars underneath.

“We don't have any condoms,” Alex told Fylox. “I could...”

“I can get condoms on my own if I need them,” Fylox snapped.

“You don't need a condom?”

He shook his head. Goosebumps erupted all over my skin. My nipples hardened, and I hugged myself, trying to hide my reaction.

“You don't fuck what you own with condoms now, do you?” Fylox stated, stepping forward.

“Fylox.” Concern coated Alex's voice, and the thought of his care consumed me.

“Turn around,” Fylox addressed me harshly. I took a deep breath, and I obeyed. “Lose the panties.”

I slipped out of them, throwing them out of the walk-in shower. They landed somewhere on a dry surface, splashing. One inhale, and Fylox was pressed against me, his hand

between us. His fingers explored my folds as I cursed against the wet tiles with shut eyes. My heart fluttered in excitement, and my hips moved to accommodate him.

In the countless hours of training with Fylox, I had caught glimpses of what he worked with. He wasn't as easy with an erection as Alex was. I felt him pressed against my ass when we played, and I sat on his lap without panties on. He wasn't as big as Alex. I drooled, thinking of Alex fucking my mouth. I lost it, thinking about how Fylox would feel on top of me with a wicked look in his eyes.

He moved his hand to the front, cupping my pussy generously. I hummed in pleasure, flourishing in the attention I was receiving. I felt better already, and I hadn't even had an orgasm yet. My fingers toyed with my nipples, rolling them.

“Do I need to ask if you've had anal before?”

I shook my head. He grabbed my hair with one hand while fucking my wet orifice with the other. I responded verbally, “No, you don't. I... I've done it before. Often. Very... Often.”

“How much will it take to fuck him out of you, huh?”

I opened my eyes in shock. Did he really just say that? “What?”

“Fylox, what are you doing? We said...”

“I know. I changed my mind.”

“Are you okay?” Alex inquired.

“Haven't been better.”

I felt his breath on my skin. The water kept flowing, making plopping noises in the background. When he planted a kiss on my shoulder blade, I froze. Fylox didn't frequent kissing. I mean, he barely touched a person. Having him up close and pressed against me with a hard dick begging for release, I was eagerly anticipating his next move.

“No safe words,” Fylox declared with his fingers plunged inside of my pussy. There was nothing gentle about Fylox as a man, and he certainly didn't finger me gently.

“No safe words,” I agreed. I could envision Alex flinch at this; he didn’t appreciate that we played unsafe games. When he removed his hands from my body, I felt momentarily empty.

I tilted my head to the side to see what he was up to. I saw him undress for me. I inhaled. My eyes drifted to Alex. “Can he hold me?”

“What did you say?” Fylox asked.

“Can Alex hold me while you...”

“What is it?” He was amused at my speechlessness. Fuck. I wasn’t a shy girl.

“I want Alex to hold me while you fuck my ass.”

“Sounds like something Alex would do,” Fylox commented smartly. “Scared already, brat?”

“Is brat the best name you can come up with?” I teased him.

“You prefer to be called a whore?”

I nodded.

“Too bad you haven’t earned the title yet.”

Alex joined us, moving in front of me. I held onto him, grabbing the sides of his head. I stood on my tiptoes to kiss him. It was weird, kissing Alex while Fylox stroked himself behind me. I felt his gaze on my skin, and it gave me shivers of the good kind.

“Aren’t you going to prep her? We don’t have lube...” Alex spoke against my lips. His hands didn’t move south. He feared accidentally touching Fylox and setting him off. Alex held my head in his hands, his thumb rubbing my jaw.

“Stop being so pragmatical about it,” Fylox said, sounding like he could give a fuck less. “Brats don’t deserve lube.”

I agreed with him. Fuck, it was wrong. I had horrible experiences with painful anal. I did. Three hospitalizations later, and I still hadn’t learned my lesson. I got wet just hearing him talk that way. I’d been wired wrong. I knew that.

“Hold onto your lord and savior, brat. This is going to hurt.”

“Fylox...” Alex wanted to intervene. He didn’t understand. I met his eyes, and I gazed at him. I wanted to say so much, but I couldn’t. This wasn’t the moment for sentimentalities. He was delightful, but he only needed to sit back and watch us do what we knew how to do best.

The water wasted away. Fylox spread my cheeks with his eager hands. After picking up some moisture from my pussy, his fingers found the tight ring of muscles. He played with me, relaxing the tightness. His fingers slid inside with ease. He removed them swiftly, lining up his hard cock. Alex watched me as I took frantic breaths. There was skepticism in his eyes, but I didn’t let it faze me. One of my hands was draped around Alex, and the other teased my nipples, sending tremors straight to my pussy.

When Fylox sunk into me, I gasped, needing a moment to recollect my thoughts. He hoisted me up with his arm around my hips. Consequently, he slid all the way in. His balls pressed against me. I was a sucker for pain, and the delicious stinging that I felt as a result of his length inside of me consumed me.

“Are you okay, baby?” Alex asked, caressing the side of my cheek. I nodded. Tears were coming from my eyes, but they were happy tears.

“I’m sorry, Fylox.” I added, “But it feels way too fucking good to be fucked again.”

He was already deep inside of me. When he thrust into me, basically shoving me right into Alex’s arms, I realized that I had been wrong.

“You can touch your pussy.”

“Can Alex touch me?”

A moment of silence followed. It felt like I was the only one breathing.

“Yes.”

I almost twirled with happiness.

The tension in the air evaporated, and a smirk graced Alex's face. He trailed one hand down my body, taking his time to tease me before he reached my wet folds. I rolled my nipples between my fingers, tilting my head to the side. The move propelled Alex forward. He planted kisses on the sensitive skin below my ear.

Fylox didn't move. I felt his thick cock inside of me, but he didn't shift. He drove me further up. I was now plastered against Alex, feeling his thickness against my belly. My feet didn't touch the ground anymore. It wasn't an entirely comfortable position. I could sense that the hands gripping me would result in marks tomorrow, but I didn't care. I'd put on some pants so that Jordan wouldn't be too scandalized.

My body was overly sensitive after months of neglect. I came on Alex's fingers, rubbing my clit, and Fylox took that as a sign to start moving inside of me. He took it slower than I expected. I had prepared myself for a bloodbath, but he was gentle with me.

"What are you doing?" I asked breathlessly.

"I hate you so much."

I frowned. His words caused more damage than a hard fuck would have. "What's the matter with you? You promised rough. This is... This could be Alex fucking my ass. No offense."

"None taken, baby." He ravished my pussy with his fingers.

"I can't." I heard Fylox's voice break, and I fought to climb out of my position. Fylox's cock slid out of me as I turned around to face him. I pulled him in for a hug, feeling his trembles.

"It's okay. It's just us..." I whispered words of comfort into his chest, massaging the tense muscles on his shoulders. "Shh. It's fine. You're with us now..."

Somehow, we ended up on the floor. Alex turned off the water, and he joined us. We were stark-naked, the three of us. There were no further words exchanged. I sat on Fylox's lap,

soothing him with my touch. He didn't twitch. There was no embarrassment between us. I held his heartbeat in the palm of my hands. Alex held my feet, toying with my toes to pass the time. He watched me with his friend. I could help Fylox because I was the queen of disaster. I didn't realize that I had grown out of being the traumatized party and into the leveled up version of myself.

Fylox didn't look at me. He studied the piles on the floor.

We were a strange bunch, and I hoped that Jordan didn't get any ideas. He should stay locked in his cellar with his secret stalker programs.

"What can I do to make it better?" I asked, tracing the lines of the scars on his chest. "I can always suck your dick if you want to. I'm pretty good at that. I'll make you forget all of your troubles."

Alex let out a low chuckle.

"I know you can, but there are things that I can never forget," Fylox said. I swallowed. I'd said that to Alex once. I nodded, understanding. He took a deep breath. "Let's just sit here for a moment."

"Okay." I gazed at his beautiful face. There was so much hurt inside of his brain. I couldn't even begin to comprehend it. "Can I touch your hair?"

"Why do you want to touch my hair?" Fylox asked, flaring his nostrils.

"I just do."

"Whatever."

I reached out, running my hand through his wet hair. I let the tips of my fingers linger. He closed his eyes, and I felt him relax underneath me. "You know my mom was found dead in a bathtub, right?"

"You tell us every other day, so, yeah, I'm aware," Fylox responded, and his voice sent chills down my spine. My fingers brushed his skull.

“I once tried to commit suicide in one, too,” I revealed. I heard Alex gasp. “My brother found me in time... There’s something unnerving about these places for people like us, isn’t it? Alex can step in here, wash and walk out all fresh and clean.”

“We’ll never be clean,” Fylox added, opening his eyes.

I nodded. “We clean and put everything where it’s supposed to be. Single corns of dust can derail us. It’s obsessive.”

I inhaled, breathing Fylox and Alex in. I liked being here with them. It eased my mind. Alex massaged my foot while I spoke. I continued, “All because others have defiled us. We can scrub ourselves clean, rub our skin bloody until everything is washed off. But we never realize that it’s all in our head.”

“They shaved my head during my first day in their captivity, and they kept that up until the very last day. I changed owners every three months or so. I don’t recall exactly. I didn’t have a concept of time back then. But they all did the same thing. I had no hair, and I was hosed down with water as cold as ice in the shower. Then they rubbed aromatic oils onto my skin, or they sprayed me with colognes they wanted to smell on me. I fought back, so they shoved me down and put a rag on me to cover my face, pouring water...”

My heart plummeted. I could barely breathe while listening to Fylox talk about what had happened to him. He had only been a child.

“Don’t cry, princess.”

“But why. Why would you hurt a child like this?”

“Why did your father do what he did to you?”

I swallowed back a sob. Alex remained silent throughout. Fylox moved his hand on my thigh.

“Who gave you the scars?” I asked, feeling nauseous. His upper body was filled with lines and cuts. He didn’t have any on his legs. The scars started fading out near his hips.

“They did. Every single one of them. It was their way of branding me, quite simple and cheap. That way, I also look like a suicidal maniac.”

“I’m so sorry,” I blurted out, turning around. I didn’t want him to see me cry. My chest heaved, and I struggled to breathe. We had the same concept in Katantia; the only difference was that we went to tattoo parlors to brand our objects. I felt sick.

Fylox pulled me closer to him, draping an arm around me. “Stop crying, princess. It’s not a good look on you.”

“He’s right,” Alex agreed, patting the soles of my feet. “Fylox is here with us now, and all of that is over.”

“Are you suicidal?” I asked Fylox. My heart pounded heavily.

He shook his head. “I can’t do that to them.” Them. His family. His best friend. “My family lost me once. I won’t let it happen again. Besides, if I kill myself, they win.”

I leaned forward, and I planted a kiss on the top of his head. “You’re way stronger than I am. I admire you, Fylox. You’re mean as... You’re very mean. That’s all I’m saying. But you’re resilient.”

“If you kiss me again without my explicit permission, you’ll see just how resilient I am.”

“Fylox.” Alex’s fingers stopped their movements on my feet.

“I’m a spoiled woman. Brat, excuse me. I don’t really have a concept of pain. Care to show me? Or maybe I should go downstairs. I think there’s an inquisitive teacher awaiting my questions...” I teased both of them, and it worked. Alex grabbed my ankle, pulling me towards him, and Fylox let him. When I mentioned Jordan, it was Alex’s business. In the hands of these two, I shifted like a doll. It was a refreshing feeling not to feel ashamed of my size.

The smile on Alex’s face faded. His sea-green eyes revealed that he was having wicked thoughts. “That smart

mouth of yours. It's time to stuff it. I can't take no more Dad talk from you."

"Gladly," I responded, crossing my arms in front of my chest. Alex didn't falter. His eyes remained on mine, challenging me.

"You good?" Alex asked his friend. There wasn't a verbal response. My shoulders sagged, and I pouted. They always wanted me to respond verbally, but they communicated with air signals when it was between the two of them.

Alex rose from the ground, towering over me as I knelt there in front of him. He lifted my chin with his long fingers, and I licked my lips.

CHAPTER 25

WESTON



I KNOCKED ON THE DOOR. I HEARD MANDY'S LIGHT STEPS from the other end, but she didn't move to open the door and let me in.

“Valentina asked me to ask you if you want to be there for her ultrasound,” I told her, raising my voice so that she could hear me for sure.

“When is it?” she asked, her voice timid.

“In two hours. We could also check in with Mrs. Bengtsson if you want. Your appointment with her is in three days,” I said. I checked the watch on my wrist. It had been too long since we had a conversation. She barely came down the stairs. I had food delivered because I was a horrible cook. She didn't eat any of it. When she ate, she only took a bite or two.

She still refused to see a therapist to talk about the new developments in her body.

“I'll come with.”

I fought hard not to let her hear my excitement. “Good. See you then.”

Climbing down the stairs, I headed for the beach to get some fresh air. I wasn't a fan of the water, but my sister and my mother were. They loved it out here. I could picture them swimming as I stood on the veranda.

Travis had caused disruption in my family. I couldn't forget that he was my mother's murderer. As valid as his excuses were, I couldn't ignore his crimes. Mandy didn't

either. The man of the Cross household had destroyed our lives, and now, he was attempting to rectify his mistakes. The other day, I asked him for his help to remove Aram from his seat, and he gave me a nod. Then he started explaining that there were multiple phases.

We had to make sure that Aris, Valentina, and their baby were safe. We'd have to smuggle them out of the country and away from Spencer and Aram's reach. Travis was thinking about Indonesia. I considered Switzerland.

"Weston?" I turned around. A neighbor had joined me. He was a short man with white hair. I hadn't seen him before. "It's a pleasure to meet you..."

"Weston's enough," I told him. He must have been new. "Welcome to Katantia."

"Thank you! It's a lovely place to live out my retirement," he said, and the grin on his face revealed that his sex enhancement pills were doing a good job. "I didn't know you resided in this house. It was empty when I first moved here in the winter."

With my hands in my pockets, I stood there. I didn't want to talk to anyone. I'd come out here to be alone. I explained, "I moved in recently. It's the royal vacation home."

"Oh, really? Will I meet the king as well? Should I prepare my home?" he asked, excited about the prospect.

I almost scowled. Royal etiquette demanded that I stand there and take it. "No, I'm afraid not."

"Well, then, you're the next best man to talk to!" I couldn't place his accent. "Some other homeowners and I have been discussing the recent news. I hear the palace is gearing up for a natural catastrophe? What's that all about? Are our houses protected? We live by the beach."

"Those are just measures. It doesn't mean there'll be an emergency. My father's just being precautious," I said. I hated referring to Aram as my father, but in public, I had to.

"Look, I came all the way from Germany. I purchased a refurbished home, and I'd appreciate it if it didn't flood or turn

into a ruin...”

“You can file a complaint,” I suggested. “Our government will take care of your concerns. I’m sorry, but I have to go now.”

Distracted by the new neighbor, I was late. I had to rush to my car. The Wraith sat hidden away in the garage. The poor thing hadn’t been taken out in a while. Everything I needed could either be delivered, or it was only a walk away.

To my surprise, Mandy was already inside the car when I reached the garage. She knew where I stashed the keys, and she let herself in. Her face was still sunken and pale. I could see that the lack of eating was translating to a loss of weight. It fucking hurt to have her like this.

We didn’t speak on our way to the Queen I hospital. I parked in the spot that I had bought for myself after Mandy’s extended hospitalization. She jumped out of the car as if the air inside of it was poisonous. I stared at her for a little too long, and she rolled her eyes at me. Then I led the way inside.

Some nurses greeted Mandy, and she gave them halfhearted smiles, acting as if she was on a speedy lane to recovery.

The Department of Gynecology was inside the east wing that was being expanded. I asked the reception about my brother’s whereabouts. The nurse led us to the room for the ultrasound, unenthusiastically, I might add.

“You came!” Valentina yelled the moment we stepped through the doorframe. She opened her arms wide, propelling Mandy to give her a hug. Aris and I watched their exchange. “We had to pull some strings to get the two of you in here. I’m so excited to finally know the gender.”

“I’m so happy for you,” Mandy told her friend. Her voice was dry. Valentina whispered something to Mandy, but only they could hear it.

Mandy and I took a seat next to the doctor’s desk while Aris stood next to the table that Valentina would be examined on. The doctor didn’t let us wait for long. Aris shook the

doctor's hand. She was one of the women that I had seen coming in and out of Mandy's room at some point during her hospitalization. They were all interconnected here.

The procedure was quite speedy, cold gel, a probe. Valentina's hand gripped Aris'. I watched my brother take deep breaths. He was more nervous than I had ever seen him before.

I wanted to reach out to Mandy, but she sat there, trying to ignore me to the best of her ability.

"Why is the heartbeat so fast?" Valentina asked, and I detected a side of her that she rarely allowed me to witness. Worry coated her voice. We were all mesmerized by the black and white image on the screen.

The doctor explained that it was nothing to worry about. That it was actually the normal beats per minute. She rubbed the probe around on Valentina's gel-coated lower belly. She explained what we were seeing, all the anatomy that could be detected at this stage.

Mandy kept her hands clasped in front of her face with her elbows on her thighs. Her eyes were wide as she glanced at Valentina and the screen.

As the doctor performed digital measurements of the baby, Aris commented, "It's moving so much."

The little creature didn't stay in one spot. I sighed. "I wish Kamila was here."

Aris nodded. Mandy lowered her head, avoiding to show her reaction.

The measurements were unproblematic. We waited for the gender reveal, for the little one didn't feel like cooperating with us. It kept moving around without showing the doctor what she wanted to see.

"We've got it," the doctor revealed. Valentina squeezed my brother's hand. Both of them gazed at this screen like it was the last thing they'd see in this world. "It's a girl."

Valentina gasped, but her eyes gleamed. Aris froze. I leaned back on my seat, exhaling. Mandy and the doctor congratulated the happy couple. Aris stood up, letting his wife's hand go. He rushed out of the room. Valentina's gaze followed her husband, but she couldn't leave the room in her state. Mandy approached Valentina, taking Aris's seat. She whispered comforting words to her, making the pregnant woman smile weakly.

I followed my brother outside.

I found him pacing around the hallway, muttering curses under his breath. I told him, "That's not a very good look, brother. Come back inside. You can't leave these two alone in there."

Aris swallowed visibly. Fidgeting with the cuffs of his shirt, he turned away from me.

"This is my punishment, Weston."

"What do you mean? You're expecting a healthy baby girl."

"I'm going to pay for every single thing I put her mother through. Or any other woman for that matter."

"Stop this karma deep dive and go back inside." I stepped closer to him, and I reached out to touch his shoulder. I was trying to keep a straight face, but I knew that he had a point. Raising a girl in Katantia... That was a challenge, to say the least. We'd seen it with Kamila. I felt pressure in the back of my head. She should be here for this. She would have loved to be around for this happy occasion.

"Fuck..."

I pulled my brother into a hug, something that rarely happened. I patted him on the back, and I could have sworn that I felt him sob. But he didn't make a sound.

"I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"That we're doing this amid Mandy's..."

“Today’s about you, not about Mandy or me. This is a good day for the family,” I reassured him. He nodded, and we distanced ourselves from each other. One look to the left, and I noticed a small group of nurses watching us from afar. “Come. You need to stand by Valentina right now.”



VALENTINA AND MANDY SAT IN THE BACK OF THE COUPÉ, discussing the baby. I worried that it wouldn’t do Mandy well, but thus far, she was genuinely excited for Valentina. My brother sat next to me, researching our country’s stores for all things baby gear.

We were headed for Euphoria, the café on top of the highest peak of Katantia. Kamila wasn’t here, but that was our way of honoring her and mom. They loved Euphoria.

Through its big windows, I observed that the spot was packed. We hadn’t sent our security guards ahead. I gestured at my brother, but he shook it off, drunk on excitement about his future baby girl.

“Last time I came here, there weren’t so many people around. I remember Kamila saying that the business was down,” Mandy commented. I took that statement, and I saved it in the back of my head. She hadn’t spoken like this in a long while. It was silly to pick at straws like that. But I was exhausted and mentally unprepared.

“People are desperate for Kamila,” Valentina said. I parked the car near Euphoria’s entrance. We had a reserved spot as royals because of my sister. “They know she likes this place, so they’ve started coming here in her honor.”

“That’s touching.”

“I went to get my hair done the other day, and people kept grilling me about her and her boyfriend. Some of her more obsessive fans claim her new life is a hoax and that she’s dead. That Aram is playing us all, trying to make more money from his offspring. It was quite disturbing...”

“When did you get your hair done?” Aris asked, perplexed. “I told you not to leave the palace...”

“I went while you were in the palace with my father,” Valentina revealed, looking out of the window. She was trying not to make a big deal out of it, but my brother wasn’t buying it. He had given her instructions because we found ourselves in a tricky situation.

“You might be in danger,” Mandy told her friend. “That’s why he wants you to stay inside. I wouldn’t want to stay inside all day long on his accord either, but you should take precautions with everything that’s going on. We should probably get you baby-friendly self-defense lessons.”

“Lessons? We have guards,” Aris argued. I turned the Wraith’s engine off. “We pay them a ton of money to keep us safe.”

“You live in a glasshouse, Aris,” Mandy countered. She took off her seat belt, and she sounded more confident than ever before. “Your father is your enemy. I know you don’t discuss these things in front of us because we’re such fragile petite women. But I hear your little chats. It wouldn’t hurt her to know how to defend herself if she ever were in a dire situation. She’s pregnant. She’s got two people that need protection. In this country, that isn’t a rare situation. People are upset these days. Tensions are rising. Kamila leaving left a big rift in your image.”

“Mandy, do you want to be my bodyguard?” Valentina asked, teasing her friend. She tickled Mandy’s side.

“I mean what I said,” Mandy stated.

“What happened to you?” Aris asked, turning to glance at Mandy. “You’re so different all of a sudden.”

“I had a wake-up call. Losing something you never knew you wanted does that to you,” Mandy told Aris. The girls couldn’t leave the car unless we stepped out. The Wraith only had two doors. She tapped on my seat, asking me to exit the vehicle. “And I held a gun in my hand after a long time. It felt pretty great, actually. Now, let me out of this car.”

Aris helped Valentina out of the car. I offered my hand, but Mandy didn't take it. She didn't even look at me. I stepped forward, leading the group inside Euphoria. It was one of the more modern spots of Katantia. It targeted young adults, people in Mandy's age. Most of them couldn't afford the ride or the drinks up here, so the business had been at an impasse for a while. Valentina was right. Ever since Kamila left, their numbers had been going up. I had read of it in their monthly tax report.

"Weston!" the man at the entrance was shocked at the sight of us. He stared at us for a little too long. Then he shook his head, clearing his throat. "What can I do for you? Should I clear the place?"

Aris responded, "No! We're celebrating. Let everyone stay. Drinks on me!"

"You're celebrating, Your Highness?" The man swallowed. He squinted his eyes. "What's the occasion? I thought with..."

"What did you hear?" I asked the man. The tag on his chest revealed that he was called Eddie.

"Maybe you should hear for yourself before they cut the networks again," Eddie mumbled, gesturing for us to step inside Euphoria. All of the tables were taken. With drinks in hand and snacks on the tables, our citizens gawked at the screens Euphoria provided for entertainment.

A man that I didn't know graced the screen, confident and broody.

"Mr. and Mrs. Winters are going on a honeymoon to Katantia, where Alex will meet the princess' family. He's looking forward to it. He's asked for two weeks off. He thought it'd be better to be upfront about it rather than lie and skip practice. He will be back in time for the games against Toronto and Milwaukee. For now, he wants to have a closer look at his wife's former home. He's always been interested in the concept of Katantia, curious, and critical."

CHAPTER 26

DOESN'T EXIST



ALL I SAW WAS RED.

Kamila Ruby Wraith represented everything I hated in this world. She was the embodiment of the system that had once upon a time owned me. I'd been sold. I'd been handed over from one person to another like merchandise.

When Jordan asked for this favor, he'd said the job was unconditional. He hadn't known how long it would last. We certainly hadn't expected to keep this running for four months, twenty days, six hours, and thirty seconds...

I didn't want it that way, but the red siren, as Jordan had initially dubbed her, had wormed herself into my being. She fit me like a glove, twisted, broken, and unafraid of her peculiar tastes. I didn't want it that way, but then again, since when did I get what I wanted from this life?

Control was something that I'd always yearned for. It was one of the things that kept me going through the motions of everyday life. When we decided to play a game of control, I wanted to reject her. I should've rejected her, let her down, and humiliate her. She was the red siren. She was the offspring of evil. The red blood flowing her veins was poison.

But I accepted her. I took up the challenge, and the red siren actually obeyed my every wish like a good girl. She made it so easy to fall into her trap. She lured me with those eyes that sucked away my energy. Her thick eyelashes batted once, twice. I was awestruck. I finally understood why my best

friend had freely waltzed into her periphery, falling head over heels for her.

Kamila Ruby Wraith was a creature of pain. She thrived upon it. When we trained together, she cherished the black and blue marks that I left on her skin due to her inability to defend herself. She gawked at them with awe in her eyes. She bit her lower lip, and she squeezed her thighs together whenever I choked her. I did it to wake her up, to get a rise out of her, but choking had the opposite effect on a woman like Kamila. She was a pain whore. She was sent into a state of ecstasy with my hands bruising her.

I'd had girls in my control before, but none had been this eager to forget. It helped that Kamila was a recovering drug addict. The girls I frequented had been proper and neat, looking for a thrill that would excite their boring life. It was weak and pathetic of mine to think these sorts of girls would keep me distracted. They never did. I was a ghost in their life, and they were ghosts in mine, barely existent and faded.

But I had been gone before. My family had lost me. They didn't deserve to lose me again. So safe rather than sorry was all I would get.

Until Kamila Ruby Wraith fainted upon seeing the drugs that I used to self-medicate.

Until the red siren licked her room clean of any dirt before we left my apartment to drive to Indianapolis.

Months later, the games began. I felt her wet cunt with my fingers. She loved the torture of teasing her. She didn't utter a single word, but her intoxicating eyes spoke volumes. She begged me to give her a release, and I denied her because I was a selfish prick.

And because I knew that the moment I'd fuck her, it would be over with the turmoil inside of me.

Unlike me, Alex talked. He got things out of the red siren that I doubted she'd told anyone in her life. Not her brother. Not her best friend. Alex shared the details with me, knowing

that Kamila was fine with it. He was a straight-up guy like that.

Knowing that Kamila was just as triggered by bathrooms as I was made it that easier to give in to my urges. I wasn't like Alex; he proudly got hard at the sight of the red siren. He wanted to fuck her just as bad as I did, but we'd made a promise to each other to wait it out. I didn't walk around with an erection in front of her. It would've made our lessons more difficult. She needed to cleanse herself. I wasn't going to be the rebound to her abusive past.

Four months later, and that was precisely what I became. We reached the tipping point in our relationship. I finally joined my best friend and the red siren in the walk-in shower with a view of Alex's massive backyard made for lavish parties. Of course, nobody gave a fuck about views when Kamila Ruby Wraith was in the room. She'd lost weight in the months she'd spent with me. We ate at specific times, and we trained a lot. Plus, she was worried about her family back in that godforsaken country of hers. The curves that had been once lively and full, begging to be grabbed, had resorted to tight skin, revealing the outlines of her bones. It worried me, and I talked to Jordan about it. He assured me that she'd bounce back once she settled into her new life.

She was tall, taller than any woman that I had ever encountered. She stood next to my best friend with her freshly dyed dark cherry hair, and she looked like what I envisioned his future wife to be, worthy of standing next to him. Her beauty was incomparable. The abuse she'd suffered at her father's hands hadn't taken away from the smooth skin that covered her body. Her full lips gracefully smiled at you. Her eyes were the darkest color of brown, almost black, and they sucked anyone in who dared to look into them for a second too long.

The red siren was a fighter. She had a heart. She wasn't the monster that I'd envisioned her to be when I picked her up from Alex's game. Kamila showed me just how much she wanted whatever we had going on between us to work. "What

can I do to make it better... Tell me... I'm here for you... I understand... I want you, Fylox.”

Alex observed us, the two walking threats to his safety and sanity, with curiosity. He let us work it out between the two of us.

It was quite pathetic, breaking down with my cock inside of her. She was the most magnificent creature that I had ever laid eyes upon. She deserved to come. She deserved the best fuck she could get, especially after four months of abstinence from men. She didn't know, but I was very well aware that she touched herself behind closed doors. Sometimes, when the nights got rough, and none of the rooms did it for me, I sat on the floor in front of her door, and I just listened to her breathing, to her dreams, to her nightmares.

It was quite refreshing to have another person as ruined as I in my life.

Alex had it all figured out. Everyone around me had a life. They worked. They had fun, well, except for Jordan. He didn't know what joy was. Their lives were so full that exhaustion was a real thing for them.

Meanwhile, I solely existed to keep them happy. I didn't feel. I didn't want for anything. I woke up every day, and I felt my past tear me apart.

Kamila caressed my scarred skin with fascination in her eyes. Her fingers trailed lines across my shoulders, my chest. I didn't want to admit to myself that I enjoyed her skin against mine. I was accustomed to pain. Where was the burning sensation skinning me alive?

The heart that had been dug out in my childhood announced itself. It craved the red siren's irresistible touch. There were questions in Kamila's troubled gaze. My best friend studied us, and I sensed his worry.

Kamila and Alex knew me. They'd never ask. The moment was too delicate.

“Baby,” Alex said. Kamila's fingers kept tracing my scars when she jerked her head in Alex's direction. I could do this

forever but forever wasn't an option. There were plains in place. I couldn't jeopardize...

“Clean him.”

I swallowed at Alex's demand. Kamila asked, “Clean him? How? His cock? Fylox?”

“He's out of commission right now,” Alex said, rightfully so. I couldn't open my mouth. If I moved right now, I risked another panic attack. So I sat on the tiles in Alex's bathroom with Kamila touching me like she owned me. Like she could carry all the baggage I came with.

“But how?” Her pout was adorable, and I despised that I liked it.

“You two are the experts on cleanliness. Warm water and soap are all you need, baby,” Alex instructed her. Heat pooled in my head. I could turn off lust in an instance. I controlled my body.

Under normal circumstances, that was true.

My cock was hard now, and I couldn't undo that.

Kamila accepted Alex's challenge. I wanted her to stay on my body. Her touch soothed my anxiety. But she removed herself from me, rising from the floor. My eyes followed her movements. Her plump tits jiggled as she grabbed one of the odorless soaps and the showerhead. My mouth watered at the sight of her bare pussy. It was just a glimpse, but it made me want to reach out and cup her bare cunt, trail her undoubtedly wet folds with my eager fingers.

The red siren turned the water on, testing it with her hand.

“Not too hot. Not too cold. He might enjoy the torture, but I won't be responsible for that.”

Kamila nodded eagerly. She knelt down beside me.

“Did I cause this?” Kamila asked. Warm water connected with my cock, but my erection didn't waver. I didn't have to nod. Our eyes connected, and she smirked at me. “Can I touch your cock, Fylox?”

Yes.

“Clean his cock, baby. He wants to put it in your pussy, too.” I glanced at my best friend. We had discussed sex with Kamila... “No filling her up. You come in her ass or in her mouth, Fylox. Her pussy is still my territory.”

“I want you both to come in my pussy,” Kamila commented.

“How do you want it, baby?” Alex asked. “Anything you want. That’s what you get.”

“I want you both in my pussy at the same time, stretching me wide and fighting for entrance,” she said. She stroked my cock with that warm water cascading around us.

Alex was hard, and he played with himself. But he was aware of my predicament. He told the red siren, “Baby, I want that as much as you do. That’s what best friends do. We share. You’re ours. Unfortunately... Fylox can’t do that at the moment. He’s easily triggered.”

Kamila nodded. She’d applied some soap to her fingertips, and now, she massaged it onto my skin. The red siren licked her lips. When she saw that I noticed her licking her lips, she stopped doing it. She sighed. “I understand. And I’ll never push him... Fylox, am I allowed to have a fantasy of you two inside of me?”

I gazed at her gleaming eyes. *Yes.*

“I just want to be your good girl.” My cock grew even harder as she rinsed me off.

“Give his cock a kiss with your lips. Be a good girl for Fylox while he needs you.”

She turned off the water, and she put away the soap. Leaning forward, she picked up my cock with her fingers, and she gave it a kiss. The red siren was a tease.

She turned to Alex while her fingers moved to my balls. “Fylox gets my two holes. What do you get, Alex?”

“I already got what I want, baby,” my best friend said.

She tantalized my balls. I wanted her to take them into her mouth already. But she didn't.

The red siren distanced herself from me. She wiggled her ass while she crawled over to Alex.

When Kamila wrapped her lips around my best friend's cock, it was not a new site. She'd blown him a couple of times ever since we arrived in his mansion. This time was different, though. Now, I was about to take a bite from the red devil in our midst.

I repeated my mantra in my head. These were my friends. They weren't out to hurt me. I wasn't supposed to harm them. It wasn't within my rights to take their life. The scars on my skin were my buyers' result, people who had a habit of purchasing children to abuse them.

Kamila didn't have a single blemish on her smooth skin. She was trained in giving pleasure, and that thought rubbed me the wrong way. It was one of the reasons I hated her. She was everything that I fought against within me. She was offering herself up to me. She didn't ask for a safe word, she didn't want softness, and she certainly wouldn't go to Jordan to complain that I had roughed her up.

She sucked Alex off, pressed against the cold floor. She struggled to take him all the way in. I heard her murmur that she was disappointed in herself, in typical red siren fashion. Her hands helped her out, stroking his length and cupping his balls. Kamila knew precisely what to do with that smart mouth and those sneaky hands of hers. Gagging around him, she licked and sucked. Her ass was right there in front of me. She wiggled it for me, inviting me in. I'd given her a couple of punishments since we started playing. She was a good girl, but she occasionally tested my limits, stealing an unsolicited touch or a kiss. That ass of hers felt good under my palm.

She wasn't the biggest fan of anal, but I had made a promise to myself to teach her to love it. The pain was her thing, after all.

Kamila Ruby Wraith would marry Alex sometime soon. It wouldn't end our situation, but it would change the dynamics.

Alex was a good man. He wouldn't want to see me hurt his wife even if she asked for it. So these special times, in the shower, with two easily triggered sex junkies, were the last I'd get.

Decisively, I spit on my hand, and I grabbed her with the other, squeezing her cheeks. She squirmed and moaned around my best friend's cock when I gave her a smack. Then I led my fingers to her pussy. There were no surprises to be found. She was drenched and aching. I cupped her needy cunt, my thumb circling her clit. In between licks, she begged, "Please... Please..."

I gathered some of the moisture that her soaked crevice provided me with, and I smeared it on the hole that I would be taking today. Surprisingly, I had never developed quirks about anal. I felt safe with it.

What I saw in front of me was red, but I battled my way through it. Blood was my friend. I'd grown accustomed to it. I didn't intend to make the red siren bleed in front of Alex; he liked his girl unscathed. I massaged the rim of muscles, attempting a different approach than before. We'd have to work our way into quick fucks. We were both fragile. Kamila behaved as if nothing could hurt her, but her nightmares said otherwise. Stroking myself at the sight in front of me, I gave her time to get used to the feeling of getting her ass played with. She wriggled in front of me, making sloppy sounds around Alex's cock. I probed her hole with my fingers until I found it an appropriate time to line myself up at her entrance. I'd intended to swipe some of her wetness on me by teasing her folds with my cock. I let the tip slide in, and then I was lost. I dipped in entirely. She stopped moving, gripping Alex with her fingers.

She said my name.

The moment was molded in a heaven that I'd never get to visit. I removed myself from her tight cunt before I did something stupid like finish inside of her in front of Alex. He wanted that. I had dibs on other things regarding Kamila. I buried myself into her ass with my hands on her cheeks. She

still didn't move, and Alex was starting to get worried. The question was right there on his tongue.

"Baby?" Every time he called her that, I was reminded of how flawed I was.

"Give me a moment."

"Are you sure?"

The red siren nodded, letting her head fall to the side on Alex's thighs. Her eyes were shut, and her fingers circled his cock. She took deep breaths. "Fylox, you can do whatever you want. I trust you."

Alex chuckled. I didn't. Trust was the foundation of life that I had missed during my childhood. I trusted those close to me, five of them. Kamila was the offspring of evil, but she gave me her trust wrapped in a box with a bow on top for me to devour.

When I started to penetrate her, her hole drew me in. I could barely contain myself at her tightness. I wanted to put my hand around her neck and press her against the floor while I fucked the life out of her.

I held back. Alex needed something else.

With one hand on her lower back for support, I let my free hand wander to her wet and needy pussy. She had orgasms for us, lined up for days. She had waited a long time for this. She was coming on my dick and on my fingers without explicit permission. She'd pay for it later. At that moment, I felt generous. It was almost like I'd left my own body, and I was watching this strange scene unfold from the corner of the bathroom.

Alex came inside of Kamila's mouth after warning her that he would. She swallowed every last drop like the good girl she was, the good girl with the poison in her veins. She still sucked on him afterward, taking her time as he calmed down.

In the past, I'd been trained to come on request. It wasn't the most pleasant thing to endure at that age. I carried the talent around wherever I went. I had a name in those circles

back then; my reputation of lasting long at that sensitive age of inexperience had preceded me.

I decided to pick Kamila up from the floor, proceeding to fuck her against the tiles on the wall, as initially planned. She didn't object as I cupped her cunt while doing so. I pressed against her, feeling her sweaty skin against my own. I was deep inside of her, filling her to the brim, and she was milking me. She wanted me to finish inside of her, begging for it with words that I hadn't given her permission to say. She cursed under her breath, her eyes connecting with Alex, who was dumbfounded where we'd left him.

I let her come around me one last time, and then I emptied myself inside of her.

The red siren panted, holding on to the wall for support. She reached between her legs, touching my hand as I lazily grazed her pussy after her orgasm. We grew intimate at that moment, more so than after having just fucked.

"Don't," I warned her.

Kamila listened; she detached her hand immediately. She heard something in my voice. She knew exactly how hard to push and when to let go.

Removing myself from the red in front of me took all the strength that I had left.

CHAPTER 27

KAMILA



SIXTEEN YEARS OLD

MY DRESS WAS A STICKY MESS OF EXPENSIVE TEQUILA, reeking of weed and torn at my back. Colton had been dared to grope my tits, and he grabbed me from behind because I wore a long-sleeved dress that cost more than our one percent's rent. Naturally, he had to mess it up because Colton didn't give a fuck about money anymore. His sister was gone, and so was his sense of decency.

With a bowed head and my hands folded on my lap, I sat at my father's desk.

My heels were broken after the long night I'd had, so my feet were tucked away in my neat slippers, proper for a teenager.

"What's wrong with you?" Daddy asked, furrowing his brows. His silver eyes were full of disappointment and boredom. He had better things to do than chastise his only daughter. "You're taking away my precious time right now. I have to prepare for a meeting in ten."

"She needs to be punished, Aram," the traitor with a voice of honey demanded from my side.

Dressed up in her queen attire, only the crown was missing, my mother ratted me out to my father. Her hair was dark, and her eyes were bitter cobalt. Her clothes were perfect, a short-sleeved dress with an incredible décolleté I could never sport. Her skin was free of blemishes, and her aura stank of privilege. She was a liar. I despised her.

“Why, again?” My father yawned.

“Why, Queen?” I asked, earning a gasp from my mother, who didn’t know I was starting to distance myself from her for good.

“I’m your mother!” she thundered.

“Act like it!” I retorted.

“She partied all night with Colton Richmond behind our backs. She drank, she did drugs, and she embarrassed the crown. Look at her attire. This isn’t how a princess of this palace behaves!” Penelope Wraith was fuming. If it weren’t for the heavy foundation covering her perfect face, she’d be redder than a fucking tomato. “There are pictures that the guards had to confiscate. They had to pay teenagers off so that they didn’t gossip about her childish conduct!”

I giggled to annoy them, and it worked.

“I don’t see why I should get punished for something that Aris and Weston do regularly,” I argued, unfolding my hands on my lap. I wasn’t a coy little girl. I was a young woman, even if I didn’t fuck anybody yet. Colton was up for it, quite literally. I wasn’t ready yet... Soon. “Aris had FOURTEEN birthday parties, doing everything that you listed above and fucking bitches left and right. Yet, he’s still getting his fifteenth birthday party. Don’t you think it’s a little excessive that he gets a party for every miserable year he’s been in my life? I barely get one!”

Special, my ass. My mother had lied to me. I wasn’t a unicorn. When I was drunk, I still felt her lies to be the truth. As soon as the alcohol dried up, I realized that my entire life had been a lie. I’d been living in a comfortable cocoon away from the hell of Katantia. And now, I had to deal with it.

“They’re my boys, and you’re you,” my father responded nonchalantly. “That’s not an argument. This is Katantia, and that’s the way our world works. Is there anything else you want from me?”

“I’m ready to go about my day,” I announced, flipping my long pink hair off my shoulders. The waves had flattened

overnight.

“I want guards on her 24/7, and I want her phone privileges taken away. Colton Richmond needs to be kept away from our daughter. He might...” The queen mumbled the rest of her statement.

“Richmond? Brother of that whore who killed herself?” The amusement in my father’s face made my blood run cold. I could feel my heartbeat pounding away. Daddy wasn’t much of a Daddy. He was a monster, and my mother had lied about that, too. She’d allowed me to think we were an average family with a king who was only a little bit more independent than the rest of us. “Yes, Kamila, you don’t want to be hanging around him. He might kill himself, and then his parents will put that on us. Again. No phone for a week. Guards will be following you everywhere you go. You’re sixteen now. The men in this country might want a piece of your ass...” The queen twitched. “... but they aren’t getting any from you. We have all the whores in the world for that. The princess remains pure. Understand?”

I nodded.

“I’d like to cancel the car for her birthday,” the queen blurted out.

I snapped my head in her direction. “No! I... I learned how to drive so that I’d get a car. You promised. Please!”

“I don’t want you to have it. You don’t deserve your privileges if you’re not going to behave like a princess.” Her voice broke. Cruelty didn’t suit the traitor.

“We can’t cancel the car. It’s coming in a month. It’s already shipped.” The king pressed the button on his brand new computer, his attention wandering away from us. This benefited me, but I wanted what I had been promised when I’d been young. Why were they treating me like an average teen? I was their first-born, the next queen.

You’ll never be queen.

Swiftly, I covered my face before they could see my frustration.

“You can sell it once it arrives,” the queen suggested. I swallowed back whatever wretchedness battled inside of me.

“Sell what?” the king asked, typing the login password of his computer. He leaned forward, gawking at the keyboard.

“The car. Sell Kamila’s car,” the queen repeated.

“Can’t. I don’t have time. Leave now. My phone call’s about to start,” the king commented. The screen brightened up in front of his eyes, and he clicked his mouse, frustrated at the system that seemed slow to him.

“Aram, please,” my mother begged.

At that moment, I vowed that I’d never become that person. People would listen to me. Begging was for people like my mother, small and conforming. I paved my own ways. If I didn’t get my promised car, I’d get my own. I had friends all over the country. I’d find a way.

My father didn’t respond to my mother’s pleas. I couldn’t stand watching their pathetic exchange any longer, so I stormed out of my father’s office.

“Kamila! Get back here!” the queen yelled behind me, but I ignored her.

Pressing the button for the elevator, I called upon it to hurry the fuck up. Queen Penelope was about to catch up with me for a sequel to her car drama. I rolled my eyes at this shit. “Kamila! Please. Let’s talk. I only want what’s best for you!”

I shook my head, hissing. Finally, the elevator arrived, but my mother was too far away to stop me. She wasn’t one to jog in her heels. Once the elevator doors closed, I took a deep breath. I took out my secret Motorola flip phone from its hiding spot in my bra, and I messaged Colton.

“Last night was amazing!” I pressed the keys too fast and hard, messing up many times before getting my message right. “Let’s do it again. How about we go out alone next time? I want to spend more time with you before you leave for the States.”

Colton responded right away. “Yes, for sure. Tonight? There’s a Britney vs. Xtina themed party at a frat house.”

“Perfect.”



PRESENT

AFTER HAVING PLANNED MY LAST WEDDING THOROUGHLY, having a wedding for which I didn’t even have a proper dress was an outcome that I hadn’t expected. Jordan handed me an outfit that he had somehow managed to get his hands on. He threw it at me without respecting the sensitive fabric.

I would never walk around like this in Katantia. Black dresses this long weren’t my style. The stilettos he provided for me were perfect for me.

After washing my face, I put my outfit on. I applied a bit of make-up. I didn’t want to overdo it because I knew that half of the attendees weren’t joining the dress-up fun. Jordan and Fylox would be dressed from head to toe in black as always. They wouldn’t be seen in the photographs. Alex, his mom, his stepfather, and I would be center stage.

Alex decided that it would look good if Mr. Howard, his stepfather, officiated the wedding. The documents were ready somehow without me having to sign anything. Jordan offered to get a conference call with a lawyer so that we’d get a prenup, but Alex insisted on not having one.

The arrival of the Howard family would burst my bubble. I was comfortable in Alex’s presence, but would his mother and stepfather like me? I wasn’t the most popular creature on this side of the earth. Early responses from our PR stunt the other week were negative. Most people called me a hooker, which I didn’t take any offense at. Hookers were cool people, all about their business. We didn’t stigmatize sex work in Katantia, but in this country, I was Satan in person even without my sexy clothes and nasty comments.

“I have to tell you something,” Alex said, joining me in my room while I got ready. He came up behind me, towering above me. Immense pride came over me, and I wasn’t sure how to express it. He wore one of his finer suits, diamonds decorating his cufflinks. He didn’t wear make-up, yet his face shone without a blemish. I recognized that his flawless skin came from what he ate and his exercise. He didn’t drink, and he didn’t do other fun things. He lived for his job. While others may have called him a workaholic, I saw his passion. His determination was attractive.

I wanted to be more like him.

If I had shown half of his work ethic, I would have become Queen of Katantia by now.

“You’re staring at me,” Alex commented, smirking at me.

“It’s hard not to. You’re very handsome.”

“You two are ridiculous,” Fylox said, entering my room uninvited. He came to stand beside Alex, watching me apply mascara. “Our parents have arrived at the gates. They’ll be here in half an hour.”

“Parents? Our parents?” I asked, baffled.

“My parents heard about the wedding, and they invited themselves. Maia Callie will also be joining us,” Fylox revealed. Squinting his eyes, he fixated on something he saw in the mirror in front of me. I didn’t care to find out what.

“So now I’m meeting the whole gang?” My voice cracked. Why did Weston have to take Mandy away? She should’ve been here with me. In fact, my entire family should’ve been here. This wedding was half a scam, half-real, but it still meant something to me.

“I don’t think you should refer to my mom and his parents as a ‘gang,’” Alex commented, kissing the top of my head. My hair was ironed straight today, no fun waves.

Immediately, I added, “I apologize. I’m meeting the entire family? Is this really happening? Do they know...”

“Yes, they’re aware,” Fylox answered the question that was meant for Alex. “And they’re not very happy about it. Mr. Howard isn’t, at least.”

“That’s the stepdad?” I guessed.

Alex sighed, nodding. “He’s just Mr. Howard. I don’t see him as a father figure. I have a dad.”

Half an hour later, the families arrived in two separate cars that Jordan had arranged for them. All of this wedding nonsense would occur in secrecy. We would surprise Alex’s followers on social media by posting a picture of us with our wedding bands.

Thinking that there would be no surprises for the day, I followed the men as they approached the entrance hall to welcome Fylox’s and Alex’s families.

I spotted Maia Callie. My heels announced my arrival to anyone who hadn’t noticed the crazy red-haired lady. “Long time no see!”

“The hair suits you,” Maia Callie complimented me, eyeing it closely. “How are you feeling? Big day today, huh?”

I tilted my head to the side. “I’m trying to get used to all of this.”

“The mansion, you mean?” she asked. Fylox’s sister had his eyes but the kinder version.

Shaking my head, I chuckled. “No, it’s the fact that I’m getting married to somebody I like.”

For a moment, I broke Maia Callie. She stared at me like a deer in headlights. After one sharp inhale, she let out an awkward laugh. “I should introduce you to my parents. They’re right around the corner...”

Grabbing my arm gently, she led us into the lion’s den.

The entire family was in the dining hall, getting ready for the feast. We’d get the ceremony over with, and then there’d be tons of food. That way, the ones who weren’t satisfied with my marriage to Alex could feed their sorrows.

Fylox's mom had the presence of a star. She worked the room, her energy touching me even before she turned around to face us. Her box braids were in an updo hairstyle of two space buns. She wore red today, coupled with heels that I'd kill for. She was a woman of the public but the subdued version. You'd never catch Mrs. Castro publicly engaged in a conversation about sucking dick.

I froze. That was a disgusting thought to have about Mrs. Castro... Fuck. They'd turned me into one of them.

Maia Callie introduced to me Mrs. Castro, and my hand jittered as we shook hands. "The famous princess. It's nice to finally meet you. I've heard a lot about you."

"I hope I can change your mind," I commented.

"We'll see." She smiled at me, but there was a line of worry on her face.

Maia Callie called her dad in Spanish. He was next to us, conversating with Jordan. When he turned, I froze.

"I know you," I blurted out, my heart heavy. The raven hair and the hazelnut eyes were nothing new. I recognized him from his nose and the scar on his cheek. He'd broken that nose often, and I could recognize that in its deformity. In a suit, he could almost fool you. He looked like a lawyer. He talked like one. He and his wife appeared like good citizens.

Luis Castro didn't seem fazed by me. "I visited your home country once. I wasn't aware that we had met."

What type of whores do you sell here? Where do you get them from? I'm simply curious. If I fuck a hole, I want to know where it's from. See, I don't trust your tests. They could be lying, for all I know. Yes, I have a wife. Two children. They're back home... Bring them here for a vacation? Are you out of your mind? I'd never do that. I want to fuck freely when I'm here...

"I was in my early twenties," I said, not offering my hand. Suddenly, the warmth in my body was gone. He'd seen me in a compromising position. He either forgot, or he chose not to remember on my *special* day. "You spoke to my father."

What's the price for younger holes? No, younger than that.

Mr. and Mrs. Castro glanced at each other, passing a message that I couldn't intercept.

When Alex's mom walked in with her husband, I should've cared. I should've made an effort, but I felt the world spin. I barely introduced myself.

"Are you proud of yourself?" Mr. Howard asked me.

I smiled at him, but I wasn't listening.

"You got yourself a cash cow. No prenup. No rules. Nothing. Just a wedding with a whore! Who knows what sort of diseases you carry around. Don't make him sick, or else he won't be able to earn all that money you so desperately want!" Mr. Howard made horrendous accusations. My twisting stomach gathered all of my attention instead.

"Don't listen to that." Alex appeared next to me, slinging his arm around me proudly. I nuzzled myself into his embrace.

Alex glanced at Mr. Howard with venom in his eyes.

"I think that's enough. The boys like her, and she's got her own wealth. She doesn't need Alex," Mr. Castro argued. He was a proud man, standing almost at his son's height. His firm posture carried the expensive suit well. I was nearly as tall as him, but he looked down upon me with judgment in his eyes. "Let's celebrate this union."

"We celebrate when the bride is worthy of the groom," Mr. Howard uttered, side-eying me with his fierce blue eyes. His blond hair was styled back, and he was shaved clean. He had an uncomfortable aura around him that was choking me. "This wedding is a rip-off. I don't know why you've agreed to this, Alex. Jordan's clearly trying to lure you into a trap."

"You don't insult my son inside of his own home," Jordan stepped forward. Alex went on to say something, but his biological dad stopped him. "He consented to this. Half of it was his idea, actually. If you don't like the plan, you can leave."

“What’s the plan exactly? Having him wed a whore from the other end of the world where they sell women like property?” Mr. Howard argued. I didn’t flinch at the comments he threw at me because I was used to westerners thinking that low of us. We weren’t the most convenient concept for them to grasp.

“You don’t get to call my wife a whore,” Alex stated, taking my hand and holding it firmly. “As my father said, leave if you disagree. I’m going through with this.”

“Alex, please,” Mrs. Howard urged her son. She wasn’t a petite woman by any means. Her voice was soft and full of air. Her jade eyes were glistening.

Suddenly, I felt a knot in my stomach. I had been so caught up with my own problems that I hadn’t even stopped to consider that I was taking away one of Alex’s firsts. These loving families only wanted to protect him.

Mrs. Castro spoke up. “Fylox, what do you think?”

Everybody looked at the bleach blond man standing at the corner. “Alex and Kamila are getting married today. That’s that.”

“I agree with my son,” Mrs. Castro said. Maia Callie nodded in agreement. “If he agrees with it, we do it. I trust Fylox and Jordan. They know what’s best.”

“Kamila?” Maia Callie addressed me. “Are you okay with this?”

I shrugged. “I don’t want to cause any trouble. You have done so much for me...”

“You.” Fylox pointed at me. “You are getting married to my best friend today like you suggested all those months ago.”

“But if they hate me...” And your father may or may not be a child molester, I wanted to say, but I didn’t.

“They’ll get to know you. Eventually. We all did.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Kamila.” My name sounded like a drug coming from Fylox’s lips. He was here to keep it all under control.

“Yeah, okay. I’m getting married today, Mr. Howard. I’m happy to prove you wrong about my whorish tendencies,” I said sarcastically, taking deep breaths to calm myself. Perhaps I should have a private conversation with Mr. Castro about his Katantia visit.

Everyone took their allocated seat in the dining hall. Jordan and Mr. Castro sat at the top and at the end of the table. Mr. Howard unenthusiastically stood next to Alex and me as he would be the one to perform the ceremony.

“You got fireworks? I thought we were keeping it quiet...” I asked Alex, but he moved so swiftly, I doubt he even heard me ask the question. Loud bangs sounded from outside, and the closer they got, the more I realized that fireworks didn’t ignite inside a house.

What happened next was a whirlwind of emotions.

One moment, Mr. Howard talked to us, asking us a question concerning our nuptials, and the next, chaos erupted.

Alex grabbed my arm, dragging me away from the dining hall. I could barely keep up with him in my heels. There were steps following us, but I didn’t have time to see who was behind us. I didn’t want to lose Alex.

Alex didn’t have a lot of decorations outside of his main rooms. He had huge wallpapers of iconic figures gracing the walls. I never paid them any attention because I didn’t know most of them except MLK. We passed by MLK with rapid steps.

Out of breath, I watched as Alex pressed against a massive framed wallpaper of a man called Malcolm. Upon pressing the frame, I heard a creak. Then, the frame lifted, revealing a small door. Alex touched it, his palm open and flat against the surface. After a click, the door opened.

He let me in first. I bowed to fit through the doorframe, almost tripping on my way into the dark room. It was cold in here. I could hear myself breathe.

Another click and the room went even darker than before. The door to the outside had shut.

“What’s happening?” I asked croaking.

“That was the Wraith brothers trying to mess with your wedding,” Fylox explained, and I jumped. I hadn’t even registered his presence. He’d snuck in here.

“Don’t worry, baby,” Alex whispered. “Everything’s going to be okay. They all know the safe rooms. Everyone’s safe...”

The lights went on, revealing a bleak room with a bed in Alex’s size. A laptop was on the desk right next to it, and Fylox sat down to work on it.

Still shaking, I took a seat on the bed. “Are we... Am I going back to Katantia?”

Alex paced behind Fylox, unable to find peace.

“Do you want to?” Alex asked, and my heart dropped at the sincerity of his question.

I couldn’t answer without breaking his heart.

“Don’t you want to be my wife?” The pain in Alex’s voice broke me.

“You don’t want to do this right now,” Fylox warned us. I heard him type and click, his hands moving too fast. He made me dizzy. “My mom, your mom, and my sister are in the safe room next to the dining hall. They moved fast. The men aren’t in safe rooms...”

I wanted to ask about Jordan’s whereabouts, but it wasn’t my place. I didn’t really have the right to ask about Alex’s father. That was disrespectful. Jordan could take care of himself. He knew... things. He didn’t need silly me to care about his whereabouts. He had guns, didn’t he? He carried one, or more, everywhere he went.

“What the fuck did you do?” Alex cursed, glaring at the screen in front of Fylox. The veins in his neck were popping. I had never seen him this exasperated.

“I turned off the cameras. We might’ve been compromised.” Fylox added, “That’s why we have the second layer, another cloud. The cheap one that nobody expects us to have. We also have audio. And, there we are. Back on.”

I couldn’t see what was going on digitally speaking, but watching Alex’s tense shoulders loosen up gave me back ten years of my life. I tried to blur out the gunshots from the audio Fylox made us listen to. The yelling and cursing made me uncomfortable, knowing how Fylox felt about it.

“Our men?” Alex asked.

“Yes, they’re still fighting. This was a surprise attack from the air. They were unprepared for that scenario... unfortunately.”

Alex took off his jacket, undoing the lapels of his shirt. He sighed exasperated, hissing. He cursed under his tongue, not letting the words out. I observed the tension in the room. It was breathing down our necks, dark and cloudy.

“Are we going to die in here?”

Both men looked at me, not giving me an answer.

And then everything went black.

CHAPTER 28

WESTON



WHEN THE WRAITH ARRIVED AT THE PALACE GATES, THE guards were in a state of chaos. I had never seen them so flustered. They had to check every single one of our identities twice. We were the fucking royals; the fact that we allowed them to check our ID once was already enough.

“Your Highness... Perhaps you should refrain from the palace...” one of the guards uttered. Their ties were undone. I could have sworn I saw one or two lying around on the floor, looking trampled on. I brushed it off because we had more significant issues at hand.

“What the fuck is going on?” Aris asked, losing his temper as we stood next to the car while the security inspected it as they did every time we entered or exited the palace. Valentina put her hand on his shoulder in an attempt to calm him down. It didn’t work.

“We... There’s a problem. There are men in front of the princess’s home. They just barged in about an hour ago. They came unannounced. They threatened us with guns. They let three cars pass through our gates. We have informed the palace, but we’re keeping it private. It’s not supposed to end up in the press. There’s already so much instability...”

“Is this Spencer Rawlins’ doing?” I asked. Mandy shrugged. The guards didn’t have an answer for me. “We’re going in. This is still my family’s home.”

Mandy and Valentina climbed into the back. Aris took his seat. I hesitated, patting the top of the car. I joined my family

in the car, and I said, “You girls stay in here. Mandy, we’ll be leaving in a minute. We just need to check what’s going on with Kamila’s house.”

“I think I know,” Mandy revealed, relaxed as ever.

“What do you mean?” Aris asked.

“Pull up to her house, and I’ll tell you.”



“SIR, YOU CAN’T ENTER THIS HOME.”

Twenty men dressed in black, taller, and more muscular than my brother and I were standing on the sidewalk in front of Kamila’s home. They blocked the entrance. I saw two men on the right and the left side, patrolling. They were heavily armed, all of them. They were meaner than our guards, trained to kill. They didn’t look like they’d hesitate to kill us.

“This is our property. We will enter if we see it fit. What’s happening? Who do you think you are?” I demanded. My pulse was skyrocketing. I saw my brother next to me, and he was an even bigger mess than me. He had a pregnant woman in the car. We couldn’t risk it.

“I want to speak to whoever is behind this,” I stated, crossing my arms in front of my chest. The watch on my wrist alerted me that it was about to get late. The winds were blowing, growing colder as the sun disappeared.

One of the men pulled out a phone. I watched him type something. It was a quick affair. He put it back in his pocket ten seconds later.

“What does all of this mean?” Aris asked me, and I honestly had no idea.

A tall black man exited my sister’s front door with a poise that I didn’t like. He had this aura of confidence that was rare in our country. My family and a quarter of the one-percenters walked around like this man did, indestructible. He didn’t seem like a man of money, though. He was dressed in dark

clothes like the men standing in front of my sister's home. His hair was hidden beneath a dark blue durag. He was in good shape, and he looked like he could take us on without the help of the armed men posted in front of us.

"Who are you?" I asked when he walked by the armed men to approach my brother and me. I heard noises from the car, so I turned around. Mandy was knocking on the window, waving at me. I tilted my head to the side, drawing my eyebrows together.

"I'm Jordan Winters. I think Mandy wants to say hi to me," he announced. Aris stood there, dumbfounded.

I unlocked the car, and Mandy rushed outside. Her face was full of relief. She jumped at the opportunity to greet this man. They hugged; on his part, it felt awkward, but Mandy enjoyed it. Why the fuck was she so happy all of a sudden?

"What's going on?" Mandy asked him in a soft tone that I hadn't managed to get out of her in a long while.

"Come inside. I'll tell you all about what happened. You've missed quite a lot..."

"Dad?" Another tall man appeared at my sister's door. Fuck. I recognized that man. He was the guy who'd been announced as Kamila's fiancé.

"Go back inside, son," the man ordered.

"Mandy, is that you?"

"Hey, Alex!"

Alex, as Mandy called him, jogged across Kamila's lawn. His aura was lighter than his dad's. He immediately hugged Mandy. It was a different hug, seemingly warmer. He let her get close. I fucking hated that she let this man touch her. His smile got on my nerves.

"Do you want to meet your niece?" Mandy asked the older man.

"Wait, what?" Aris intervened.

“Valentina is his niece. He has a right to meet her,” Mandy insisted, gesturing at Valentina. “Come with me.”

“No! Who are these people?” Aris thundered. “That’s my wife in there.”

“These people are the ones that keep your sister safe,” Jordan responded. “These people have managed to do what you couldn’t do.”

“I’m your brother-in-law now, by the way,” Alex said, offering his hand for a handshake. Aris and I stared at each other.

“Don’t be such dicks. Shake his hand. He’s the nicest guy ever,” Mandy said, her eyes gleaming in excitement.

“I’m very much confused as to what’s going on right now,” Aris blurted out.

“Weston?” I turned towards Kamila’s home. There she stood, in her strangely combined pajamas, her red hair back in form in a big asymmetrical bun on top of her head. Her eyes were tired, but they were happy, happier than ever. She looked so skinny. Was this an illusion?

“Baby, I told you to stay inside,” Alex addressed my sister. I didn’t know what to think.

“You’re not the one with the orders,” she responded, grinning. What the fuck. She waved at us to join her inside the house. My brother and I glanced at each other.

“I have a pregnant wife. I can’t... What the fuck is going on?”

“Aris, you’re both safe with us. You have nothing to fear from us,” Kamila revealed, including herself in whatever was happening in front of her house. “Come inside. All of you.”



KAMILA SAT BETWEEN TWO MEN, ONE MORE DIFFERENT THAN the other. Alex was the perfect basketball star. His team was on the path to their first championship in years, his dad

mentioned. Alex charmed everyone, even without the accolades. Valentina was smitten by him the second he said her name. The other man, the one with the bleach blond hair, looked like hell on earth. He had the face of a Hollywood star, but his posture screamed at us. The scars on his upper body were unlike anything I had ever seen. His hand was on my sister's thigh while Alex leaned back on the sofa with his arm spread out.

She wore a ring on her finger.

My sister had actually got married.

“Kamila, I knew you'd get the best of the best,” Valentina began, breaking the uncomfortable silence. I doubted that she let herself think about any adverse outcome. My sister-in-law rubbed her belly lazily, leaning into my brother's arms. “No offense, husband and baby daddy. Sheesh. You went and outdid all of us.”

“Nonsense,” my sister replied, the smile gracing her face says otherwise. “So I'm getting a little niece soon? That's incredible.”

Valentina nodded. “She's very healthy so far. She keeps making me eat Greek olives for some reason. Aris has them delivered straight from Kalamata. It's pretty cute. Oh, and then there are the strawberries...”

“Is there anything we can do to help?” Kamila asked gracefully. She was still a princess at heart.

“The baby is my family, too,” Alex added. “We're here for you guys.”

“Well, we don't know you from yesterday,” Aris countered.

“Aris, behave, babe. Mom is really fond of her brother,” Valentina urged her brother. Kamila's jaw dropped. Aris grew quiet, studying Valentina's newfound family closely. They were different than us. Stronger. Better prepared. When Travis had said I had no discipline and knew no authority, he knew exactly what he was getting at. The men sitting here answered to Jordan. They obeyed his wishes. They were loyal.

They weren't here to hurt her. It was an uncomfortable pill to swallow that they provided her with safety that I hadn't managed to give her.

"Kamila, please, explain yourself," I urged my sister.

"She has nothing to explain to your kind," the man they called Fylox argued. My sister leaned forward, whispering something in his ear. Then they stared at each other for a moment.

My sister spoke up. "It was a bloodbath. Spencer's men showed up at Alex's place, and they started taking out Jordan's guards. They retaliated while most civilians like Alex and I retreated into safe rooms. I have no idea how we got out of there. I woke up in a private jet headed to Katantia, packed with Jordan's men, guns, and a plan I have no idea of."

"Have you seen Aram yet?" Aris asked.

"No, and she won't," Fylox answered for my sister.

"She's right there. She can answer for herself," I told him. It didn't faze him.

"Weston, stop with the BS," my sister addressed me. "Fylox means well. Alex and Jordan have my best interests at heart."

"And how come you're married now?" Aris asked.

"Secret weddings are becoming a thing in this family," Kamila responded. "Actually, we didn't get married for real. Jordan forged the documents since the ceremony was interrupted."

Aris exhaled. He grabbed his wife's hand. Then he went on, "What happens now?"

"We play happy family," Kamila uttered. "Isn't that what Daddy wants?"

"What about my mom?" Valentina asked, her mask of contentment drifting.

Jordan took it upon himself to clear the air. "It's over, sugar. Their time is ticking. Anyone who dares to harm my

family won't find a happy ending. Not even on Katantia.”

CHAPTER 29

MANDY



I WANTED TO DISAPPEAR.

There was this throbbing in my head that I couldn't evade. Kamila, Alex, Fylox, and Jordan were back in my life. I felt relieved to see them. But at what cost?

"It's okay. You're not even related to Spencer. We knew that he'd do something like that..." Kamila claimed, trying to make me feel better.

Aris and Valentina had left Kamila's house because V was exhausted and needed rest. Overprotective Aris didn't object. He was a peculiar father figure, different than our fathers. Well, the one I'd grown up knowing at least.

"I'm sorry that they took you away," Kamila blurted out. "I threw a tantrum when Jordan told me you were back in Katantia. I didn't want that to happen. And, you, what were you thinking?"

Kamila spat at her brother, the reunion turning sour.

"I was thinking ahead," Weston stated, confident of his choices. I wanted to roll my eyes, but I didn't have the energy. The constant pain was gone, replaced by a stinging sensation every time I moved wrong. It would be like that for a while, they'd told me.

Weston sat next to me, seemingly bothered by what was happening around him. He must have felt like an outsider in our midst. Kamila and her man had months to get accustomed to each other, more time than I ever had with Weston himself.

He didn't know the men Kamila relied on now. Kamila didn't need him anymore.

And Weston didn't like not being needed. That much was obvious.

"You did what you always do. Take charge right under my nose," Kamila said, rising from the sofa. Seeing her back in her home felt strange. It was almost like she had outgrown it. The house had remained the same, but she had something to her that was bigger than these four walls. "We had it under control."

"You didn't. They did." Weston pointed at Fylox and Alex. "Forgive me if I don't trust strangers who just want to fuck my sister."

Jordan entered the living room, chuckling darkly. He didn't spare us a glance. He was searching for something, turning the entire house upside down. Bugs?

"Thank you, Weston. Your insights are profound and intellectual," Kamila responded, glaring at her brother. "Now, get out of my house. If you think all they want to do is have sex with me, then you can leave. I don't need you. I was fine just a couple of moments ago."

"Is this how you treat your sister?" Alex asked, joining Kamila. He traced her down with a couple of steps, pulling her into a hug. He whispered things to her that nobody could hear. We were all watching them, in awe or disgust.

Alex didn't belong here. That was for sure. I wasn't sure if Kamila was aware of it.

"She's finally doing better, away from all of this..." The word was right there, but Alex's eyes traced down his best friend.

"You can say it, brother," Fylox uttered, shrugging. I had never witnessed Fylox shrug before. "Bullshit. We helped Kamila get out of this bullshit and spend some time being herself. She didn't have to fuck Aram Wraith or suck anybody's dick that she didn't like. She was just plain old Kamila. And she enjoyed the fuck out of it."

Alex and Kamila snapped their heads in Fylox's direction, weirded out by his statement. Kamila asked, "Is everything okay?"

"Gloriously so," Fylox responded, the corner of his mouth lifting into an impeccable smile.

Another chuckle from Jordan and I understood that something was happening.

"Alright, kids," Jordan joined us, his hands on his hips like he was busting an underage alcohol party. "Let's break this up. Mandy, Weston, go back to your vacation home."

"Mandy, would you like to stay here?" Kamila instantly asked.

I nodded. "Can I?"

"No, you can't," Jordan intercepted. He kept glancing at the windows, making me nervous."

"Whatever." Weston rolled his eyes, standing up from the sofa. He addressed Kamila. "Now that you have your own harem of bodyguards, you won't be needing me anymore. Congratulations on getting married. I sure missed that memo. It must've been that day when I got stood up at the palace, waiting for you. Anyway. See you around, sis. Enjoy your life."

Weston turned to leave, but Kamila grabbed his arm. They stood in the middle of the living room, watched by all of us. She said, "We need to have a talk soon. I don't know when, but we have to clear whatever issues we have. We need each other."

"I needed you when father threatened to bring you back to impregnate you and then kill you," Weston snapped. "I was all alone here. Aris has been working on his marriage since you left. He barely takes on any projects. I had to sit through Aram threatening my entire family. I had to sit in front of Travis while his wife got defiled a couple of floors above my office."

"I'm sorry," she blurted out.

“It’s not really helpful what you’re doing,” Fylox commented, unbothered and laid back on the sofa. He scanned the scene in front of him. “Kamila saved herself from her monster. She had her own issues to work through. She almost relapsed a couple of times. She’s been having nightmares for as long as I’ve known her.”

Kamila’s head snapped in Fylox’s direction.

“What I’m trying to say is that your father won’t kill Kamila,” Fylox went on. His ruthless voice left me in shudders. Fylox had that effect on people that weren’t that close to him. Kamila managed to see past his demons, but for people like Weston and me, he seemed bathed in hell. “If he tries, I’ll kill him myself.”

“Fylox...” Alex tried to intervene.

“I’d suggest you keep that thought to yourself. It’s treason to threaten the King of Katantia,” Weston told Fylox. “You could be thrown in a punishment sex house.”

“Oh, I know. I’ve been there.”

Kamila lost her footing. Alex had to catch her before she fell to the ground. “What do you mean you’ve been there, Fylox?”

“It means that when he was in captivity, Fylox spent a considerable amount of time on Katantia,” Jordan explained.

“And you tell me that now?” Kamila raised her voice. “After everything?”

“What are they talking about?” Weston asked me. I shrugged.

“You get to know what I need you to know,” Fylox told Kamila. “Stop shaking. I’m fine, aren’t I? I survived just like you did. We always do.”

“You were just a child, Fylox. We don’t... This is Katantia. There are no children in sex punishment houses!” she contended, turning to Alex, but not even Alex could find a way out of this. He was as surprised to find out about this as the rest of us, which didn’t make me feel at ease. They didn’t

have secrets in their camp. Why had they hidden this from Alex?

Alex stood there, contemplating.

“It’s pointless to argue. I was there. Are you calling me a liar?” Fylox asked.

“No...”

“Weston, let’s leave. They need to discuss this in private...” I told Weston. Pain flooded my abdomen when I rose to grab Weston by the arm.

“There is no privacy on Katantia. Everything is bugged,” the prince deadpanned. His glare went unmet by Jordan, who was once again watching the windows. “And as my sister says, there are no children in sex punishment houses.”

“What are you saying, Weston?” Kamila was red all over.

“He’s full of shit. That’s what I’m saying. In what world would Aram ever do such a thing? Children in sex punishment houses? Are you listening to yourselves? All he wants is to be famous. He can’t be famous and beloved if he allows child abuse. Katantia has strict laws. They are enforced, and those that disobey get punished.”



WESTON PARKED THE WRAITH IN THE GARAGE. TURNING THE engine off, he picked up the key, and he left the car. Instead of exiting, I remained inside, reflecting on Fylox as a child, being held captive in Katantia. I caressed my belly, the emptiness that would never fill, and a tear escaped my eyes. Fylox tried so hard to fit in with the rest of us. He and Kamila fought the same battle. Basic human decency had been stolen from them. I didn’t want to know what went on in Fylox’s head. Kamila understood him better than anyone. I was happy for her. Perhaps, they could help each other out. Maybe they were already doing that. Kamila and I hadn’t been able to speak in private yet.

“Will you sit there for another half an hour, or can we go inside now?” Weston asked, still furious about Kamila’s new situation.

I shook my head, taking the suffocating seatbelt off. I flinched at the pain the small move caused me. Weston had already opened the door for me, so I slid out of the car with little trouble. Once my feet touched the ground, I felt an internal tug, the worst stretch of pain. The earlier tears morphed into full-on sobbing. I turned away from Weston, not wanting to fall apart in front of him.

“Let’s go inside,” Weston suggested in a softer tone. He put a gentle hand on my shoulder, trying to animate me to move into the house.

“I don’t want your help,” I replied in a stubborn mutter.

“You have it anyway. I’ll make you tea, and I’ll order food. What are you craving today?” Weston asked, seemingly a new person. Tears softened Weston up. In his head, he had this fragile image of me. It pained me that this was who I had become. This surgery had taken so much. I’d never bear my own child. I spent years trying to get pregnant for Manuel. He wanted to settle down. Come to think of it, his infertility cost me my children. If he had just impregnated me, my surgery wouldn’t matter now.

They managed to freeze some of my eggs. That was that. I doubted that it would amount to anything.

Perhaps Aram was right that I had lost my purpose. My father wasn’t my biological father. My feelings were all over the place. War was bound to happen, and the closer it got, the more convinced I was that my father wasn’t done with my role as a trojan horse yet. His plans reeked of ego and greed.

“Mandy?”

“Can’t you just leave me alone?”

“No.”

“I want to be alone,” I insisted.

“So, you’ve said.”

“You brought me here without a choice. The least you could do is leave me in peace.” I sobered up, patting my cheeks dry. Without glancing at him, I stormed off. I was in Kamila’s room in less than ten seconds.

Shutting the door, I crawled into bed, fully clothed. I pressed my face against the pillow, and I whimpered. Every move I made reminded me of everything I’d lost.

Even crying hurt, and that made me cry harder.

A soft knock on the door made me twitch.

“Can I come in?”

I scoffed at the question because Weston didn’t require my permission. He’d enter anyway.

And he did, but he remained by the door, thankfully.

“I can talk to Mrs. Bengtsson and see if she can give you more medication for the pain,” Weston offered. He cared. I had to admit that he cared. He’d left the palace when I came out of surgery, and he hadn’t looked back. He tried to keep up with it all; the clothes, the attitude, and the voice. But he wasn’t the Weston I’d first met anymore. This was a Weston that desperately needed to play the hero. He required it like the air he needed to breathe.

Too bad that I couldn’t be saved.

“I can’t keep doing this for much longer. It’s like I’m talking to a wall,” Weston said. I didn’t want to look at him. I knew he had unbuttoned the top buttons of his shirt in the Wraith on the drive here. I knew his hair was disheveled from all the times he’d absently run his hand through it. I knew that one look at his face right now would crack me open for him, welcoming him back when there was nothing left for him to take.

“Maybe I should off myself. Then you’ll know exactly what it feels like to talk to a wall.” The menacing words left my mouth in a triumph, but a bitter aftertaste lingered.

“What the fuck did you just say?”

I remained quiet.

“You dare speak of suicide when we spent most of our lives thinking our mothers killed themselves?”

The tattoo on my wrist itched with shame. I hid my face from Weston, and I placed an arm over my ear to numb the sounds. I stayed like that until I felt the bed tremble. Slowly, I moved into an upright position. I breathed through the pain.

“I’ll bring up your food. If you don’t like my company anymore, I won’t force it upon you.” Sober, he glanced at me. His eyes were full of regret. When he turned around, I watched him leave. He shut the door behind him gently.

“You’re scaring me,” I said to nobody in particular, not really believing my own words. I felt a strange sensation—a silly one.

I shut my eyes, trying to find peace.



MRS. BENGTSSON’S SMILE WAS REASSURING. “YOU’RE DOING great. Make sure that you have enough meals every day. Go out. Enjoy your life.”

That was easier said than done.

Weston sat next to me in Mrs. Bengtsson’s office. It wasn’t as messy anymore. Books had found their place on the shelves. The medical equipment was sorted. Posters promoting safe sex hung on her walls.

“This doesn’t mean that it’s over for you. There are a lot of women out there who had the same operation,” the doctor claimed. “If you need to talk to somebody who shared your experience, there’s a network. I didn’t think...”

“Katantians, right? You thought we were cruel fuckers who only look at pussy when we fuck it?” Weston asked exasperated.

The doctor nodded. “Well, yes. My first weeks here have proven me wrong. It seems like the local doctors are working

hard to help sex workers and other female citizens of the country be safe and healthy.”

“Thank you, but I’m fine,” I lied, gracing them both with a smile that was as real as werewolves in the Sahara.

“She doesn’t have to be on bed rest?” Weston asked.

“No, her body is recovering fast.” The doctor faced me again. “You were stuck in here for weeks. Don’t you want to be outside again?”

I shook my head. “I’m comfortable in bed right now.”

“Can I take her shopping?” Weston asked, and I snapped my head in his direction. “Physically speaking, is that okay?”

The doctor nodded. “If she’s okay with it, why not? Just try to improve your circulation. The beaches here are lovely. Go out for a walk. No swimming yet. We’ll touch on that subject in a month.”

“I don’t want to...”

Weston interrupted me, “I’m sure Valentina will host a baby shower. Don’t you want to have the perfect gift for the little one?”

I sighed.



WESTON PARKED THE WRAITH WHILE I STARED AT THE TATTOO on my wrist.

Amalia.

“What do people get babies at this point?” I asked Weston, having no idea what was expected of me.

“I thought you’d know the answer to that,” he responded, clicking his door open. I waited for him to open mine because it stung when I tried to do it on my own. “What do babies need?”

I shrugged, stepping out of the car. Behind me, Weston locked the vehicle. It was too hot for late winter, even for Katantian standards, as Weston had told me the other day. I still wore a long-sleeved oversized sweater that hid all of my insecurities. I couldn't look at the scar on my abdomen just yet.

“Clothes?” I suggested, pulling at my own sweater. Weston waited for me to take the first step. He'd brought me to the Nordstrom of baby items, a huge store that had zero relation to the rest of Katantia. Innocence was still intact here. And, fuck, did I need that affirmation.

I started walking, taking it slow because I wasn't sure which movements caused me to hurt.

Once we entered the store, Weston had it cleared. That took ten minutes of us standing by the management office, and I questioned why we had to take such extremes measures. We just wanted to have a look at clothes for the baby.

“It's all set. Do you need my help?” the man who'd scared the customers out of his store approached us.

Weston glanced at me.

“I think we'll have a look on our own,” I told them. Weston didn't object. One by one, we inspected the items of the baby store. It took us a long while to get to the clothes we wanted to look at because we were distracted. Soft music played in the background. The colors were warm and inviting. We were alone. Cute teddy bears and tiny shoes stole my heart.

“I want to buy everything,” Weston exclaimed. He had picked up a pair of mini sneakers with red and blue stripes. He'd checked the sizes on his phone to get it right, and now, he didn't want to let go of them. “It won't fit in their home. They need a bigger house. The baby... She needs everything that's in here!”

“Slow down,” I said, fighting back a chuckle. “Let's get her a romper for now.”

“What about these shoes?” He lifted the cute sneakers he’d fallen in love with.

“A romper and sneakers.” I shook my head, feeling lighter. I could mop around, or I could be happy for my friend. I chose to be happy for her family. “I’m beginning to think we’d have made terrible parents.”

Weston’s face darkened, and he lowered his hand, the sneakers dangling from their white laces.

“Too soon?” I asked.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

I gave him a quick nod. “It’ll be fine. After a couple of years, it’ll all be a distant memory.”

We spent the entire day roaming the multi-story baby paradise. Weston ended up filling multiple shopping carts with fluffy animals, more tiny pairs of shoes, bath toys, and blankets. He chose various colors, which I found strange at first. I felt more comfortable picking up pink items. It was what I was used to from back home.

Night came over Katantia by the time we were finished. The bill that Weston stocked up was massive. I figured that we had shunned away the store’s customers, but the prince had made up for it by buying half the store.

“We can deliver the items to the palace...” the cashier offered, but Weston was distracted by his ringing phone.

“I have to take this. I’ll be back in a moment,” Weston told me, gesturing at the cashier. Overwhelmed, the cashier kept doing his job. I watched him scan the various items we had selected for Aris and Valentina’s future child.

It hurt. I had no choice but to live with it. Life moved on. I was determined to grow...

I heard stomps from afar, but I ignored them. Weston was still outside, and Katantians continued to intimidate me. I preferred to stay away from them...

“We have to go,” a breathless Weston announced. I looked up, and I instantly felt it. There was something wrong. His

face was cold and cruel. “Now. We have to leave.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“Would you like us to deliver...”

“No. I... Just keep them in storage. It’s all paid for... We have to go.” Weston’s voice cracked, and he turned around, leading the way outside of the store. I waved goodbye at the cashier, thanking him for his patience with us.

We reached the car, and Weston opened the door for me, helping me enter. Once again, it stung, but I couldn’t do anything about it. In a rush, Weston hopped into the driver’s seat.

“There’s been an incident.”

That was all that he said.

CHAPTER 30

KAMILA



MY PLANTS WERE HALF DEAD. FRUSTRATED, I SCOWLED. I could see that Weston had tried, but he watered my poor babies to death. I picked up the shovel, and I went to work. It would take weeks for this backyard to return to its former glory.

Even the fountain was messed up. It hadn't been cleaned properly, and I could see the contamination. I gagged.

"Kamila, get back here!" Jordan yelled from the veranda. I refused to look back at him. Exhaling, I knelt, and I started picking up leaves. I flinched when I heard his angry stomps approach me. "I need to explain..."

"WHAT?" I turned around. "What do you need to explain? The fact that Fylox was tortured on Katantia? That's what you need to EXPLAIN?"

"Calm down, and stop yelling. You'll alert my men," Jordan instructed.

I scoffed. "Leave me alone. I'm busy here."

"Not even Alex knew," Jordan revealed, and my heart broke for his son. There were no secrets among these men. To find out that there had been a secret after all must have hurt. "Fylox didn't want him to know. If we told Alex that it was sex trafficking, it was still a distant concept. Katantia's all over the news. The internet is full of images. Fylox wanted it to be kept private."

"HE THREATENED TO KILL ME." I panted, unable to control myself. "Multiple times."

“He didn’t, though,” Jordan commented, and for a brief moment, I wondered what it would’ve been like if the men that invaded Alex’s home had actually hurt him. It would’ve given him a lesson that he wasn’t invincible.

“You left me alone with a man who was raped in my country,” I miffed, my brain ready to explode. My babies hadn’t managed to distract me, after all. I was an angry mess. “And you know what? He should’ve just killed me. Then we wouldn’t be in this mess.”

“Don’t say that,” Jordan said. He took a step toward me.

“Why are you here, Jordan? Why did we come back here? We were fine in Indianapolis,” I asked, pacing. “WHY?”

“Time’s up.”

“What does that mean?” I implored. I exhaled in frustration. “Is that why I know Fylox’s dad? I recognized him at the wedding. He had a private audience with Aram once upon a time.”

Jordan remained quiet, but his eyes spoke volumes. He took one last glance at me, and then he turned around. Calmer, he walked back to my house.

Between the branches of the trees, I studied the outline of the palace.

This pussy is mine. Don’t ever forget that.



I COULDN’T BELIEVE MY EYES.

Alex and Fylox sat on my bed, watching me pace around in my walk-in closet. Fylox traced lines on his arms, pretending to be absent. Alex’s eyes studied me closely. He didn’t want to let me out of his sight.

“You can’t go out in that,” Alex commented. His gasp sounded like music to my ears.

I glanced at myself in the free-standing mirror with the golden engraving. One look, and I knew that I was back in Katantia. My fingers jittered, but I hid them from Alex's hungry gaze. He would worry too much. I wasn't over the fact that Fylox had been abused in my country, but the men had buried the hatchet already. They'd talked about it behind closed doors. When they reappeared in my room, Alex's eyes had been red. Fylox wasn't mentally with us, but he acted like it. I pretended to go along with it.

My long red hair was wavy and loose. I had put on make-up, heavy one at that. I'd almost forgotten how to apply my dark blue eyeshadow that made my nearly black eyes pop. I had curled my eyelashes, and now they were huge. I wore red lipstick, a shade lighter than my cherry hair.

Aram would be proud at the sight of me. I swallowed. My heart pounded inside my chest, and I felt relieved that Alex wasn't here to feel my pulse. I was as skinny as Aram had always wished me to be, finally after ten years of torture. It didn't matter how much food Alex tried to stuff me with. I had lost a considerable amount of weight. My legs looked lost in the spaghetti-strapped indigo dress with an open back that ended midhigh. My chest size hadn't suffered; I figured that all the horniness had paid off. The small group of anti-plastic surgery cults downtown were right after all. "Be horny! Don't get botched!"

"Fylox, look at her," Alex pleaded with his friend. My husband sounded like he was in pain. Butterflies fluttered around excitedly inside of me at the thought of Alex as my husband. The heavy ring on my finger cemented that. Jordan and Fylox's dad came through for us. They forged a couple of signatures, and now, we were officially wed in the States.

"Yeah?" Fylox was indifferent. He preferred me naked and at his feet.

"What do you have to say about that outfit?"

"Pair it with heels. It'll make your legs seem even longer," Fylox commented with amusement. I chuckled. My legs were already endless but good idea. I was surrounded by tall men.

Not even heels would make me look big next to them. I had the perfect pair for the occasion.

I tilted my head in their direction. “You can own me all you want, husband and... Fylox. But you’ll never tell me what to wear ever again. We did that for almost five months, and I felt like a nun.”

“So you don’t want to wear our shirts?” Alex asked, folding his hands on his lap.

I bit my lip. “You don’t make me wear them. I steal them from you, and Fylox always gets upset.”

“But... Is it safe? To walk around dressed freely like this?” Alex wondered.

I nodded. “For me, yes. People admire me, and they fear the palace. Other women... not so much. Unfortunately.”

“It’s not your fault,” Alex responded.

“It kind of is. I never saw past my own issues. I used to talk to these women every day... I could’ve made change happen.”

Sighing, Alex asked, “Did they ask you for help?”

I shook my head.

“They knew that you were just as much a victim of the system, baby.”

“Still. I won’t ever be able to make up for all the harm the country’s toxicity has caused. Yes, we’re a country based on pleasure but at what price?” I walked over to my spinning shoe rack, bending over to grab one of my shiniest platform heels. Then I lazily strolled over to sit on Alex’s lap as I put them on. He secured me from falling over with his strong arms.

“You’re going awfully deep for someone who’s about to go out clubbing,” Fylox pointed out. My legs wiggled in the space between him and Alex. Twisting around, I started putting on the heels. “And no bra. If you’re trying to give your husband a heart attack, you’re about to succeed.”

“I think I can be strong for one night,” Alex announced in an attempt to convince us, but he didn’t. He would always find my racy clothes problematic. I would never stop teaching him better.

“What’s a nipple slip when my pussy’s been on the cover of my country’s gossip magazines for over a decade?” I asked, securing the heels around my ankles. I was ready. I didn’t put on any perfume because Fylox was around, and I didn’t want to give him any trouble. When we’d arrived, I’d cleared out all of the products that I had stored. One of the bodyguards from outside went on a shopping spree to get unscented ones for the entire household. I was pretty sure that he got his dick sucked on the way back home. That smirk on his face revealed it. Of course, he hid the secret blowjob from Jordan. He was a major cockblocker.

“For real?” Alex asked, shocked. I nodded, and he grabbed my hips. “No more pussy pictures, please. I can take a lot. I can’t take to witness what’s mine for all the world to see.”

“Even a liberal snowflake like me will have to agree with that,” Fylox responded, awfully cheerful. He’d changed after our arrival. It was like his walls were finally down on Katantia, and that was strange as fuck, considering that they had just told me that Fylox spent time on Katantia as a child. Fylox’s hand reached out, touching my knee. “This pussy is ours now.”

“My body is of the people,” I preached. “I’m the princess.”

“Your body belongs to us,” Fylox argued, flicking the skin on my knee. The pressure between my thighs grew. “That goes for Aram, too. We’re not your brothers. If he so much as touches your fingernails, I’ll have a word with him, and it won’t be friendly.”

There was pent up anger inside of him, but he thought he hid it well. I saw it in his dark cognac eyes. Alex and I were both scared of what Fylox was capable of doing now that we were on Katantia.

“Now, get up. Take off your dress,” Fylox demanded. His hand made my knees buttery.

“But It took me hours to get ready...” I mumbled. In all honesty, my pussy was begging me to obey. My brain considered my brother and his pregnant wife. They were waiting for us.

“Hours in which you teased my best friend and me,” Alex claimed, gripping my hips harder. His large hands made my wide hips appear tiny. These hands could singlehandedly dunk basketballs. Apparently, that meant something in Alex’s world, and I couldn’t feel more proud of it.

“What’s the plan, though? My hair, the makeup, Jordan downstairs...” I panicked. I didn’t want to be heard. Being humiliated in front of Jordan wasn’t my kink. He was innocent in all of this.

Alex glanced at his best friend. I loved their relationship, although it messed with my plans often.

“Well,” Fylox began, considering his options. “You deserve a punishment for your earlier outburst. You don’t get to be upset at me hiding things from you when it’s for your safety and sanity. Look at Alex. He’s over it already. Who cares where I was debased, raped, and robbed of a voice? The most important aspect is that I suffered. You don’t get to be upset at Jordan and me. We withheld information. You tell us exactly how Aram fucked your pussy that one time in front of a Singaporean billionaire. It doesn’t mean I have to reveal every detail of my abuse.”

I gulped down my shame.

“Now, do as told, and we’ll allow you to fix your looks before we leave,” Fylox said. Sighing, I stood up to remove my dress. It fell to the ground, and I was already worried about potential crinkles. I didn’t worry for long because Fylox attacked.

“You good?” Fylox asked his best friend.

Alex nodded. “I need a couple of strokes only. I’m not ashamed to admit it.”

“Okay. Hold her down for me. Don’t let her touch you,” Fylox instructed Alex. In a matter of seconds, I was on my

back with my legs spread for Fylox. Alex had his enormous hand covering half of my face, pressing me against the mattress.

I was soaked, and it was clear that something was wrong with me. How could I enjoy being taken like that? Fylox didn't prepare my pussy at all. He swiped his fingers through my wetness once, and then he licked my juices off his fingers. He did that. Fylox didn't do horrendous things like licking his fingers clean. Something went on inside of him, but I was too horny to care.

Fylox shoved himself inside of me while I gasped at Alex. My eyes turned watery, and my cheeks went rosy.

Alex loosened his grip on me, but Fylox warned him, "Do you want your father to hear her moan because she's getting fucked?"

I flinched at Fylox's cursing. It sounded like a new word, coming from him.

They were still dressed, and I was completely naked. Alex couldn't resist. His free hand moved to my tits, and he lazily kneaded my flesh. My nipples were responsive, and under normal circumstances, I would've come. I hadn't been prepared, though, and Fylox was bent on punishing me.

He slammed into me, no mercy and no smoothness for my pussy. Fylox glimpsed at the clock on my nightstand, and his strokes became more urgent. He wasn't big on making noises when he fucked. He was precise about the act. His concentrated face concerned me. Meanwhile, my desperate muffled moans made me sound like I was being strangled. Alex tried to shut me up, but the harder Fylox fucked my pussy, the more desperate I became.

When Fylox came inside of me, he remained on top of me for another couple of breaths. Our eyes met, and I tightened up around him. He gave me a faint smirk, and then he removed himself.

"It's your turn," he said to Alex. My eyes followed Fylox as he left the room. Before Fylox's come could dribble out of

me, Alex's tip found its way to my entrance.

"Keep it in, baby. He wants you to be marked by us while we're out," Alex told me. I loved that he was breathless for me. A couple of moments later, Fylox reentered the room with his cock tucked away safely, away from my reach. While Alex took his time to enter me fully, Fylox grabbed one of my thongs. Then he joined me on the bed.

"Don't silence her. I want to hear her if she's in pain," Alex said.

Fylox chuckled. His eyes glued on mine. "You like the pain, don't you?"

Eagerly, I nodded. I lifted my hips to get Alex deeper inside of me. He was bigger than Fylox, and I understood his hesitation.

His former partners must have alerted him. But I was Kamila Ruby Wraith, and my pussy had been trained. Alex's cock was the biggest I'd ever taken, but I took it with grace. My pussy could accomplish great things, after all...

When Alex's fingers reached for my clit, Fylox warned him, "She's not coming today."

"I want her to."

"She isn't coming."

Alex sighed in frustration while I clenched around him in an attempt to get the orgasm I wasn't supposed to have. My men worked against me, though.

As promised, once Alex seated himself inside of me, it only took him a couple of strokes. He filled me up with his come, and he said, "I'm sorry, baby. I don't like edging you."

Fylox put the thong on my bare chest. "You get thirty minutes. We'll be downstairs, trying to explain to Jordan why there were muffled cries from Kamila's room."



“I LIKE IT WHEN YOU’RE ALL PROTECTIVE AND NOT TRYING TO kill me,” I told Fylox, giving him a smile that I meant from the bottom of my heart. He’d suffered in my country. Now he was back. I felt like shit. I’d do whatever he asked of me just to rectify my country’s wrongs.

“I’ve always been protective of you,” Fylox claimed. While I fixed my clothes and my hair, they waited for me. Jordan didn’t want to hear their lousy excuses about our shameless sex earlier. He shooed them away to work on a new training program for his men.

Fylox had made it a game. No orgasms for the princess. It was pure frustration, and I rejoiced in being touched again.

“Please, tell your best friend that half the time I’ve known him, he’s looked at me like he wanted to kill me,” I told Alex. I couldn’t wait to have his lips on my pussy again. One second on Katantia and I was back to being a horny mess; not that I had ever stopped... “And after what you told me about you and Katantia, I feel like that’s his endgame.”

“If I wanted to kill you, I’d have done so before Alex fell in love with you.”

I grew quiet, unable to respond.

“Killing wives simply doesn’t do it for me,” Fylox added, knowing that he had hit a nerve. His eyes searched for mine, but I didn’t reciprocate his gaze.

“I feel sorry for Mrs. Howard,” I blurted out. “She must be worried with all of us being here now. I’m sorry that you can’t be with your family.”

“This is an important moment. I want to be here.” Alex sounded final, and that was a rarity from him. My heart ached for how things had gone down at our wedding. “Let’s leave the house before Jordan declares house arrest on us.”

I nodded, finishing up my hair and flicking it off my shoulders.

“Fuck.”

“Alex!”

“Sorry, baby. You’re just too gorgeous.”

I couldn’t get enough of these two. My heart was whole. Coming back home with Alex and Fylox, I realized that I hadn’t felt this exhilarated in a while. Having both of them in my life made me happy, and that was a new sentiment.

With my youngest brother currently resorting in our mother’s vacation home, I had decided to invite my other brother and his wife. Weston and Mandy had shit to sort out on their own. She wasn’t in the mood for parties, even if she tried to act all tough.

Aris leaned against the back window of his black Ford Mustang GT. The two-seater was definitely not a car for babies. I made a mental note to gift them a safer family car for the birth of their baby girl. The passenger seat’s window was rolled down, showing Valentina inspecting her long and sharp fingernails.

I lead the way outside with Alex and Fylox following me. Jordan sat on the front porch, observing us and his men stationed in front of my house like a brick wall.

The look in my brother’s eyes was astonishing. He actually saw me for once. He pulled me in for a hug, and I cherished it. Aris wasn’t distant. He showed his emotions, unlike Weston. However, Aris liked to pretend. You never knew what Aris was up to. Out of the three of us, he was the rowdiest and the biggest player. But seeing him with his wife now, more in tune than ever, I realized that he had a heart somewhere in his chest, and it beat for his family.

“Where do you want to go, big sis?” Aris asked.

Valentina’s head snuck out of the passenger seat’s window. “Let’s go dance in a club!”

“Let’s try a safer choice. I don’t want to endanger my future niece,” Alex said, making me swoon, and I wasn’t the bitch that frequented swooning. I got fucked hard, and I enjoyed it. Yearning for love and other romantic bullshit was for women like Mandy.

“There are some things we need to teach you, big guy,” my brother said, approaching my husband. He patted him on the back. “On Katantia, we have all sorts of fun for pregnant women. We cherish them, and we give them the time of their lives. We could go to a strip club, and nobody would bat an eyelash. Well, the owners would. I’m not usually seen in strip clubs. They’re too PG for me.”

“I’m in the mood for a show. There are some new ones that premiered around Valentine’s Day! Aris took me to see some of them already,” Valentina suggested. Her face was fuller, and her lips were puffier. When they said pregnancy made you glow, they weren’t lying.

“Which ones haven’t you seen?” I asked.

“Electrique, The Red Windmill and Amorous Aphrodite,” she responded.

“Babe, I’m not watching a show where they electrocute each other,” Aris commented, crossing his arms in front of his chest. “It’s not even our kink.”

Valentina said, “Electroshock, not electrocute. These guys are new. Don’t give them the wrong idea.”

She chuckled awkwardly. I turned to glance at Fylox, and he was down for whatever. I was absolutely sure that if I asked him to put some clamps on my nipples and put me under a shock, he’d agree to it.

“Let’s go to Amorous Aphrodite! I talked to some of the girls as they were rehearsing the big production last year. Maybe we can join them later on their post-show prowl,” I suggested, and Valentina nodded eagerly.

“Be back by midnight,” Jordan called from my front porch, and I shuddered. Grabbing Alex’s hand, I felt wanted. I felt safe. Jordan meant whatever he said, and he didn’t have bad intentions. He had our best interests at heart.

“Ok, Dad!” I called back.

“I like hearing you call me that.”

I blushed. Alex kissed the top of my head, whispering the words only he knew how to use. We were beginning to melt into a new ensemble, and I thrived in it.

Aris reentered his sports car while my men and I wandered off to my garage to pull out my baby. Jordan and one of his guys had checked the vehicle to see if it had been meddled with during my absence. Luckily, it hadn't. My Beamer was clean and ready to drive around.

Alex went to join Fylox in the front of the car, and I pouted. "You're going to let me sit in the back all alone?"

"Yes," Fylox responded right away.

"But..."

"Sit there and be quiet."

"Okay, Daddy," I deadpanned, putting on my seat belt. Out of my window, I watched as some of the men that guarded my home jumped into one of the cars that Jordan had rented out for his crew. I hated that Jordan felt the need to protect me in my own country, but it had to be done. I'd disobeyed the king, and I'd returned without facing any consequences. Guarding me was a 24/7 job these days. Aram was spooking around in his quarters in the palace.

"I'm not your daddy. I'm your owner. There's a difference. Don't call me names," Fylox uttered as he turned the ignition, and my heart pumped louder at the sharpness in his tone.

We drove away. Fylox and the car behind us followed my brother as he led us to the venue of Amorous Aphrodite. The midweek shows weren't as busy as the weekend shows, so we could find parking close to the venue. This was my first official outing after returning to Katantia, and I wondered whether people would give a damn. I had been gone for a while, and I bet that Aram made sure to let rumors about my absence ruin my reputation.

We were ushered into the venue from a side entrance, away from the other Katantians. We didn't even have to pay for the tickets. They sat us in the front, clearing the tables close to ours. The bodyguards that had accompanied us sat

somewhere behind us, studying the room. The staff served us drinks and snacks, which Fylox didn't even look at. Alex casually chatted with my brother while Valentina observed my men in curiosity. Whenever I caught her glance, she winked at me cheekily.

Soon, the crowd started filling the room. The bodyguards grew more on edge. Fylox retreated to the usual place in his head, the one that made him mean as fuck. He looked like he had just killed your pet dog. The expression on his face was worrisome if you didn't know him.

I noticed that every single woman checked Fylox and Alex out. They eyed their clothes, their shoes, and their jewelry. My husband wore an expensive watch and diamond stud earrings. Our matching rings were a bit too flashy for my style, but we hadn't chosen them. Jordan had. That smile of his son was something everyone noticed. It turned all the heads. Alex had the face of the man you introduced to your family.

Fylox was simply pretty; the defined angles on his face and his irresistible cognac eyes mesmerized me even if they had a darkness in them that I couldn't comprehend. Katantians were suckers for beauty; of course, they'd bypass the dark shit. He had also chosen to hide his scars under a long-sleeved black t-shirt that accentuated his toned body. Fuck. I wasn't the only one receiving attention anymore. My men had taken over.

The show started, but I couldn't focus on it. I kept my eyes on the table and the people that sat there. Alex had his hand on my thigh. He gave me soft and gentle caresses. Fylox's arm was draped over my shoulder for some peculiar reason. We spent two and a half hours sitting like that, Fylox's skin touching mine. I almost came right then and there.

Aris and Valentina watched the show with excitement in their eyes. Each show produced its own original music. We had a row of star singers on the peninsula, and today we were entertained by one of the most famous ones. She was called the virgin swan because she moved so elegantly when on stage.

Amorous Aphrodite was a show with a cast of women. The backstage was also run by women. The only man in this building was the guy at the front desk, selling tickets. It was a show for those that got off on innocence. The girls didn't overperform or excessively moan.

Things ran smoothly. There were ten actresses, all of which I knew by first name. I'd seen their previous shows. The ticket to sit at one of these tables cost around a thousand US dollars. Only the top percent could afford attendance; in Katantian currency, this meant five thousand Katantian crowns. That was rent for some people downtown. Live entertainment like this was expensive because the production included massive LED screens and naughty holograms fucking each other on the stage. These actresses and the staff in the back were part of the *crème de la crème* of sex work. People were satisfied to pay up even if they weren't allowed to touch these women, and on Katantia, that meant something.

The costumes were decorated in lace and diamonds. Their corsets were handcrafted by international designers who remained anonymous, and their shoes were imported from Italy.

At some point, the show's star singer performed a powerful ballad. She was accompanied by two female holograms performing a contemporary dance that ended in them eating each other out. The singer belted out whistle notes that sounded ethereal.

All in white, the ensemble joined the lead songstress on the stage. They performed a routine where some actresses were lifted up in the air held by almost invisible strings. They twirled around, elegance and seduction radiating from their bodies.

Fylox wasn't impressed at all. He kept gawking at the watch on his hand, and his foot tapped against the floor, making me nervous for what treat he'd serve me later for forcing him to watch a show like this.

When the show was over, and the cast came forward for their standing ovation, they shouted me out. In typical princess

fashion, I had to stand up and greet the crowd from my table. More cheers erupted. I sat back down, and I felt like crying.

I had left my people behind. For almost five months, I hid behind four walls while they were out here, worrying about my whereabouts and whether I was still breathing.

Before we left the venue, one of the backstage staff came up to us, inviting the group to join the cast in their post-show dinner at a nearby Greek restaurant called Aphrodite's Fountain. Since we didn't have a national religion, people believed in whatever they wanted to believe as long as they paid their taxes to Daddy Dearest.

We joined the cast, and we were welcomed with hugs and kisses. Aris, Valentina, and I were accustomed to being treated as though everyone knew us personally. Fylox and Alex were weirded out by the crass language we used with each other. The Greek restaurant joined a bunch of tables, and we all sat down, hunched together. My men sat on my sides, and I didn't overlook all the actresses eying them. Alex saw my slight discomfort, and he kissed my cheek, whispering words about his gorgeous wife and her tight pussy. Meanwhile, Fylox nonchalantly stared down anyone who dared to look at him twice.

At the end of dinner, which Fylox didn't touch one bit off, the cast was in the mood for clubbing. Aris wanted to go home because he had an early morning the next day, but Valentina wanted Fraises Au Chocolat from the infamous Fuck Me French store on the East Side of Katantia.

"I don't want to leave you alone. It's not really safe," Aris urged his wife, caressing the sides of her arms.

"But Kamila has Alex, Fylox, and her bodyguards. I'll be much safer here than with you pushing the speed limit to get home in time," Valentina responded, pouting.

"We've got her," Alex assured Aris. "We'll bring her back to you before midnight."

"Babe?" Aris addressed his wife. "Behave, yeah? Don't be late. I love you."

After using the L-word, which made me pinch myself to see whether I was dreaming, my brother kissed Valentina on the mouth in the usual disgusting fashion. I calmed down. They were still the same. They hadn't been cloned. Aris grabbed her ass, which was juicier now than ever before; I was back to my usual self and paid additional attention to people's body parts. Alex and Fylox turned away, giving them privacy. I chuckled before doing the same.

We watched Aris speed away in his black Ford Mustang GT as we settled into my own cute BMW.

"I'm dying for these strawberries," Valentina blurted out as she reapplied her lipstick.

"Why didn't you go with him?" I asked, not buying the strawberry charade. I'd typed in the Fuck Me French spot in Alex's phone, and he was giving Fylox directions while I grilled Valentina.

She put her lipstick back in her tiny bag, and she glanced at me. "I rarely spend time with anyone other than my husband these days. Dad and mom are busy in the palace, doing God knows what. So you guys are a small escape."

"I'm sorry that I left so abruptly," I told her, feeling ashamed of her mother having to take over after my exit.

"You did what you had to do," Valentina responded, the amusement drifting away from her face. "I'm mad that my mother's now more involved, but I can also understand why you needed out."

"I want your family to visit me where I play," Alex threw in, having overheard that our conversation was taking sour ends. "I'd love to show my aunt around. Dad misses her a lot. He hates that he can't be a part of your life."

"Once that baby is out, I'm going to do all sorts of things that I haven't done before," Valentina announced. "Aris promised that we'd go on a cruise across the Mediterranean sea to see Spain, France, Italy, and Greece. I'm going to be so fat by the end of it, but I can't resist all that food. Perhaps we can come to America afterward and see you play."

“I’d love that,” Alex said, gifting us his mesmerizing smile. Even Valentina melted at it, and she was my brother’s wife, who was basically a caveman.

We arrived at the Fuck Me French spot fifteen minutes later as they were about to close up shop for the night. They took our order, and they processed it in record time, handing us three square boxes of strawberries dipped in all sorts of chocolate, white, bitter, or sweet. Fuck Me French was known for its delicacies all over Katantia. People came here when they needed a gift for a house invitation.

On our drive back to the palace, through the city, because the peripheric highway was shut down for some reason, Valentina devoured an entire box.

“What names are you thinking of for her?” I asked her, gazing out of the car’s window and at the modern bank district buildings.

Valentina chewed down her strawberry dipped in white chocolate. Then she revealed, “We’re thinking of calling her Penelope Jade, after her grandma and my father’s mom.”

I bit back the sadness that threatened to overcome me, and I tilted my head in her direction, showing her how happy that decision made me. “My mom would have liked you.”

“You think so?” she asked, stuffing herself with another strawberry. Her eyes were wide.

“You love her caveman son more than anyone in this world ever could,” I told her.

“I think it goes both ways.” She put aside the empty box of strawberries. Alex was listening in on our conversation. He watched us with curious eyes. “I know it might sound backward to people on the outside, but I can’t live without him in this country. Look at my mom... Aris protects me, and he will do the same for our daughter. I can’t do it on my own. I haven’t learned it any other way.”

“You’re a resilient woman if you managed to stick by my brother back when he was fucking anything that walked,” I told her. “You took all of our BS. The collective family bullied

you for years, and you never faltered. I admire you, and I feel ashamed for us. You don't give yourself enough credit."

When we finally arrived at the palace, it was half an hour later than expected. Alex reassured me that he had messaged his dad about being late. The security guards didn't do a thorough search on our vehicle because the car ahead of us, my very own harem of bodyguards, had threatened them with guns.

Fylox pulled into my street, and he drove to the end of it where Aris and Valentina resided without my brother these days. Valentina stepped out of the car, carrying her Fraises Au Chocolat boxes. I joined her to see her get in the house safely.

At first, she appeared curious.

Then she dropped her tiny bag and the boxes of strawberries. I started to worry. Her eyes were wide, and her lower lip trembled.

"What is it?" I inquired, taken aback by her sunken posture.

"Where is Aris' car?" she asked, stuttering.

I replied, "What do you mean? It's probably in the garage..."

Frantically, she shook her head. She stomped towards their garage. Once she arrived, she stood on her tiptoes to peek inside. "Aris doesn't park the car in the garage when he has to step out early. He knows that the sound wakes me up."

I turned, searching for Alex's comforting gaze.

"Where is Aris?"

PART III



CHAPTER 31

KAMILA



I OBSERVED AS VALENTINA CRUMBLLED IN FRONT OF EVERYONE in the middle of my house. Her father stood opposite her. Travis explained, “He’s been taken to the Queen I hospital.”

“What happened to him?” I inquired. All I could think about was my little niece. “Everything was fine when he left the restaurant.”

“There’ll be a toxicology report soon. The scene of the accident is on lockdown, and it will be for a couple of days. The Prince of Katantia has been attacked, and the palace won’t let it slide,” Travis claimed. He ran a hand through his hair. The wrinkles on his face were more prominent today than ever. I attributed it to his pregnant daughter and her helpless situation. If she hadn’t stayed with us, she’d have been in the car accident with my brother. “Another car crashed into his, but there are also reports that Aris was speeding too much. The man in the other car was nowhere to be found. Obviously, the car’s totaled.”

Valentina blurted out, “I don’t care about the car! What about him? When will he be with me again?”

“I’m sorry to tell you this, but he’s out of commission,” I told her as calmly as possible. Fylox and Jordan sat together in front of their secret laptops on the other end of the room. They whispered things among each other. Their solemn faces made me nervous. There were guns on my coffee table, but I tried to ignore them. I shuddered, just stealing a glance at them. “He won’t be with you for some time.”

As a collective, we decided to keep Aris' critical condition from her. He had broken bones; we didn't yet know how many. The glass hadn't cut him much, but he had suffered two-degree burns. There was one third-degree as well that the surgeons were attempting to fix. Since we didn't have news from the doctors, Travis suspected that the impact was too heavy for Aris not to have some sort of brain injury. He would most likely end up in a coma, but we couldn't say for sure.

Mandy resurfaced at the doorframe. She was in the kitchen with Weston, keeping him busy. My brother had retreated into his head, distant and cold. She said, "We're finished. The food's in the oven. Weston would like some time alone now. Would it be okay if we left?"

"Of course," I responded. "Are you sure you don't want to eat with us?"

Mandy swallowed. "I don't think he's in the mood to eat. He's still in shock."

I nodded.

"Valentina, do you want to stay here?" I asked.

"I want you to take me to the hospital," my sister-in-law demanded. Her eyes were empty. She constantly moved, her arm wrapped around her belly. "This is useless. I need to be by his side. He needs to feel us there. It'll make him heal faster."

"No, it won't," Fylox replied matter-of-factly.

"SHUT UP!" Valentina hissed. "Please, take me to the hospital?"

Mandy approached her friend, whispering something to her that nobody could hear. Valentina lowered her head. She started shaking.

"I'm not about to become a widow, Mandy. You have to believe me."

"I'm trying."

"Try harder, you brat."

“I’ll tell him about this when he wakes up,” Mandy replied, and a smile graced her face. It was genuine.

“You don’t talk to him. He scares you. And you haven’t forgiven him for being a dick to you when you first came here,” Valentina responded.

“Let’s just go to the vacation home on the South Side. We’ll go back to the hospital once the both of you are well-rested,” Mandy suggested.

“Who’ll drive?” Jordan asked while scanning the screen in front of him.

“I will,” Mandy responded. “I have a driver’s license.”

“Let one of my men do it. You haven’t driven in a long while,” Jordan commented. “There’s a lot at stake in that car.”

Mandy sighed, giving in reluctantly.



IT WAS GETTING DARK, AND I SHOULDN’T BE HERE.

“You should go home.” Travis’s voice made me jump. I stared at the graves that held the bodies of Katantia’s makers. My mom was here, too. Her grave angered me. This was what Aram had always wanted to achieve. He wanted me here but six feet under.

I wasn’t his first-born son.

I was the cunt of the family.

“I’m serious, Kamila,” Travis urged me, moving closer to me.

It felt like a betrayal to breathe in his presence. I didn’t want his words. “Go away.”

Stay strong, Kamila. Please. My wife knows what she’s doing. I can’t help you leave him. All I can do is protect you from serious harm. He can’t end your life. I promise you. It’ll be over one day. Just trust me.

“I want to apologize,” Travis blurted out. He was a monster. He’d never shown me that face of his, though. I saw the calm Travis. “I’ve done a lot of things wrong in my life. I should’ve taken my family underground when I had the chance, but I didn’t. Now, everything’s about to blow up in my face. I can’t control it much longer. For what it’s worth, I apologize.”

“Your apologies don’t mean shit,” I responded. I tucked away a strain of my red hair because I had nothing to do. It was too late for words. Travis’s actions had brought us here. “And if you’re expecting a thank you from me because you sent me to Jordan, you can fuck off. You’re lucky Fylox didn’t end up killing me.”

“He would’ve never killed you. Jordan trusts Fylox with his life,” Travis told me. He inhaled, and I feared that he was in pain. I heard him croak. “You’ll understand soon. I wanted to inform you that Spencer Rawlins is coming. His welcome party will be huge.”

“And?” I rolled my eyes.

“You have to make an appearance. That means you have to face Aram and Spencer,” Travis announced. I heard the leaves rattle in the wind. It was cold tonight, for some reason. Katantian summers began early.

I wanted it all to go back to the way it was before.

Did I, though?

“I don’t want to see the man who ordered you to kill my mother, you stupid piece of shit!” I lashed out at him, throwing fists at him. Fylox had taught me techniques, and I had a better understanding of my strength now, but against Travis, I couldn’t use logic.

He let me swing at him.

“Why did you pretend to be my friend?” I yelled, jabbing my finger in his face.

“I didn’t pretend. You’re like a daughter to me,” Travis stated, backing away from my wrath. I scoffed. “Everything I do for my family... There’s a reason behind everything.

Katantia isn't just a place. It's hell. It's perfect for a monster like me. I deserve to be here! But you don't. You shouldn't have come back. I told Jordan to keep you away. He knew how to keep you safe, but he insisted on bringing you back..."

His voice cracked, and I interrupted him, "Stop rambling! I don't want to see you. I don't want to talk to you. You murdered my mother and Mandy's mother because these men told you to! If you're such a monster, why are they still alive? Get the fuck away from us. I don't ever want to see you near my mother's grave."

"Really, Kamila?" His chin quivered. "I'm the only one out of all of you who keeps visiting her. I'm here every week while all of you go about your days! I think of them every second of every day. When I'm not thinking about your brother marrying my teenage daughter, I think of them. They should be here. Don't you think I know that you ungrateful..."

The rest of his sentence got lost in the night. I took a couple of steps away from him. I didn't recognize Travis. He used to be my comfort in all of this. Now, I couldn't shake the image of blood on his hands. It was overflowing.

"Stay away from me," I warned him.

"Please, tell my daughter to come back to the palace," he begged me.

I shook my head. "It's not my fault that you fucked up your relationship with your daughter. She's as tired of you as I am. We're done with your empty promises."

Heat covered my body inside and out. My temperature rose. I couldn't stay here for much longer. I never came here because I had other ways of remembering my mother. I had spent years thinking that I'd driven her to this point.

I'd thought she killed herself because of me, my failures as her daughter.

Finding out that it had all been in my head, I realized that there were some mistakes you couldn't escape from. Valentina was his daughter, and she was aware that her father wasn't a white knight. But it wasn't her fault that her father killed

mothers. She had nothing to do with the fact that Felicita and Aram fucked.

That was all Travis's and Aram's work.

I hadn't driven my mother to suicide. Knowing that, I finally jumped off the cliff. I could leave my past behind.

"You need to leave Katantia," Travis said as I walked away from him.

Without a response, I hurried back home.



"WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN." IT WASN'T A QUESTION. THE accusation in Fylox's hung heavy. I'd felt his shadow in my veins as I tiptoed around the road earlier, but he'd never shown himself.

"It's none of your business." Citrus invaded my senses, making me dizzy. I didn't want to see his face. I had one less burden to carry tonight, and I wanted it to stay that way. I could resume my guilt trip tomorrow. "Can I please take a shower now?"

Fylox stood there, blocking my entrance. I had climbed over the fence to go to the graveyard and back. Upon my return, I'd landed on mud because my conversation with Travis flustered me. I had to get the dirt off of my skin. It tickled me in the worst way. *Lick it up, cunt. Don't be shy.*

"Take off your clothes."

"I'm not in the mood. Everyone's asleep. Let it go," I muttered, trying to push past him. There was no use. I didn't have it in my core to hurt Fylox physically, so I didn't give it my all. *You know you like it dirty. I see how you keep your house. You sent away all the housekeepers so that you can get on your knees and lick your floors clean. Well, lick her asshole. Do it. Now.*

"Don't make me repeat myself." His stern voice made me roll my eyes. He didn't even ask where I'd been... He

probably knew that already—stalker much. I never heard him, but I knew he was lurking around me, watching me.

“What are you going to, Fylox? What are you going to do that’s worse than what I’ve already been through?” The words flowed out of my mouth without any remorse whatsoever. A second later, the guilt kicked in, and I began breathing hard. *Pee in her mouth. There you go. Make that filthy princess gag on your pee, slut. Perfect. Don’t worry about her, slut. The Princess of Katantia won’t die gagging on your pee. She’s just a little OCD. That’s all.*

Fylox shoved me out of the way, leaving me speechless in front of the bathroom. He descended the stairs, and I found myself studying him from afar. What had crawled up his ass? The king was gone for the night, partying at some grandpa’s birthday party. I wouldn’t have left the house otherwise.

I could take my shower and go to bed. Alex was in bed, sleeping heavily. The bed felt different when he was in it. Normalcy with a giant could be the title of my new book.

Curiosity had killed the cat, but I was no kitty. I bit my tongue, mud and messy hair be damned. Picking up my pace, I followed Fylox down the stairs. The front door was shut, so I made my way to the living room. He wasn’t there, but he’d left the back door wide open, letting the cold into my house.

I shook my head, following his footsteps. Gently, I shut the door behind me.

Smear it all over her skin, yes. Wonderful. Look at the mess you made, my little slut. She’s in absolute shock. Now, she’ll keep her mouth shut for a week. Thank you, little slut. Go back to your daddy now and tell him that the deal is on. He can have the kids in the...

Fylox stood by the spot that I had climbed to leave the property. I stomped over there, already over this but curious as to what he would come up with. A lecture in the middle of the night was something only he could do.

“Take off your clothes.”

“You said so before, and I told you I wanted to take a shower. Do you see a shower anywhere? I don’t,” I responded, gesturing at the innocent trees that surrounded us. These beings had seen me in my worst of times. They housed all of my secrets. *Let them all see what a mess you are, cunt. Parade yourself in front of my colleagues with your legs spread and your tits bare. No privacy for you. They all get to see the dirty cunt of their princess. They pay for it, after all. And then, they’ll come inside your holes. All ten of them.*

Fylox crouched down, and I followed his movements with my eyes. His bleach blond hair was bright in the night while the rest of his body was hidden beneath a dark hoodie paired with black sweatpants. The guys didn’t wear anything else around me these days, and I started to get used to all the dick prints. They weren’t even special anymore. I could do without a glimpse.

He dipped his hand into the mud, and I gasped. Why would he do that voluntarily? We didn’t do such things. I took a step back from him. He dug into the dirt with his hand, getting all types of dirty. When he rose from his crouch, I distanced myself some more.

Not a lot of people could understand Fylox, but I did.

My heartbeat raced in my chest, urging me to get the fuck out of here.

“If you run, I’ll do it in front of the guards. Is that what you want?” he asked. Hollow and smoky, his voice bruised me before his hand could ever cause any damage.

“Fylox, I’m not in the mood,” I blurted out. *I don’t care that you’re on your period. I know I never fuck Felicita when she’s on her period, but you’re special, aren’t you? That’s what Mommy always told you, didn’t she, cunt? Now, you’ve taken Mommy’s place. That’s how special you are.* “Please, let’s just go to bed. I’ll leave you alone. I won’t even make you notice that I exist. Please, think of Alex...”

After a few quick steps, he reached me. My shoulders tightened, and I felt small. He held mud in his hand, and he did what I feared he’d do. He used my fear against me.

I stiffened at the ugly touch. Fylox smeared it all over my face, and I started shaking. My knees turned to butter, but before I could fall, Fylox picked me up. He carried me back to the spot where I'd tripped.

“Don't shut down on me now.”

But I couldn't speak. My skin connected with the wet dirt, and I wanted to drown. My uncontrolled whimpers filled my ears with white noise. Fylox reached out for me, and I flinched away. He grabbed my ankle, pulling me close to him.

“The game hasn't ended,” he announced. “And you got yourself a punishment. Where do you want it?”

“I-I j-just want t-to...”

“We're on Katantia. What you want doesn't matter,” Fylox responded, smearing more mud on my face. I quaked beneath his touch. The only slight relief I allowed myself was the fact that Fylox wasn't keeping himself clean either. His hoodie was a mess.

I couldn't move my limbs as Fylox continued the chaos. After tearing at my nightshirt, he picked up more mud, and he massaged it into my skin. I quivered, caving into his torture. “P-please, g-get it o-off me...”

“I would've accompanied you,” Fylox began. Why did he sound so controlled? Where was his anxiety? Why was I the only one this close to a heart attack? My insides were convulsing. “I want you to know I hate doing this, but you need a lesson. This isn't a joke. Your father won't ever touch you again.”

I hissed.

“Go ahead and speak, princess. Have you ever eaten dirt?” he asked, vibrating through my bones. I had never eaten actual dirt. I'd eaten other things, but I couldn't speak. Besides, whatever I'd gone through, Fylox had it worse. While I drank cheap vodka with Colton in my teens, Fylox had zero agency in his childhood.

I feared that if I parted my lips, the dirt would find its way into my mouth. I barely even breathed. “I have. Do you want

to know what it tastes like? You don't. It tastes like death. If you open your mouth right now, I'll give you some of that medicine. You'll know not to play with your life then..."

His hands reached the hem of my panties. He slid his finger underneath, and I bit my tongue, causing tears to cascade down my cheeks. I squirmed, but he kept going. "You have a right to be mad at Travis. After all, he whored both you and his wife out to his king. I understand that. He watched for years while you faded away. If he hadn't sent you to me, I would've killed him the other day."

"Why?" I asked trembling. "What has he done to you?"

"He found me too late."

"Too late?" My eyes wandered, but Fylox was all I could see.

"I was dead by the time he got to me."

CHAPTER 32

KAMILA



HEAVY WORDS WOKE ME UP.

My eyes fluttered open, and the first thing I saw was the blue sky above me. The branches of the trees surrounding me greeted me. The heat was back, burning my skin. I didn't need to move from my little heaven to notice that the sun was glaring down at us.

I didn't need a lot of sun cream in contrast to my brothers. Their skin was paler than mine. I never got sunburned as a child, and it always made me feel special. My brothers turned blaring red, and they needed all sorts of treatments while I sat there, sipping my juice and giggling to myself.

"Kamila, are you okay? What did he do..." The four words that followed Fylox around. I yawned lazily, stretching out my legs. Slowly but surely, I remembered where we were. Fylox lay wide awake, holding on to me. My arms were wrapped around him as if I wanted to glue him to myself. As if he'd ever run away.

My head used his shoulder as a pillow. I inhaled, taking both of them in. Alex's presence kept me calm.

What had happened last night?

Alex's eyes were squinted, his eyebrows angrily snapped together.

Then I noticed the dirt that covered our bodies and how clean and handsome Alex looked in comparison.

“I did what I had to do,” Fylox told his best friend. He pushed me off of his body in one swift move, and I collided with more mud.

Fylox rose, but I couldn't move.

“We're done playing now. You can have her. She's your wife, after all,” Fylox spat. His fingers jittered, and I welcomed the worry about his well-being. My guilt trip was officially reinstated, and I swallowed. I felt crushed. I couldn't move to get myself out of this mess.

“Why do you have to be like that?” Alex's voice was calm. I picked up the tremor in his tone, though. I didn't like it. Alex left me there, dirty and entangled with nature. I should have loved it. Gardening was a part of my life that I couldn't let go of. But when I spend time in my backyard, it was on my own terms. “Why? You've got everything now. I've given you every comfort there is. You even have a girlfriend now. What the fuck is wrong with you?”

I twitched at the curse word. Poor Fylox. I didn't want him to hurt. We were one. Why did he discard me? Oh, right. I was dirty, and he needed something pure. I reminded him of everything that had gone wrong in his life.

“What the fuck isn't wrong with me? That's the correct question,” Fylox responded in an exhale. He turned around, leaving us here alone. I didn't want him to go. In a twisted way, we'd bonded last night. “She's messed up. She doesn't obey. I can't deal with her anymore.”

“Why? Because she's a mirror to your fucked-up-ness?”

Fylox balled his fists. “Watch what you say to me.”

“Just admit you want her. Get it over with so that we can move on with our lives,” Alex muttered. He faced me again, pity coating his beautiful face. He knelt down beside me, picking me up with all of the dirt attached to me. I breathed hard. He was pure. He didn't need my troubles in his life.

“You just want to have a babysitter for her,” Fylox retorted. He watched me as I clung to Alex, shaking in his embrace.

“In case you haven’t noticed, there are tons of babysitters around. Nobody gets to her alive,” Alex reminded Fylox. We shuffled past Fylox, and I attempted to reach for him, but there was no strength in my movements. I couldn’t even lift my arm.

“Stop this. We all know you can’t wait to leave Katantia. You hate, no, you DESPISE the fact that we’ve dragged you here. You want to go back to the States and finish your season!” Fylox alleged. I shuddered. I hadn’t even considered what this trip meant for Alex’s career.

“Some of us have a job, you know,” Alex snarled.

We were almost at my house now, and I couldn’t wait for the treats that waited inside. I shut my eyes, envisioning my bathtub full of bubbles. I’d be clean once and for all.

Alex dropped me, and I fell on my ass. Fylox was on him in a matter of seconds, fists flying. With wide eyes, I followed their hasty movements. Alex evaded the punches. He was quicker than Fylox in his emotional rage.

Besides, Alex didn’t want to hurt his friend.

“S-stop.”

Alex was the only one who reacted to the sound of my voice. He turned toward me, and he almost got battered because of it. Alex had eyes everywhere because he managed to block Fylox’s knuckle. He demanded, “You heard her.”

The muffled cry that came out of Fylox pained me.

“I’m s-sorry,” I said. I cleared my throat. Taking a deep breath, I called upon every inch of my body to play along. “I won’t do it again, Fylox. I’m sorry. I know you worry about me, and I went out without protection. I apologize. I’ll never leave your side.”

“You did what?” Alex asked breathlessly.

“I visited my mother’s grave, and I ran into Travis,” I confessed, swallowing.

“In the middle of the night? And the guards didn’t notice? What the…” Alex cursed under his breath.

Shaking my head, I intervened, “I climbed the fence, and I used my secret routes to get there. It’s not their fault. They’re doing a great job. Don’t fire them. I didn’t mean any trouble —”

“That’s up for my dad to decide,” Alex interrupted me. His best friend panted next to him, looking like he had just been dragged out of a one on one with Hades. “He’s looking for us, by the way. He went out to get Travis and Felicita. Spencer Rawlins has arrived, and his welcome party is happening tonight. We’re all expected to make an appearance.”

And so it began.



I TIED THE KNOT OF MY EMERALD WRAP DRESS BELOW MY chest. It reached midthigh, too revealing for Alex but just right for Katantian customs. My dark red hair was loose and wavy. The heels on my feet were hurting me since I was out of practice.

Alex had a tough time breathing. I watched his chest rise and fall abruptly. Trembling, I added, “I don’t want to go. I can’t see him.”

“Baby, why are you so afraid? We’re here with you. Fylox. My dad. Travis. Our men. You’re safe. He can’t touch you,” Alex commented, stepping forward to touch my shoulder. I winced. That hurt Alex. “I never hurt you. He does.”

“It’s not that,” I responded, raising my voice.

“Stop yelling. That’s not your place,” Fylox added from the other end of the room. With his arms crossed in front of his chest, he observed what was happening on the street below.

“You know what, Fylox? Shut up!” Somebody needed to slap the hysteria out of me. Checking my looks in the mirror, I looked every bit of the princess my people knew. My hair wasn’t as long as they were used to, but it would do. I wore my wedding band on my left hand. After going into my jewelry storage, I picked up one of my mom’s more delicate

diamond necklaces. The hardcore fans would recognize it. I had forgotten when she'd worn it before, but I remembered that she'd handed it over to me a couple of days after I got my period.

Too preoccupied with my looks, I missed that Jordan had joined us. He didn't make much noise when he roamed around, just like his protégé Fylox. "You need to calm down. We should leave. It's already late."

"I don't want to go," I insisted. Fylox and I had cleaned up. The bad blood had been settled, and we were talking to each other again without smashing heads, but my insides were full of turmoil. "Nothing's working. I'm still a mess."

"Get your shit together and let's go," Jordan cursed, and I flinched.

"That's not helping," Alex commented, stepping in my direction. I moved away as if he was the man that scared me. He wasn't. I was petrified about what was going to happen in the next couple of hours. I looked the part, but I wasn't ready to face my father just yet. It had been months since I had last seen him. We'd been here for days, and I'd miraculously kept away from him. "Perhaps Kamila and I should stay here."

"That's not an option. Spencer is here, and they're announcing your brother's car crash to Katantia. You're making an appearance."

Jordan's words were final.



ON OUR WAY TO THE PALACE, I PRAYED THAT IT WOULD START raining antidepressants or something that would take the edge off. Hell, I'd even do coke.

Alex talked to me, but I couldn't focus enough to listen. Fylox and the other men formed a circle around us, walking us to the palace.

Once I saw the endless cars lined up to park in the parking lot behind the palace, I swallowed. This was happening. Our

family reunion would be televised.

Any person that visited the palace for the first time was astonished at the interior design. The giant double-sided staircase that led up to the second floor at the entrance was an incredible sight. The men that were escorting me didn't think so. They held their position. Alex wasn't smiling, and that was my sign. We'd put on our rings. As husband and wife, we barged into the space I'd grown up in.

My heart pounded in my chest, and I felt like throwing up.

The last time I had an appointment in the palace, I ignored it, and I escaped the country.

The main hall awaited us. Mandy, Valentina, and my brother sat in their seats at the front of the big crowd. Who had we invited? Usually, I'd know these things. Not working in the palace anymore, I had lost certain privileges.

Travis and Felicita Cross had their own section at the edge of the first row. Where was their son? Not that I particularly liked the guy, but he usually made an appearance at important events. Mandy had told me that he'd accompanied her to my wedding only to fight with Weston in front of everyone. He had been escorted away from the festivities. Today, Ryan was nowhere to be found.

Alex and I treaded to the center stage, where we had allocated seats behind a golden podium, ready for the king's speech. The palace staff attempted to break up my formation of protection. Jordan and Fylox vanished in the background while five men remained nearby to interfere if necessary.

Aram and Spencer weren't here yet, but they would be arriving soon.

My father wouldn't let me stand him up again. That was for sure.

When they played the theme of Katantia, I closed my eyes. Alex, who sat next to me, grabbed my hand. I heard as the entire hall rose from their seats. Cameras flashed. Whispers all over. I opened my eyes a moment later, and I also stood up. Alex followed my lead.

There he was, my father.

I waited for the voices to bring up another troubling piece of my past, but they remained quiet. They didn't need to harass me. Their king was here, live in the flesh. He'd take over now.

Aram's silver eyes sought me out. They burned me. I could feel my insides dissolving. He had cut his hair shorter. It was even ashier now. Had I caused that to him? No, I hadn't. My father stressed about other things. The scandal. What would the people say? He didn't give a shit about my well-being. He wanted to control the narrative, and my escape had robbed him of all control.

Behind him, another man followed. Unbent, both tyrants joined us in the front of the hall. Next to each other, they looked like family. How did everyone miss it? They had similar facial structures. Everyone said I had my father's nose; Spencer did, too. Grandfather had passed it down upon us.

Spencer's hair wasn't as ashy as my father's because he was a couple of years younger.

The difference between Spencer and Aram lay in the money. Aram pretended for the cameras, while Spencer didn't seem like he cared. He didn't even wave hello to his daughter in the front row.

My father stepped towards me, and I almost sunk to the floor. I had to bite my tongue to steer clear.

Alex whispered something to me, but I didn't listen.

I took a step forward when my father arrived, and I went into princess mode.

The cameras were rolling.

Aram put his arm around me, pulling me into the most uncomfortable hug I had ever been in. Thankfully, he didn't put his hands on my ass. I wouldn't put it past Alex to punch my father in front of all the media. I took in my father's scent, and it was like *déjà-vu*. I smelled the familiar cedar that he showered himself in.

“They’re dead, Kamila. One word, and your men are fucking dead, you fucking cunt. You’ll pay,” he whispered so that only I could hear him. “I’ll put you back in your place. Get ready to have your womb spit out ten of my sons, cunt.”

His hand caressed my red hair before he pulled away with a phony smile on his face. It was all for the cameras. The crowd gasped in shock.

I was breaking in two inside as I stepped back to be closer to Alex. He grabbed my hand to comfort me, but I didn’t register it.

“Now that we’re all back together, let’s begin!” my father announced, his voice echoing.



FINALLY, THE PALACE CONFIRMED THAT ARIS HAD BEEN IN A car accident. That towered over our reunion. In a sick and twisted way, I was glad. Valentina wasn’t. I saw her shooting daggers at my father from where she sat with my brother and Mandy.

At the end of our little get-together, Aram welcomed Spencer to Katantia. He was an official guest, and he was here to celebrate his allyship with us. He was financing our military defense against greedy neighboring countries.

The Katantians in the crowd clapped for the man as if he were our hero. After what he had done to his daughter, I couldn’t share my country’s excitement.

Numbed out, I sat next to Alex, holding his hand.

Fylox was somewhere around us. I could sense him, but I couldn’t see him. I was a nervous wreck, attempting to cling to anything.

“Let’s also welcome my daughter back. She’s come to her home with her new husband, Alexander Winters! He plays basketball for Indianapolis,” Aram informed the crowd. I blanked out the crowd’s reaction. Aram’s eyes burned holes into my body. Aris wasn’t dead, but I could be. That was what

his look revealed. “Kamila’s future is uncertain. Her new husband isn’t from Katantia. However, my daughter will always find it in her heart to dedicate time to her country. That’s how I raised her.”

I nodded, smiling for the cameras.

“WE DON’T CARE ABOUT ARIS! WE KNOW YOU TRIED TO HAVE HIM KILLED! CLIMATE CHANGE IS REAL, YOU PRIVILEGED DICK! WE WANT MORE PROTECTIVE MEASURES IN CASE THERE’S ANOTHER NATURAL—” The disrupter was interrupted by palace guards who silenced him with electroshock down his throat. Stunned, the crowd gawked at the disrupter being dragged out.

Soon, the press was alerted to turn off their equipment. Jordan reached us with his men before anyone else could get to me. He escorted us out of the palace without even saying goodbye to Aram.

I had to hold onto Alex. I was too weak to walk on my own.



“TAKE OFF YOUR SHOES, PRINCESS.”

Alex, Fylox, and I crowded the hallway. Jordan was out, having left us when we arrived at my house.

“I-I can’t...” I stuttered.

Fylox crouched down beside me, his hands caressing my calves. Alex grabbed the back of my neck, pulling me towards him. His mouth claimed mine to distract me.

I still shook as Fylox struggled to unbuckle my heels from my feet.

“Take her to the sofa. I’ll be there in a moment,” Fylox told Alex.

Alex swept me off my feet, my legs holding unto him. He walked us to the sofa, where he sat me down. My gaze

wandered from the turned-off television to the framed pictures of my family back at the vacation home.

Fylox entered the living room with a gun in his hand, and I shuddered, shifting on the sofa.

“What’s that?” Alex asked in a voice that wasn’t lighthearted anymore.

“I’m reacquainting our brat with her safety,” Fylox uttered. He pushed back the coffee table, and I felt my heart flutter uncomfortably. Fylox crouched down in front of me, meeting my eyes with his cognac.

Fylox placed the gun on my half-covered thigh, and I winced at the steel touch. I didn’t like weapons at all.

“Will you be a good little princess and suck your friend off?” Fylox asked, rubbing the gun on my thigh.

“Which friend?” I asked.

“This friend.” Fylox raised the gun to my cheek, gently caressing my skin with it.

“Fylox.” Alex was having none of it. “Be careful.”

Fylox snickered. “Part those full lips for me. Let me shove my friend down your throat, princess.”

“But... I’d rather suck you off...” This pounding pressure in my head kept me dizzy. Aram had touched me today. I still felt his fingers on the small of my back. I could smell him on me.

“You haven’t earned that right today.” Fylox let the gun trace my lips, smearing my lipstick. “Suck your friend off like you suck all of your friends.”

“You’re not my friends,” I intervened. I didn’t want them to suffer for me. They had their lives back in Indianapolis. Who the fuck was I to keep them in my home? “You’re my everything...”

Fylox seized the moment, and he snuck the cold metal between my lips. It hit my teeth first, but this wasn’t real flesh. Alex minded my teeth more than Fylox. While Alex liked the

back of my throat, Fylox's head rolled back when I paid extra attention to the crown of his cock. Fylox didn't mind when I bit him; he embellished in pain.

Alex gasped next to us. Fylox rose from the floor, staring down at me while my lips wrapped around the gun in his hand. Was it loaded? I had done worse things than suck a loaded gun. If he pulled the trigger, I'd be safe.

"Suck."

"Please..." My muffled pleas fell on deaf ears.

"We're working on your fears. Show this gun some love. This is what protects you. Put that little mouth of yours to work. You always shower us with your mouth. The guns that protect you are getting jealous." He shoved the gun further inside my mouth, and I urged myself to believe he had cleaned it before shoving it down my throat. His cognac eyes were drunk off fury. There was a darkness in them that had fired up ever since we arrived in Katantia. "This is what protects you. We protect you. I'll kill anyone that dares to lay a hand on you."

My tongue licked at the gun between my lips, and I shuddered at the sharp taste. I compartmentalized. I couldn't think about how dirty it was. A small whimper escaped me.

"Fylox, is it loaded?" Alex asked. I hated myself for what he sounded like, full of agony.

"What do you think?" Fylox sounded insane. I fed off his insanity. I sucked on the gun like a good little princess. Fylox turned his attention to me again. "Where are your cock-sucking skills, princess? Impress me."

"Don't push me," I mumbled, but the words didn't come out because of the gun in my mouth.

I took the gun further inside of me, and I wet it. My hands were firmly placed on my thighs. This was Fylox's way of distracting me. He pushed my boundaries, fucking my mouth with an object I feared. I didn't see a friend in a gun. I saw fear and blood. I gagged.

“Easy there,” Alex commented, caressing my thigh. “Fylox, I can’t watch you do this.”

My face was quite possibly red; I felt the heat radiating from me. Tears flowed down my cheek, but it wasn’t the fake blowjob. The guys probably thought that, though.

Your men are fucking dead, he said.

“I think our brat needs food, don’t you, Alex?”

“Fuck, yes.”

“Can you get her something to eat while I calm her down?”

“I’m not leaving the room without the gun.”

“Are you scared I’m going to shoot your wife?”

I didn’t even flinch. I trusted Fylox with my life.

Alex shook his head. “Both of you need my supervision. I’m not leaving you alone while you’re all calm, and she’s all flustered.”

Fylox removed the gun from my lips, and I gasped. My breaths came in heavy and fast, making me heave. Alex kissed the top of my head, and then he left the room with Fylox’s gun in his hand.

I stared ahead, noticing dust crumbs near the television. My fingers itched to pick them up and throw them out. They were messing up my living room.

Fylox sat down next to me, letting out a long exhale. “Technically, you haven’t done anything that deserves a punishment. I can’t punish you for being scared.” I lowered my gaze, biting my lip. What the fuck were we doing? Aram wanted them dead. He wanted me to pay for my sins. Fylox went on, “Be a good little princess, and hop on my lap.”

“Fylox, I think we should stop. I’m this close to throwing up. My head’s a mess.”

“Let me cure you.” Fylox touched the knot of my emerald wrap dress, and he undid it. “That’s what we do.”

“How do you want me?”

“Is that even a question?” His smirk was eerie. Fylox was rarely this happy this often. Why was he in such good spirits while I was almost dying inside?

Over his lap, with my ass in the air and my long legs crowding the sofa, I settled my head on my own arms. I awaited my punishment. This smelt like a spanking. I didn't know what good it would do.

“Can you get me a drug? Any kind. Something you also take. Let's take it together. If you supervise me, Alex will allow it. Don't tell my brother...” I mumbled, shifting on his lap. I caused friction against his crotch. His hard cock dug into my belly.

He ignored my ramblings.

“You're the most magnificent creature my eyes have ever feasted on, you know that, right?” he said, his finger tracing the line of my spine.

“You've never said that to me before,” I told him, shutting my eyes. I was trying to drown the tears out.

“My best friend's in love with you. I won't let anyone hurt you.” His hand groped me at first, but then he started massaging my cheeks. “We've been hurt enough, haven't we?”

I nodded, feeling his dick twitch against me.

Fylox pulled up the fabric of my emerald dress, revealing my invisible thong to him. His hand grabbed my ass, squeezing it to the point of making me squirm under his touch. He had this warmth to his touch, although he was constantly cold as a person.

“If he touches you again, I'll put a hole in his head. I'll do that after I leave him alive while slicing his body parts.” His voice was a drug of its own. In the background somewhere, I heard Alex open up the fridge in the kitchen. “You can watch me do that to him. I think that'll do you good.”

“I can't watch you kill my father.” *He can't be killed*, I told myself. He's the King of Katantia.

Fylox's fingers found my thong, pulling it to the side. He dipped below, finding my wetness. "He harmed you. He harmed this pussy. Our pussy. I saw him touch you today, and I wanted to cut off his fingers, one by one. But that would be humane. If I had it my way, I'd take a drill, and I'd use it on every surface of his body. Would you like to see that happen, my good little princess? I'd bore him hundreds of holes. I'd be curious to see how his dick reacts when I..."

"What's going on with you?" I asked. I couldn't shake the feeling off that something was wrong, more so than usual.

"I'm just learning what it feels like to get what I want in life. Now, count."

I bit my lip, squeezing my eyes. This was risky. My heart pounded heavily, and my anxiety spiked, waltzing around inside of me like she owned my soul. I didn't like public humiliation, but here I was, in my living room with an exposed pussy. The windows were wide open, and the front door was unlocked. Any of the guards could walk in on us. Jordan was upstairs in Mandy's room, doing whatever men his age did in private. I didn't want to think about what he did because he was my father-in-law and my protector now. He'd done so much in such little time. I respected him in ways I hadn't respected a person in years.

Fylox's hand collided with my cheeks. He was warming up. "One."

"Two," I blurted out. The second strike stung worse. The next strikes were the calm before the storm, and I shifted on top of Fylox's lap to gain some friction.

"Stop moving. You're making a mess out of your dress," Fylox warned me. I felt his voice in the depths of my being. Deep and obnoxious, he was making up for his earlier outburst.

"I don't care," I pleaded.

"You don't get to change clothes until later tonight."

I rolled my eyes, and Fylox didn't need to see it for himself. His open palm connected with my flesh, and I gasped.

What followed was a row of strikes that had me holding my breath. We were halfway through, and he was giving it his all. When he didn't hear me count, he did it again, harder.

Not once did he dip his fingers between my thighs. He massaged my cheeks every now and then, whenever he felt like it. Like I wasn't dying here.

"Twenty-five." All the fire that concentrated in me skittered down low. I took deep breaths, but whatever we did worked. For a moment there, I wasn't me.

Fylox's fingers tortured my skin, purposefully avoiding the wetness building between my thighs.

"Please." The word came out as a breath.

"Please, what?" he asked, sounding awfully amused.

I squirmed. "Please, fuck me with your fingers?"

"Bad princess."

The curse word earned me another round of strikes against my already sensitive cheeks. When Fylox finished, he dipped two fingers below. Once again, he teased me, tracing lines. I gasped when his fingers plunged into me. His thumb reached my clit, robbing me of my sanity.

Alex strolled into the living room as Fylox had his fingers deep inside my pussy. This was his idea of aftercare; after hurting me with his spanking, he played with my folds to grant me release.

I was about to come right as Alex sat down next to us, chirping sounds filling my ears. How many bowls was he carrying?

Focusing on Fylox's fingers in my pussy, I bit my lip. Alex took a seat on the sofa, not far from us. His long fingers reached out for my chin, lifting it to meet his curious eyes. "Are you being a good girl for Fylox?"

"Not really." "Definitely." Fylox and I spoke at the same time, causing Alex to chuckle at us.

“Are you letting her finish, or are you going to torture her some more?” Alex asked, tilting his head to the side.

I received my answer when I came without any consequences. Fylox lazily stroked my wet folds. “Get up, princess. You can put your dress back on, but the panties are going off.”

I removed myself from Fylox’s lap, the dizziness not letting me go. I adjusted my clothes, sliding out of my messy thong. I held it in my hand, ready to discard it in my washing room.

“Give it to me.”

My eyes widened at Fylox’s request.

“I’ll wash it for you,” he added. He tucked them into the pocket of his sweatpants.

“You two are weird,” Alex commented, snatching an apple piece from the fruit bowls. I watched him chew and swallow it. “But I like it that way.”

Holding onto Fylox’s shoulders, I settled between them. Fylox put his fingers on my lip, begging for entrance. I parted my lips, and I sucked him clean of my wetness. I didn’t like doing this to just about anyone.

“Time for dinner.”

“I wouldn’t call a couple of apples, bananas, and oranges a main dish,” Alex commented, handing Fylox a bowl. Then he gave me mine. “We should probably ask my aunt if she can fix us up with a meal. I’m not in the right mindset to cook today.”

My fingers couldn’t stop trembling, and my fork clattered against the bowl.

Next to me, Fylox started consuming his fruit. His lips were so full. They felt impeccable against my skin. Why didn’t he ever kiss me?

“Baby?” Alex addressed me.

I tilted my head in Alex’s direction. I felt fingers grip my shaking wrist. I noticed that Fylox placed his bowl on the

coffee table. It was still overflowing with fruit. He'd only taken one bite. "Allow me."

I shook my head. Fylox insisted, and he removed the bowl from my grip to feed me. He gestured. "On my lap."

Alex complained, "Man, you just stopped playing."

"Does she look like she's calmed down?" Fylox asked. Alex cursed under his breath. I shifted, holding on to Fylox's upper body as I climbed on his lap. My cheeks were on fire from what we'd done earlier, but it didn't bother me. I was almost catatonic down there.

My fingers still shook.

"He can't hurt you," Fylox stated.

"You don't know what he can or cannot do," I croaked. I was allowed to speak, wasn't I?

"Open your mouth." He had a portion ready for me to consume. I parted my lips, and I took my bite, carefully chewing. Glancing at Alex, who had prepared the fruit for us, I felt a warmth inside me. "I know what he's capable of, princess. He underestimates us."

"Aram threatened you," I blurted out.

"It doesn't matter," Fylox countered. Another portion of fruit arrived.

"It matters to me. I already lost my mom."

"Baby, that's what you're worried about?" Alex grabbed my ankles, massaging them. "We're not going anywhere. He can't touch us."

If Aram wanted to, he could. He had Spencer on his side.

CHAPTER 33

WESTON



MY BROTHER NEEDED ME NOW. I WOULDN'T LET HIM DOWN.

Being in the midst of her second trimester, Valentina helped Mandy out of the car while I ordered food on the phone. I let the women settle inside the house while I stayed in my car.

Was I next? Who had hurt my brother?

This hadn't been an accident. If Valentina hadn't decided to eat a snack with my sister, she'd be in that hospital now, too. The thought twisted my insides.

Seeing Aram and Spencer in one room today had put it all in perspective. We were due for a showdown, and I had no idea where the next bullet was coming from. My sister was protected in her home. Her men weren't letting anyone close, and the display of her bodyguards earlier had proven just that. Not even Aram dared to touch her inappropriately. That had been a first for me.

I failed. It took a family of strangers to protect my sister.

"She's more exhausted than I am, and I'm carrying another being inside of me," Valentina commented, stepping back into the garage. I exited the car, hanging the keys on the wall. "You look like shit, by the way."

"I feel like shit, too," I told her.

Ever since Valentina started staying with us, she'd insisted that Mandy sleeps in the same room as her. They slept in my

mother's former bedroom for a good reason. Valentina was plagued with nightmares. Instead of sleeping,

Mandy spent most of the time, reassuring Valentina that everything would be okay.

That was up for debate.

We sugarcoated Aris's condition in Valentina's presence. If she knew that his chances were slim, she'd not only lose it, she'd walk up to my father and attempt to strangle him. We couldn't have that.

Valentina's dedication to Aris was something I had never experienced before, and I knew that I would never experience it again. She wasn't here with us. Mentally, she was by her husband's side. We had to drag her out of the hospital, which she insisted that we visited every day.

"Penelope Jade needs her father," Valentina reminded me.

I nodded. "Of course, she does."

"She keeps asking for him. We were supposed to go for a swim..." The rest of her statement never found its way out of her mouth. She lowered her gaze, hiding her red eyes from me. "What is there to do? Should we get better doctors? I know there's something you're not telling me."

"We've done everything we can," I assured her. Aris was out of surgery today. He had stitches on his face, his chest, his shoulders, and his arms. He hadn't broken any bones. He'd fractured four ribs because of the airbag. His knees had barely gotten away with a couple of scratches. The burns weren't as bad as we'd initially been told. The second-degree burns would heal at some point.

What was troubling was that he had brain damage, and the doctors couldn't tell when or how he would wake up.

Seeing that Valentina was already mid-pregnancy, we were anxious.

"You hate me, don't you? You still think I'm the cockroach," Valentina said, staring at the Wraith now. Her eyes were wide.

I shook my head. “I don’t think you’re a cockroach.”

She insisted, “I should’ve been there with him. Now, he suffers alone. He doesn’t get to hold that over my head...”

“What are you talking about?” I approached her. “Aris wouldn’t want you or the baby harmed. You mean the world to him. It took him a long time to finally show it, but you’re everything to him.”

“He always showed me,” Valentina commented, tucking a strain of her raven hair behind her ear. “You just never looked close enough.”

I let that sink in. “Look, for what it’s worth, I’m here. Mandy and I will help you with whatever you need...”

“It’s not you that I need,” she spat. She took a deep breath. “Although I appreciate the gesture. Aris made promises. If he stays in that hospital, we lose what we had built up until now. He wanted to be there for her birth. For everything.”

“You don’t know whether he’s going to be awake by then.”

“Who are you trying to bullshit?” Valentina tilted her head to the side accusingly. “I know my husband. If he were meant to be with us right now, he’d be awake and fucking me back in our house. We had plans, you know. There’s something wrong with him, and I fear things will never be the same again.”

I should’ve argued, but Aris and Valentina always carried a deep connection that nobody understood. How had they actually met? Yes, they were neighbors. They’d told the journalists a bunch of lies about their early union.

Valentina and Aris kept their early relationship under wraps. I had never seen them together up until she showed up on our doorstep on Christmas with a beaten face. I’d called up Aris, fearing that he had done this to the poor girl.

But he hadn’t.

He showed up a little later, and he took care of her. I watched them together from afar, and I didn’t recognize my brother. He was a fun man to be around, never letting anything get to him. But with her, he let his guard down.

We didn't hit women. Contrary to the West's beliefs about our abusive country, violence toward women was a clear no. Not even my father hit women, and he tended to think he was invincible.

"I want to eat soup today," Valentina revealed, crossing her arms in front of her chest. "Can you make that happen?"

"For sure."

"When did you and Aris know you wanted to marry?" I asked out of the blue.

"No."

"It's just a question," I contended.

Uncrossing her arms, she drummed her fingers on the window of the Wraith. "You never gave a fuck before, Weston. I know you're trying to live up to your role now, but you're not fooling me. If I wasn't pregnant with his child, you'd throw me out. I'm not under the illusion that we're suddenly best friends now. You hated me for a long time. You don't have to pretend so much. You'll get wrinkles. There have been enough hospital stays in this family. We don't need anymore."

"I hated you because you brought out a side of Aris that I never knew existed," I told her honestly. "We have our coping mechanisms in this family. I'm the quiet one. Kamila is the addict. He's the joker. He never really was a joker, was he? He pretended."

"That's not my story to tell, Weston. Don't fucking push me. I'll get a hotel room." She added, "My father killed your moms. Is that correct?"

"How did you..."

"Mandy had the decency to tell me," Valentina interrupted me. She was much smaller than me, and I shouldn't have feared her, but there was something dangerous about this woman. "After a long night of nightmares, she opened up to me, and she told me everything all of you have been hiding from me. Do you know how that feels?"

“It feels like your entire life has been a lie. You’re familiar with that sentiment,” Valentina continued. She flared her nostrils. “I don’t plan on being a cockroach for much longer. I’m everything you loathe. My father has betrayed my family, your family, and Mandy. He has caused us pain. I can’t forgive him. I know you never will. What’s worse, having a living parent that you loathe or a dead one that you loved?”

She took in a deep breath. “I don’t know the answer to that either. I can’t apologize for what my father did because I was just a child when he did it. I didn’t have the power to stop him. When Travis Cross sets his mind on something, he accomplishes it. I didn’t take a lot from my father’s DNA, but I got that. If Aris dies, I won’t be responsible for my reaction.”

“If he dies, which he won’t...” *Don’t fucking die, you prick. We need you.* “You won’t have to worry about a thing because we’re all going to back you whatever you decide to do.”

She drew her eyebrows together, but her eyes had softened. Silence in a room with Valentina was unheard of. It only took a couple of seconds until she broke the eerie quiet. “Can you show me his room? I’m new to this house. Aris and I never came here before you moved here.”

“But you used to work in the South Side, didn’t you?”

She nodded, her eyes glowing. “Yes, with Carmelo Ciccone. I was his intern for months.”

“He’s that fashion designer who wanted to dress Kamila for her wedding, right?” Kamila ended up going for a different option, a more expensive one, imported from the States.

“I don’t know anything about that. I haven’t talked to him in years,” she confessed, giving me an awkward smile.

Valentina followed me up the stairs. His room was the first on the right. I opened the door for my brother’s wife, and she walked by me, instantly soaking up her husband’s room. She said, “This looks like a time capsule.”

“When you two came to visit us the other week, it was the first time in years that he’d stepped foot in here.” I stepped

into the room, gently closing the door behind me. One of the Star Wars wallpapers had fallen off the wall, crinkled on the floor. It wasn't a messy room. Kamila didn't want to admit it, but she used to come here a lot before leaving Katantia. That was why the house was in such perfect shape. She kept everything in order.

“Did Aris want to become a cop?” Valentina asked, picking up one of the books next to Aris's bed. “*Understanding Interrogations*. He read this?”

“Mom always got us books for birthdays and on holidays,” I told her, and she widened her eyes in surprise. Our mother treated Kamila with kid gloves, but she behaved like we were grown men when we were in our teens. She held us accountable for every mistake we made, and we were terrible kids back then, doing all sorts of things that got us into trouble. On some days, it felt like she resented our existence. She spent so much time with Kamila that Aris and I felt excluded. Mom gifted us books that we could never understand at fourteen and fifteen. She pushed us to do better. “But he didn't want to become a cop. At some point, he wanted to become an actor, but I'm unsure if that was a joke. He liked movies, though. You guys watch a lot of movies, don't you?”

“Yes, we do,” Valentina confirms. “He pays for a Netflix subscription like a weirdo. He doesn't need movies when he has me in his life.”

“Your confidence baffles me,” I commented. She put the book back in its place, taking a seat on Aris's bed.

“It's not confidence. It's obsession,” she corrected me. She inhaled skeptically. “This bed doesn't feel like it has been used by my husband at all. It's devoid of his scent.”

“It's been years,” I reminded her.

“I can feel his essence. It's not here.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” I asked her.

“Whoever the boy was that lived in this room, he's not my husband.”

Valentina stood up, heading to the closet. I watched her scan each item warily. The things were part of our past, back when mom and grandma washed and folded our clothes. She picked a gray fleece jacket that Aris used to wear at home in his teens. He didn't wear it too often because Katantia's winters were short, but Valentina took the clothing item off its hanger, pressing it to her chest.

It was overdramatic, to say the least.

"I can't imagine Aris ever wearing this," she blurted out, wiping away a getaway tear from her rosy cheek.

"Believe it or not, he used to be tiny."

"Like me?" The sob she let out fucked me up.

"No, you're tinier than tiny," I replied with a smirk, trying to lighten the mood.

"Oh, fuck off," she snorted, but there was a flicker of amusement in her face. "Why does half of his closet look like a valedictorian took a shit in here? Aris has better style than this."

"Mom bought him these clothes," I warned her, and she rolled her eyes. "She wanted us to look a certain way. She paid close attention to our grades, and she saw something in all of our achievements. Sometimes, she bought into the good grades too much. I bet we only did well in school because the teachers were afraid of the palace."

"Don't undermine your achievements," she responded. She removed a white shirt with one of the Star Wars characters on it, the little green guy that everyone liked to share on the internet. "You can go now. I want to be alone in this room for a while. Let me know when dinner's here."

"I'm not sure I appreciate your assertiveness but will do," I said, backing away from her.

"You better get used to it. The cockroach is dead."



TONIGHT, VALENTINA HAD ASKED MANDY TO SLEEP IN A separate room. They were testing what worked best for the pregnant woman.

Mandy had grabbed her pillow, joining me in my room. With her next to me, the silence wasn't as numbing.

"I won't apologize for what I did but rather how I did it. I just wanted to take care of you," I blurted out. "You can hate me all you want. I did what I had to do. I wanted to make sure you'd survive."

"And here I thought Kamila was a drama queen," Mandy responded, her breathy sigh content and tranquil. "I don't understand why you dragged me all the way to Katantia when I had a ready hospital waiting to treat me over there."

"I don't want Winters or that freak to be responsible for you." When Kamila left, I suffered a loss, but deep down, I knew that she made mom proud with her actions. Leaving and ruining one of Katantia's biggest moments? I could feel mom's pleased smile in my soul. I took a deep breath, and I went on, "When you left, all the color you brought with you disappeared."

"What is that supposed to mean?" she asked, shifting on the bed to face me. I stared at the ceiling. My siblings filled their rooms with life. There was nothing of value in here for me. I didn't own anything that I would want to rescue if there was a fire. My Wraith was as good as it got, and after my brother's car accident slash murder attempt, I didn't feel safe inside of her.

My brother had been right.

I was a ghost.

Kamila had been raised by our mom. She would conquer the world one day. With her husband, she was one step closer. I heard the rumors. I saw how much money her husband's colleagues spent on our island. They never brought their wives, though, and I didn't want Kamila to be hurt by Winters. She deserved to be happy, to be owned and loved. She didn't

deserve to sit alone in a foreign country, waiting for her husband to come back from his exotic adventures.

Kamila's husband was on TV all the time. People idolized these types of men, rooting for them to win as if it meant that they'd get a piece of it. For my family, this was a familiar concept. But I had never found my footing here.

"I have nothing."

She chuckled, and I turned to face her. Her cheeks turned into a shade of pink that I needed more of. "Don't be silly. Your family, all these properties... You're a prince. This country worships the ground you walk on. If I had a penny for every time somebody bowed for you, I'd be richer than my father."

"I have nothing," I repeated. "All of this means nothing. I could leave tomorrow, and it wouldn't matter. What am I doing here? After you left, things weren't the same. I had it all figured out. I had my girls, my job at the palace. One day, I'd end up king because Aris and Valentina surely wouldn't get the throne from under us. I went out, and if I wanted to, I could fuck ten girls in a night. They offered. I didn't even have to ask."

Mandy batted her eyelashes, and I was momentarily distracted by the simplicity of the act. I continued, "You didn't mean to cause this. I know you didn't, but once I knew that there was somebody out there who needed me for more than this fucking charade... A switch flipped. I let you go, and I did it with ease because I didn't want to deal with what your existence in my life meant."

"I had a lot to digest," Mandy commented, biting her lip. "Things have been changing too fast. It's an active process. We don't even know what tomorrow holds. Why are you telling me all of this?"

I let out a harsh breath. "I'm afraid that I'm next."

She winced. "Don't say that."

"I want you to be my responsibility. I want to own you," I confessed. A weight rolled off of my shoulders, providing me

with a long-needed deep inhale of air. I had to get it off my chest. Just in case the possibility never presented itself again.

“We talked about this,” she reminded me, tucking a strain of her hair behind her ear. “I don’t want to be owned. It’s not your job to keep me safe. It’s my own.”

“You’re doing a terrible job,” I told her. She blushed. “What? You don’t have a clever response to that? The moment I heard about your health issues, I was ready to move heaven on earth. I’d do it all over again.”

“You didn’t have to,” she insisted.

“I did it anyway. That’s what people like me do.” Her fucking smile filled me with hope. If she could smile, there was nothing I couldn’t do. “In my head, you’re already mine. It took me a couple of months to act upon it, but now, I know for sure. This can work if you just let me show you what it’s like to be owned...”

“That word gives me shudders,” Mandy revealed, creasing her face. “I can’t be owned. I can’t even have sex for the foreseeable future. I can’t be what you need me to be.”

“I get the feeling that you don’t know what I need.”

“What I know is that we can’t go back to what we had,” she blurted out. Her watery eyes shook my empty heart. “I’m broken. You’re you. You could have any woman in the world. I’m broken. I’ll never...”

He interrupted me, “You’re not broken, my pretty little whore. You’re alive and well now. I’ll take care of you, and you won’t ever need for anything.”



WATCHING THE SUN DISAPPEAR, WE SAT ON THE VERANDA. Valentina had grabbed a bite with us, and then she’d stormed off to Aris’s room. Ever since I let her in there, she’d been shutting us off.

“I’m sorry that I can’t cook for us,” Mandy blurted out, placing her empty bowl of soup on the coffee table. Her spoon rattled against the porcelain bowl. “It’d be better if we had homemade food for Valentina and the baby...”

“It’s Euphoria. They’d never give us leftovers. You don’t have to worry about it. They know about V and the baby,” I reminded her. There wasn’t a place on Katantia that I trusted more with my food. My mom loved the place, and she’d take us there often. Salacious rumors had her cheating on Aram with Euphoria’s owner, but I didn’t believe them. I knew an honorable man when I saw him. There weren’t many on Katantia, and whenever we went to Euphoria, we were well taken care of. Years have passed since my mother’s death, almost two decades, and Euphoria still welcomed us with open arms.

I added, “Besides, once everything is settled, I’ll hire a cook and cleaning staff. We won’t have to bother with all of that. It’s not your job to look after me.”

“But it’s my job to fuck you?” she asked, and the grin on her face struck me.

“For starters, you don’t have a job, so simmer down,” I told her. I observed the girl next to me, and I saw strength in person. She could barely get out of bed in the morning. Instead of walking, she moved around the house at a slow pace, wincing and cursing at the pain she couldn’t get rid of. She refused my help when I asked to carry her. I didn’t mind, but I took away her control if I carried her, so she strode in slow motion.

“Don’t you want something easy and fun? I’m not going to be fun anytime soon, Weston. These past months have taken a toll on me.” The light mood had dissolved, replaced by a thick rope that twisted around our necks.

“I don’t want fun. I want you.” I’d repeat it until she grasped the concept. What if I was about to join Aris? What if my father was planning another grave next to my mom?

“You won’t be able to have me for some time,” she said sighing.

Couldn't she see what she did to me? It felt good to be needed. I couldn't describe what I saw when she was in the room. I insisted, "I don't care."

"It's all fun and exciting now, but you'll get bored eventually."

"Nothing about this is fun and exciting. Everything's going to shit, and I'm just trying to salvage whatever I can." I didn't want to break my mom's fine china, so I placed it on the coffee table. "There are half a million people here. They don't deserve to suffer because Aram and Spencer have decided to go to war. My brother's out. My sister's married. It's up to me to take over."

Her face fell, and pressure inside of me tied my stomach in knots. She didn't want to stay here. Fuck. I knew that already. Why did it hurt so much to see her confirm the fact?

Mandy took a deep breath. "I want to make a couple of things clear."

I nodded too soon, too eagerly. "Tell me what's on your mind."

"I can't stay here." After a moment of bewilderment at the obvious, I gave her a quick nod. "You're Katantian. You need to have sex. However, I don't see myself having sex anytime soon..."

I gazed at the beach ahead of us. "I'm telling you that I'm more concerned about your well-being than fucking you. We might be Katantian, but we're still human."

"Then, there's the fact that I can't bear your children anymore."

"Do I look like I want kids?" I asked her.

Taken aback, she cocked her head. "You can't be serious."

"Very much so."

"But what about the throne?"

"I have two siblings in happy marriages that can produce heirs," I reminded her. I couldn't deny the love I felt for those

kids even before I ever met them. We'd teach them like my mom taught Kamila. I'd never put them in harm's way.

"Last year, you wanted to fill me up with your come, though. You wanted to see me carry your kids. What's changed?" Her voice trembled, and I wanted to terminate the doubts that ate at her.

"Everything's changed." I ran a hand through my hair. "Sure, a pregnant you would've been splendid. Look at V. The baby's making her bitchier than usual, and she's actually fun now? Besides the fact that her husband's in intensive care... What I mean to say is, I'd rather have you and no children over children and another wife. I never had any family plans. I fucked you, and it was an interesting concept to impregnate you. It's not the end of the world that it won't happen. You've got more shit to deal with than to worry about my inflated ego. If you're with me, I don't need anything else."

"We'll have this conversation again, you know," she mumbled. The words barely left her mouth. "Until it all settles down, and I've started to cope with what has happened, I'll drive you crazy with my outbursts."

Mandy started shaking, and I handed her my jacket. The wind was cruel, urging us to step inside the house. I didn't want to go in there. As much love as I felt when I was younger in this home, it was destroyed now. My family was a mess, and everything in those four walls reminded me of a time long lost.

"Touch me."

She gasped. "Excuse me?"

"I'd never joke about you touching me. I want to prove a point. Touch me."

"Where do you want me to touch you?"

"Where do you think?"

She shifted in her seat next to me, wincing. Fuck, I hated that I couldn't do anything to help this pain she couldn't escape. Every move she made reminded her of the surgery, of what she'd lost so suddenly. We were in constant

communication with the doctors. There was almost daily physical therapy. I monitored it all, willing to spend every dime I had to make her feel better. But there were things that I couldn't buy. I couldn't buy her inner peace. "Are you trying to embarrass me? I'm not in the mood right now."

I reached out, grabbing her hand. Carefully, I led it over my lap.

"What do you feel?"

"I told you. I'm not in the mood."

I knew. Fuck, if I knew. I let our entwined fingers trail across my hard length. "Can you feel it?"

She gulped down her pride. "Yes."

"I'm hard for you. I want to do things to you... If you had a peek into my brain right now, you'd be terrified. All I can think of is how once you heal, I'll never fuck you with a barrier ever again." Her hand froze. My thumb rubbed the back of her hand. "I don't want you to fear me. I'm not touching you until you give me the okay. Your doctor needs to approve. And... If you want, I'll never touch you again. I'll live with it. Your happiness and safety are my priority."

"I can't make any promises, Weston. I don't feel like myself right now. I might never go back to who I was." It was my turn to flinch when she applied a small amount of pressure on my erection. "This is great. Thank you. But I don't have any urges right now. I feel... I feel so empty."

She jerked her head to the other side, hiding her blushing face from me.

Moving quickly, I knelt in front of her in a matter of seconds. I kept my hands entwined with hers, laying still on her lap now.

My eyes searched hers. "Look at me."

After a moment of hesitation, she glanced my way.

I told her, "I want to be there for you. Let me help you. Don't shut me out. I have zero expectations—"

A thud from inside forced me to rise from my kneeling position in front of Mandy. Spooked, she glanced at me. “What was that?”

CHAPTER 34

MANDY



I HEARD WHIMPERS FROM UPSTAIRS AS WE ENTERED THE vacation home from the backdoor.

“Is everything okay up there?” Weston called, but there was no response from Valentina.

I couldn’t panic. I stepped away from Weston, and without making a sound, he shot me a questioning glare. I couldn’t. What if something was wrong with the baby?

On our way up the staircase, I bumped into Weston. I cursed under my breath. We rushed upstairs, and we had to switch on the lights because the sun had gone down. Weston pushed Aris’s door open, revealing a man standing in the middle of the room. The blinders were still up, and no lights were on in here. I could only see his shadow in the minimal light.

Immediately alert, I recollected where I stashed my backpack.

“What’s going on here?” Weston asked. “Who are you?”

The cackle that followed gave me goosebumps until I realized that it was a familiar sound. “Loosen up. It’s only me. I came to see my sister.”

I gulped down my shock, instant relief washing over me. Weston asked, “How did he get in here?”

“Yeah, how did I get in here?” Ryan asked. He stepped aside, revealing a shell-shocked Valentina. She didn’t move from the spot.

“I-I let him in,” she blurted out.

“Let’s have a coffee downstairs?” I suggested, ignoring the pain in my gut. “We weren’t expecting you. Where have you been, Ryan?”

Weston stared at Valentina, seeing something that I couldn’t detect. To me, she appeared fine. Her uncombed hair messed up her otherwise splendid outfit, but who could blame a pregnant woman for having strange hair? One glance at the unmade bed, and I knew that she’d spent the day enveloped in her husband’s old sheets.

“I’ve been around. What are you guys having for dinner?” Ryan asked. I could faintly see a grin on his face. It startled me.

“We’re not having anything for dinner. We already ate,” Weston revealed coldly. “Next time, announce yourself.”

“I’m allowed to visit my sister,” Ryan argued. Delight glazed his timid voice. “And Mandy. I missed you. We need to catch up.”

“Definitely,” I replied because it would’ve been rude to leave his statement in the air like that.

“Can I have an orange juice?” Valentina asked out of the blue.

I responded, “Yes, of course.”

An orange juice? I didn’t recall Valentina ever asking for OJ. Frowning, I led the crew out of Aris’s old room. Every step that I took helped my body, but it made me wince in discomfort. I had to move, though, or else I’d suffer even more consequences. I had to get my blood flowing.

“I’ll get the drinks,” Weston offered as soon as we reached the living room. His angry eyebrows and troubled gaze concerned me. I figured that he still hadn’t got over his animosity with Valentina’s brother.

“I’ll have a cappuccino,” Ryan said, taking a seat on the sofa with his legs spread wide. His posture attempted a manly look; if one could define a manly look, that is. With a puffed

out skinny chest, Ryan gazed at his sister with baggage of emotions.

Weston cursed under his breath, disappearing into the kitchen.

“I have something I want to show you,” I told Ryan. “Let me get my backpack.”

“No need,” Ryan intervened. “Stay here with us. I haven’t seen you in so long.”

My eyes followed Ryan’s gaze that was fixed on Valentina’s swollen belly covered by one of Aris’s button-down shirts, probably from school. We all caught ourselves staring at Valentina’s belly sometimes, wondering what was going on in there. How was the baby feeling today? What would she look like once she was out?

Ryan’s eyes didn’t carry such questions.

“Why aren’t you guys staying at the palace?” Ryan asked. He trailed Valentina with his eyes as she took a seat on the other end of the sofa.

“We needed a timeout,” I said. Valentina’s eyes were lifeless, and I didn’t know what to do about it. She and Weston weren’t entertaining Ryan because they had their issues with him, but I couldn’t help but feel responsible for making him comfortable here. He’d come all this way to see us. “The palace gets so busy sometimes. Weston thought it’d be best for me to recover in the South Side.”

“Why is my sister here?” Ryan asked, and the twitch in his eyes made me shift in my seat.

“She shouldn’t be alone in that big house,” I commented. I attempted to cross my legs out of reflex, but the moment I lifted my leg, my body decided not to cooperate. The pain was insufferable, so I sat straight with uncrossed legs.

“My father and I would love to have her in our home.”

“I’m sure you do. She wanted to come with us, so we accept her here,” I insisted, growing tired of his sudden care

for his sister. He never showed his face on other occasions. I was nice to him. He overestimated his role here.

“Is Weston having fun with you two, all holed up here?”

“What are you insinuating?” I asked. “His brother’s in the hospital, in case you have forgotten. We’re not even sure if he’s going to survive. I’m sorry, but what exactly are you doing here? I must have missed the memo.”

Valentina started whimpering, distracting me momentarily. I scanned her from top to bottom, and I noticed damp spots on the button-down shirt near her belly button. I didn’t see him coming, but Ryan sped toward me, pressing me against the sofa. He placed his knee between my thighs, dangerously close to my newly operated-on vagina.

“Get the fuck away from her,” Weston roared from the side. I flinched, accidentally causing friction between Ryan and my body. He pushed himself against my sensitive area, and I gulped down a shriek.

I flipped my head to glance at Weston, and I saw my backpack on his left arm. Jordan’s gun was cocked on his right hand. Apparently, Weston listened to me when I talked, but I didn’t like seeing an armed Weston. Why? He had no idea how to use a gun.

“She asked for it,” Ryan blurted out, lifting his filthy hands from me.

“She doesn’t ask for anyone but me, so back the fuck off,” Weston warned him. The gun’s safety was still on, but that didn’t matter because I hadn’t loaded the gun. Of course, he didn’t know that, but the acting skills of the Wraiths ran wild.

“Are you fucking my sister, Weston?” Ryan asked, stepping away from me. I took a deep breath.

“Your sister is my brother’s wife, and if you have any sense left inside of you, you’d know not to fuck with her.” I’d never seen this side of Weston before. His calm was gone, replaced by a scowling growl. “He’ll have you beat up again if you touch her.”

“Oh, that was him? I’ve always wondered,” Ryan admitted. “Is that a confession? Should I get my lawyer? I’m still paying off my new teeth.”

“You don’t have a lawyer, moron,” Valentina muttered from her side of the sofa.

“I think the only moron here is you, sister,” Ryan said, his grin imprinting itself as a part of my nightmares already. “Once again, you’ve shown how disappointing of a whore you are.”

“What the fuck is going on here?” I asked. Who had beat Ryan up? And why? His knee between my thighs had caused me pain that lasted longer than it should have.

“Ryan’s a dickhead,” Valentina blurted out. “That’s what’s going on!”

“You can put the gun down. I’m not here to harm anyone,” Ryan commented, but Valentina cringed. “I just came to see what the fuss is all about. Rumors have been floating around the palace. Unsolicited threesomes. Fake babies. Women turning into men. But I see Mandy’s still as much of a pussy as she ever was.”

“Fuck you,” I cursed at him, surprised at myself. “I’ve only tried to be nice to you.”

“No, you haven’t. You used me last year when he wouldn’t fuck you,” Ryan accused me, and I could feel his spit on my skin from his livid words. “I was there to accompany you when HE wasn’t available. My family’s been subject to the Wraiths for a decade now! Maybe more if we count the fact that my father killed the Wraith mothers. Shoot me already, Weston. I know you want to.”

“Don’t,” I warned Weston, glaring at him, but I could see that Weston’s self-control was fading. I rose from the sofa. Squeezing my thighs together was my reflex, and it turned out more painful, so I relaxed my body.

“He hates me,” Valentina spat.

Ryan scowled. “I have a lot of reasons to!”

“Tell me one. All I’ve ever wanted was to be your little sister. Why don’t you like me? What have I ever done to you that’s so bad?” Valentina rambled on. “I’m not a mistake, and I refuse to let you portray me that way! You’re the fuck-up. You haven’t achieved anything in your life. You sit around at home, playing your video games all day long. If you only had a job! I doubt you’ve ever been fucked properly! Has a woman ever touched you? I think—”

I held my breath at Valentina’s statements, too stunned to realize that there were movements right in front of me. Ryan charged at Valentina. Weston tried to fire the gun, but, clueless as he was, it didn’t work. I snatched the gun from his hand, grabbing my backpack. He left me alone with the gun to look after Valentina, who was now pressed against the sofa. Tears rolled down her rosy cheeks, and I could hear her tense breathing. My fingers shook as I properly loaded the gun the way I’d been taught in record time. Jordan would be proud.

There was no time to dwell on such details. There was a tiny baby amongst us, relying on us to keep her safe. I thought of Aris, and I realized that he wouldn’t let this slide. I took a deep breath, and I aimed at the scene in front of me.

Weston had successfully removed Ryan from Valentina’s private space. The men wrestled for the upper hand. Whatever advances Ryan made, Weston blocked them. They didn’t know guns over here, but body contact was their specialty. Weston’s height and weight gained him the advantage of overpowering Ryan’s pathetic attempts.

“He came on m-my...” Valentina mumbled. She was out of it, and I had to make it right again, quickly. I was tense all over, and my ache was growing worse. Nonetheless, I flipped, breaking all the golden gun rules. My finger wrapped around the trigger, and for once in months, I felt elated.

“Weston, stop moving,” I urged him. Of course, Ryan started flopping around like a fish out of water.

“What did he do to you, Valentina?” I asked, raising my voice. “Why did you let him?”

“He threatened the baby,” Valentina croaked. “He threatened Penelope Jade. I didn’t think he’d go through with it... He just pulled out his disgusting dick, and he attempted to... Fuck. I hate you, Ryan!”

“At least I’m not Aris’s cumdump!” Ryan yelled. Cold sweat trickled down my spine. Weston shut him up with a shove against his abdomen. “I hope he dies, you whore!”

Fixing my posture and hoping that what I was about to do wouldn’t backfire, I pulled the trigger.



THE MOMENT I OPENED MY EYES AND I MET JORDAN, I’D known he was a handful. Did he look like he could kill a man with his bare hands? Yes. Did his stature scream authority? Of course. I dreaded disobeying this man. Did I feel safe in his presence? Always.

“The baby is fine,” the doctor announced. I couldn’t remember her name because there was no space in my brain for names right now. Jordan looked like he was about ten seconds from exploding. Felicita and Travis sat curled in the corner, whispering things to each other and holding each other’s hands. There were tears all over the room but on the pregnant woman.

Valentina’s furious eyes and flared nostrils didn’t allow sadness. Ryan’s fluids had been cleaned off of her body, and she’d been given a new outfit. She lay on the examination table with clenched fists while her doctor scanned her belly.

“You should’ve just killed him,” Valentina blurted out, stupefying the room. “He’s a trash bag!”

“Didn’t we just discuss how you should remain calm? This doesn’t benefit neither of you. Think of the baby,” the doctor advised Valentina, but she shook her head.

“My baby knows what a fucking piece of shit Ryan is!” Valentina coughed. Her eyes were bloodshot, and I could feel her agonizing heat from all the way across the room. “But he

gets to walk around proudly. Oh, my dad serves the king! Oh, suck my dick! Oh, FUCK OFF!”

Needless to say, once she washed the shock of her brother’s disgusting actions off of her skin, Valentina couldn’t keep quiet or calm. She’d been going off ever since she was placed on the examination table.

“It’s your fault!” She gestured at her Travis, who was comforting Felicita. “YOU ALLOWED HIM TO BECOME THAT WAY! Look at me. I’ve done what I was supposed to do. What you told me to accomplish, I’VE DONE IT! I’m married. Are you proud? I’m pregnant, too. I bagged the future King of Katantia! What about Ryan? Are you proud of your glorious son? He’s going to get raped to death now. And I have ZERO regrets. You murderer!”

I intervened, “Valentina, please—”

“Shut the fuck up. You should’ve killed him,” Valentina cursed at me. I took a deep breath.

“Let’s leave Valentina alone for a little while. She needs to process, and you being here doesn’t help,” Jordan suggested. His deep and calm voice echoing in my thoughts. He’d refreshed my memory and skills in Indianapolis. For that, I’d be forever grateful.

“I’ll stay with my daughter,” Travis said. Exhaustion covered his features. It dawned on me that I had never seen Travis happy. The one time he appeared remotely content was at breakfast with his family. Not even then had he let himself relax.

“No, you won’t,” Valentina uttered bitterly, and I watched her father break into pieces. “Your daughter doesn’t want to see your disgusting face. Get out!”

“We should go,” Felicita suggested, wiping tears from her cheeks. She grabbed Travis’s arm, and they left the room together.

Controlling my breath, I got up from my seat and headed for the door.

Valentina's voice halted me. "You stay. Please, come with me to Aris's room."

I didn't move from the spot.



IN THE ROOM THAT ARIS WOULD SOON BE RECOVERING IN, I sat by Valentina. I held her hand tightly. We'd just sat down after spending two hours setting up the room for Aris. I doubted that Aris cared about candles or flowers. He'd like the framed picture of their baby's sonogram on his bedside table. Valentina cleaned it thoroughly before placing it there.

Now, we sat next to the bed he'd soon be lying in after his surgeries. The room was one of the quietest of the hospital, reserved for those with deep pockets.

Still, I heard the hurried steps of nurses and the occasional whisper of doctors in front of our door.

What I didn't hear were the five men standing guard in front of that door. Jordan had a security detail for Valentina, two big men dressed in black and looking lethal as fuck. I'd never heard their voices. Did they even breathe? They didn't look like they needed air. Anyway, they followed Valentina everywhere now. The other three men were here guarding the room. There was another group guarding the Cross family and Aris, who was still in surgery.

Valentina attempted to play it off, but I saw her tremors and tired eyes.

"The baby knows."

"What do you mean?"

"I talked to her. I told her that her dad's not feeling well." Her voice was drier now. She didn't put much effort into hiding her state right now. She was probably tired. She'd worn herself out arranging the room with zero hours of sleep. "I also told her that she saved me."

“How?” I asked. I ached just hearing her speak like this, but I had no right to tell her to stop. I had to stay strong for her.

“She asked for strawberries. She wanted us to eat strawberries, so I stayed with Kamila and the boys. I also wanted to chat more with them, but... it was a craving that saved me.”

She removed her hand from mine, folding her hands in her lap. “He’s getting out of here.”

Valentina was as dramatic as Kamila. When they set their minds on something, they intimidated you. Her determination was a change from her teary face.

“Okay,” I responded.

“No, it’s not okay,” she fired back. “If something happens to him, I don’t know what I’ll do. But none of you will like it. I promise.”

Before I could intervene, she went on, “He made a vow. Aris and I are a lot of things. We might seem strange to you guys, but we’ve always had our own understanding. He vowed to help me raise this baby.”

“Life gets in the way sometimes,” I said, barely audible.

“That’s not life. That’s our fathers. They make our lives miserable. I won’t take it for much longer. You all think I’m just Aris’ wife with a hungry pussy, huh? You don’t think I see shit? You think I don’t know what’s going on?”

“Please, calm down. The baby...”

“She feels my anger. I kept calm because that’s the only thing my mom’s ever asked of me since I could think. She said to stay out of it. But if that bastard touches my man again or my baby, I will cut his dick off myself, and I’ll feed to him. I’m good with dicks and blowjobs. He’ll think of me when he’s six feet under. I’ll make it very painful.” Valentina fumed next to me. She sat there like she had nothing but everything to lose.

There was a knock on the door. I bet it was one of the guards. Jordan and his people heard shit before it even happened.

“Leave us alone!” Valentina yelled at the door. Then she turned to me. “I don’t want to go back to the palace.”

“Understood, but we have to now. Jordan won’t let us go back to the vacation home,” I explained. Valentina had always had a ruthless aura around her, but this was new. I welcomed her newfound assertion. I was proud of her for standing up.

“We’ll move back in with you,” I suggested.

Her mask fell. Valentina instantly added, “I don’t want to sleep in our bed.”

“You don’t have to. There’s plenty of space, isn’t there?”

“I’d prefer to stay here. I’ve already asked the nurses for a bed, but they won’t let me stay here. It’s too complicated and other bullshit...” She sighed. “Aris needs to feel me next to him. He’ll come back to us. I’m sure.”

“I know. But the doctors say you need your rest. The hospital’s cold climate doesn’t do you any good.” I didn’t let go of her hand. She needed to feel me near her, and I’d give her that. I’d lived a life of seclusion, and she’d been bullied ever since she stepped foot on Katantia. From what I understood, Aris had been the only one to look at her as something other than the nasty Cross’s offspring.

I didn’t understand their relationship. There was a firm barrier between Valentina and Aris and the rest of the world. They didn’t allow us inside, and sometimes, I wondered whether we were better off that way.

CHAPTER 35

MANDY



I STROKED VALENTINA'S LUSCIOUS DARK HAIR AS WE SAT BY Aris's empty bed. Her head rested on my chest, and my arm was wrapped around her. We weren't allowed to see Aris just yet. The Katantian doctors weren't letting their patient out of the operation room. From what the guards had told us, they were still working on his burn marks. We didn't have further information on how far his brain damage reached.

And Valentina wasn't having it. She'd calmed down for now, but I could feel it bubbling inside of her.

"I'm hungry," Valentina revealed, letting out a sigh. "I'll get a snack from the cafeteria. Would you like something as well?"

Shaking my head, I replied, "I'm afraid I'm still in shock."

Valentina removed herself from my embrace. She got up from her chair, her fingers grazing the bedsheets that would soon be her husband's. They creased underneath her touch. "That was badass."

"I almost shot the Prince of Katantia," I blurted out, tremors filling my voice. "I've been caught with a gun in one of the most anti-firearm countries in the world. It's like going into Abu Dhabi naked."

"It was in Weston's defense. He barely suffered a scratch," Valentina insisted. She turned around to face me. "I didn't know about your mad gun skills. How did you get a gun? Did you have to carry it in your—"

“No, I didn’t hide it in any of my orifices,” I informed her, unable to fight the shy grin on my face. “My skills are definitely mad. I can’t even aim right... I had a teacher back when I was in high school. One of the guards taught me how to use a gun. My father’s staff left me alone most of the time... Apparently, my mom had me with him. Of course, Spencer removed him from my life, but the man’s lessons stayed with me. Silly, I know. But it’s become quite handy.”

“I agree. Your aim sucks. Just a little higher, and you would’ve shot my brother’s dick off. That would’ve been spectacular.” She added, “It’s like we have another guardian angel up there.”

Valentine hurried out of the room, and I heard her argue with the guards outside. Eventually, I heard her wild steps as they left for the cafeteria.

My eyes fell on the sonogram. Valentina had placed it on the bedside table with pride. It had been a strange day when we found out the baby’s gender. Aris stormed out of the room the minute the baby’s gender was announced. Weston had to drag him back inside while I comforted Valentina. Once he was back inside the room, all of that became secondary. He snatched Valentina out from under me, and they shared an intimate kiss, sweet and tender. There were no words. They gazed at each other like they were in their own bubble, and we should be grateful that we witnessed it.

The door burst open, taking me aback. Weston barged into the room. His chest rose and fell rapidly, and there was sweat pearling together on his forehead.

“Aren’t you supposed to be in treatment?” I asked him, tilting my head to the side while I scanned his body for injuries. Outside of his visible lightheadedness, the constant swaying on his feet, his outfit was put together just fine. There wasn’t a drop of blood on his white shirt.

“They let me go,” Weston blurted out. “Where is Valentina?”

“She’s getting food,” I told him. He nodded, stepping forward. The Prince of Katantia didn’t like this room. Nobody

did. If it were up to us, we'd take Aris back home. Weston's eyes were hollow as they traveled across the room. I sat there, observing his pain.

"I've come to the realization that life's too short," Weston revealed. He approached my chair, but he didn't take a seat on the empty one next to me. I lifted my gaze to meet his. Weston's fingers cupped my chin, and I felt his warmth. "You need to teach me how to use a gun."

I gasped. "Excuse me?"

"You can't be the only one in our household to do that. I want you to buy me a gun for Christmas or whatever you Westerners celebrate," he said, teasing the fuck out of me. "That was hot. I'll keep that image in my head forever. You need to teach me."

"But I'm terrible with guns. I wouldn't be good... I almost shot you. How's your foot by—"

"It was a tiny cut. Relax." His eyes swirled with light, and I had no idea what was going on inside that head of his. "Will you forgive me if I jerk off to that?"

"To me, shooting you?"

His chuckle was delicate and almost inaudible. I felt it in my heart, though. He shook his head. "I want to jerk off to you saving the day. Fuck, I never knew you had this energy in you. You protected my family."

"You're crazy," I said, blushing.

"If my brother was with us right now, he'd grant you every fucking wish on earth. He'd get you a spaceship if that was what you wanted. We'd positively go bankrupt. Fuck..." Weston ran a hand through his hair. I shuddered at the thought of not having Aris around again. Sure, he was an intimidating being to anyone whose name wasn't Valentina Cross.

Nevertheless, Aris meant so much to this family. Weston couldn't sleep at night. He had his phone close by, hoping for news on his brother's health.

“You didn’t shoot Ryan’s foot off, but it was close. They’re fishing the bullet out of him, and then he’ll be sent to one of the worst punishment sex houses without a trial. He endangered two heirs of Katantia. He doesn’t deserve to get treated with dignity. He hurt his sister. I’ve never seen a stunned Valentina. She always speaks out. He stunned her, silent... This wasn’t the first time either.”

“This happened before?”

“Aris and I will tell you about it when he’s with us again,” Weston promised, and I nodded in acceptance. He leaned forward, kissing the top of my head. “Thank you.”

I felt his breath on my skin, goosebumps erupting all over me.

“What’s your favorite place back home?” Weston asked.

“I don’t have a home. You are my home, remember?” I told him, and he pulled me into a hug. Careful as always, I wrapped my arms around him. I breathed him in.

“Don’t use my words against me right now. Tell me. Where do you feel most happy in the States?”

“I don’t know,” I confessed. “I barely left Illinois. When I was younger, I probably traveled with my mom, but I don’t recall the details.”

“Where should we settle then?”

“Sorry?”

“I want to buy a house. Where should I buy it?”

“How do you mean?”

“We’re moving,” Weston revealed. I swallowed. “I’m going to leave Katantia for you. You get to pick the city or town. Whatever you desire.”

I shook my head. “You’re joking.”

“I’m not,” he stated. He knelt down in front of me, joining my lips with his. His hand wrapped around the back of my neck, and he drew me closer to him.

Against my lips, he whispered, “We can find our favorite place together.”

“Yes.”

CHAPTER 36

WESTON



AFTER ANOTHER SLEEPLESS NIGHT, I LAY IN BED, ABSENTLY tracing lines on Mandy's shoulders while she slept. She didn't shift during the night, stuck in one position to avoid any unnecessary pain. I didn't do much either. Either I stared at her, stunned at the fact that she was with me again, or I glared at the ceiling.

I was back in the house I'd grown up in.

Valentina occupied the room next door, which had originally been held available for guests. Since she avoided her shared bedroom with Aris like the plague, she stayed next to us. We only heard from her when she was hungry. My sister-in-law didn't want to see anyone unless there was news concerning her husband.

There wasn't any news. Days had passed, and we were impatiently waiting for him to be released to his room so that we could visit him.

I meant what I'd told Mandy. I was prepared to leave my home for her. This life wasn't for me anymore if my object... My future wife didn't want any part in it.

Being back in my *home*, I felt out of touch with it. Things changed when I left this place. The housekeepers were gone. The kitchen was empty. My brother became a victim of an assassination attempt that landed him in the hospital.

Valentina wasn't herself. She didn't leave her room, and she behaved more sourly than ever before. We never connected, but now, bitterness coated our every exchange.

Mandy got to her in the beginning, but as the days passed, Valentina withdrew into herself.

The only good news we received were updates on the baby. She was growing wonderfully.

I promised Mandy that we'd leave, and we would once Aris woke up. He had to wake up. It was out of the question that he would return to us.

"I can feel your stare," Mandy mumbled, rubbing her eyes. Her little yawn was strangely attractive to me. "Good morning. Any news on Aris?"

"Nothing."

She groaned in response. "I hate that."

"Listen." I cleared my throat. "I received a message from Travis earlier. He said our parents want to have dinner at the palace with us."

She gagged on air, taking her time to respond. "Who?"

"Aram and Spencer want to have dinner with Kamila and me." I added, "But I want you to join us."

"If I haven't been invited, I'd rather stay here with Valentina," she responded. I could taste the hostility in the air. It wasn't directed at me, but she was my responsibility now, not officially but soon. I didn't want to give her father room to bully her some more. Even if he wasn't her biological father.

Thank fuck for that.



I'D ONLY BEEN GONE FOR A MONTH, BUT THE PALACE HAD changed. More guards were roaming the halls, but fewer Katantia emblems greeted me. Resentment was in the air. My sister and I were walking into the lion's den.

"They didn't want me to come, but I told Fylox and Alex that you'd be there for me if something happened," Kamila said. Her shaking arms weren't a new addition to her

existence. I'd been around my sister, and I knew that she had these tremors quite often when anxious. She also had the occasional seizure, and I sure hoped that she wouldn't suffer one in the presence of the older Wraith men. It would make for an awkward conversation.

Today, the palace smelled like expensive cigars. Kamila and I flared our nostrils at the strange scent. Our father didn't smoke.

We called for the elevator. The wait was tedious. The staff knew not to stare at us, but the new guards hadn't been taught manners yet. They studied us, and I scowled at them. Dressed in three-piece suits with white shirts and brown leather shoes, they paroled our home.

I scoffed at the thought. The palace hadn't been my home in ages.

Travis had mentioned that dinner wouldn't take place in the official dining rooms. Since we were only four people, the staff had prepared one of the meeting rooms on the king's floor. The empty elevator granted my sister and me an awkward silence.

Glancing at my watch, I saw that we were right on time. Not that I wanted to be respectful, but... Aram and Spencer were unpredictable. They wanted to meet with us over dinner for what exactly? There was nothing to discuss. They knew that we were up to something.

The elevator came to an abrupt stop. "Fuck."

"I can't do it," my sister blurted out. Her fingers hovered above the buttons of the elevator.

"One dinner," I told her. "And then we'll be out of here. You don't even have to eat. Pretend you've been fed the come of your men."

"That will only get me into trouble," Kamila pouted, lowering her gaze. "Although it's very much true..."

"Hey." I cleared my throat. "You have nothing to be afraid of. I'm here, and I'm sure Travis and Jordan have a way into that room, too. They can't touch you."

At first, it was a hiccup, but then it turned into full-on sobbing. Kamila turned away from me in an attempt to hide her tears. I witnessed her emotional slump, and I hated the fuck out of it. Days like these I wished for Winters to take her away from this bullshit. I wanted to be near my sister, but at what price? She'd suffered the most out of all of us, and we were all to blame.

"I spent most of my life thinking I killed mom," she revealed, gutting me. Baffled, I stood there. I didn't understand what she'd just uttered. "We fought a lot before she... Died. When they said she committed suicide, I thought I was to blame."

"You weren't. Even if it had been suicide. You were a teenager and in no way responsible for a grown woman's misery. Kamila, what is this nonsense?" I approached her for an embrace, but she flinched away from me.

"I hated her, Weston."

"You didn't," I insisted.

"But I did." The sobs my sister let out cut my heart open. She went on, "I despised her. I was supposed to be the special girl, but where was my special treatment? You two were golden boys. Daddy let you have everything. You walked around without a worry in the world. Meanwhile, I—"

"What? Did you want to make fake friends? Is that your aspiration in life? We behaved like mini-Arams. I'm pretty sure we could be sent to a sex punishment house for the bullshit we pulled," I told her. "Kamila, you were special to mom. She loved you to death. You were her entire universe. Aris and I were there, but we were on the outside. She let us get away with our shit because her entire focus was on you. Special is your middle name."

Kamila's chest heaved. She leaned against the elevator's mirror for support. Barely a whisper, she said, "I-I know all that now."

"Good."

“I wasted my life on a lie. I could’ve done so much more. I should’ve gone to college like you two did. All I did was get fucked by Aram. Where was all that strength my mom conditioned me to have? It evaporated. I don’t want to be like that anymore,” Kamila confessed. I heard her intake of deep breaths. “I have to do better. My body doesn’t agree yet, but I’ll get it there. I have to be strong for Fylox. He needs me. Alex deserves to have a whole partner, somebody who’s worthy of his goodness. I can’t be a shell of my teenage self.”

“Whatever you need, I’ll help you out,” I vowed. I’d seen my sister break often. She’d relapse, beg me for forgiveness. She wasn’t begging now. I felt proud of her for realizing what she needed to accomplish for her future.

“I want to leave Katantia,” Kamila blurted out. Shouts and knocks from outside the elevator broke the silence that followed Kamila’s statement. It was evident that my sister’s focus had shifted elsewhere. Her husband had a career in the States, and he couldn’t leave that behind to live on a shady sex island.

I never thought it’d come down to this.

“Is everything all right down there?”

“What’s going on?”

“We’re getting help for you!”

Before we could discuss what she’d revealed, the elevator started moving again. Kamila patted her tears away, fixing her make-up with the help of the elevator’s mirror. She sniffled. Once the doors opened, she was Katantia’s princess and not a sobbing mess.

“The king and Mr. Rawlins are expecting you. You’re late,” one of the staff called out. He was an old employee of ours. His clothes were fixed, just right, and without dirt on his shoes. His chest was puffed out, proudly displaying the Katantian emblem on his jacket’s pocket.

“Thanks a lot, Lance,” Kamila addressed the man. Of course, she knew his name. “We’ll get to it then.”

We followed the staff across the familiar halls. Men were stationed at every other door. My father didn't have that much security. He believed in his power over Katantians too much. This must have been the work of Spencer Rawlins.

After a knock on the door and curious glances from the guards protecting this door, the staff member that had escorted us to the room pushed the door open. Spencer and Aram sat at the end of a long glass table that was set for four. Candles were lit at the center of the table, proudly displaying a gold miniature version of the palace. One of the sheiks that frequented our country had gifted it to us three years ago.

"You can go now. I'll let you know when you shall serve dinner," Aram instructed the staff. One after the other, they left the room with their heads bowed. It could've been an occasion like any other. Official dinners were frequent when we didn't have a national crisis like Kamila escaping Katantia.

As they sat next to each other, I couldn't miss the similarities in their faces, similar noses, and silver eyes. We were a family of tall men. Spencer wasn't any different. He was bulkier than my father, in all the wrong places. Snob and entitled, his attitude didn't allow you to judge him. He had numbers of money that my sister and I never even considered.

There was something off about my father today. He didn't ogle my sister. He didn't grace us with his usual crude remarks about her body. Instead, my father stared at the tiny golden imitation of our palace on the table. Spencer Rawlins sat next to him, but they were miles away mentally. Mandy's dad watched us with intentions I couldn't interpret.

Kamila and I took our allocated seats at the other end of the table.

My sister, ever the rulebreaker, commented, "What's the occasion? Spit it out. We don't have all day."

"No warm welcome for your uncle?" Spencer said. His eyes gleamed in pride and fat egos. "I have something that was made for you lips, baby girl."

My father didn't even twitch at Spencer's words. I didn't like this at all. Before I could jump in and defend my sister's honor, Kamila blurted out, "I don't fuck family anymore. You're four months late, bitch."

Spencer snickered, making the hair on the back of my neck stand the fuck up. "Baby girl, if I wanted to fuck family, you'd just nod and give me head. Besides, I don't fuck my brother's leftovers."

Oh, okay. So the cat was out of the bag. I asked, "What are you here for, Uncle?"

"It's quite simple, really," Spencer responded, sobering up. He straightened his back, leaning forward. "I want you out of here by tomorrow."

"Excuse me?" Kamila instantly responded. Aram didn't move. He didn't say a word. I'd have celebrated my father's speechlessness. But somehow, I wanted him to speak now. "This is our home. You're just a visitor."

Spencer's grin returned. "Your father's made a mess of the economy. He asked for my help. I practically own half the land already. What's owning the rest? And I purchased it in cash. I didn't use my name. I may not be their king, but they pay me nonetheless. I want the Wraith family out of here by tomorrow."

"And who's going to rule the land?" I asked. I wanted out of Katantia, but not like this. I didn't like what Spencer's statement meant for our people.

"Is that a rhetorical question, dear? I will, of course. I'm the money, and you're the figureheads."

Kamila and I glared at Aram. His silence frustrated me. I finally addressed my father. "What do you have to say about that? Do you agree?"

"I don't agree, but we have to do what's best for the country," Aram replied timidly.

"Great. Now, go pack your bags. Book your flights. I know you both have bright futures ahead in the States." Aram

pushed his chair back, and the squeaking noise hurt my ears. “Get out.”

“What about Aris?” Kamila asked before I could.

“What about him?” Spencer countered.

“My brother’s still in the hospital. He can’t leave right now. His condition is critical,” my sister explained.

“Your brother stays here. Valentina can stay as well. She’s a pretty decent girl, I’d say. Don’t you agree?” Spencer asked Aram.

My father nodded. “Indeed.”

“Sorry?” Kamila asked.

“Your father showed me his sex tape with the girl. It was quite an interesting sight. Haven’t you seen it? I showed it to Aris when he came to visit me. He looked appalled. As if he never fucked his wife bloody. Oh well. What a waste of space that man is.” I attempted to get up from my chair and show Spencer exactly what type of man my brother was, but my sister stopped me. She grabbed my arm, holding me back. I took deep breaths. My father had never fucked Valentina. That was a blatant lie! My brother would’ve entrusted me with that information.

“Juicy holes. She’s got a nice pair of them. Her mouth needs to be zipped shut, but other than that, we’ll get along just fine.”

“Don’t talk about her that way!” Kamila thundered.

Spencer added, “I will talk about your favorite cockroach however I see fit. Along with your departure, I’ll grant the families with children a flight outside of Katantia. I’ve booked aircrafts for them. There are ten destinations. They can pick where they want to go. They won’t be coming back. I’ll tear down all the unnecessary suburban trash, and I’ll make more sex stores. International franchises are next. I hear Amsterdam would love a Hole Store of their own—”

“You can’t just kick Katantians out of their country,” I argued.

“I can. This is my property,” Spencer stated.

Kamila dug her nails into my arm. “But—”

I heard a commotion from outside. Yelling and shouting that kept coming closer. My sister ignored it, and the men on the other end of the table did the same. Then the door flew open, and Travis burst in. “We have to evacuate. There’s an earthquake coming.”

CHAPTER 37

ALEX



I WATCHED KAMILA WALK AWAY. SHE HELD ON TO HER brother, who had promised to keep her safe. It wasn't enough. I offered to join them, but I'd been held back. This was a family matter, and Travis had stressed that.

Upon re-entering my wife's home, I smelled her everywhere. She'd removed the scented shampoos upon our arrival, but I could still feel the blackberries invade my nostrils. When Kamila showed us her home, I finally peeked behind the curtain of her secrets.

She didn't allow anyone to touch her stuff and clean it for her when I'd thought that she employed staff for housekeeping purposes. Images of her family were sprawled across her living room. Her mom was in almost every frame. Apart from the red hair, Kamila resembled her mother the most. She was the spitting image of the queen's grace and beauty.

I didn't like Katantia, and I couldn't wait until Kamila's other brother woke up so that we could finally get out of here. I was missing games and pissing people off with my absence. My PR team was twisting my Katantia honeymoon into a feminist warrior coup, but the fans were displeased.

Understandably so.

vis and Jordan regrouped in the dining room with some of the guards, discussing strategies. What was there left to do? I couldn't see what the next day would bring. It was a time of uncertainty.

I stomped up the stairs. There was nowhere for me to let out my frustrations. I couldn't go to the gym, and Fylox didn't have time to spar. He was happy now, for some peculiar reason.

Shutting the door close behind me, I surveyed Kamila's room. Her bed wasn't small, but it still didn't fit us comfortably. I'd have to get a couple of massages when I returned to Indianapolis. Fylox didn't show any signs of discomfort, but I didn't believe he felt as fine as he pretended to.

The door didn't creak, but I felt the shift in the air. Fylox joined me in Kamila's room. "You don't want to be here."

"I don't," I admitted.

"You'll get to leave soon. Don't worry," he reassured me. He adjusted the sleeves of his black hoodie, and I traced his movements. It was too hot for hoodies, but he refused to wear anything else. We couldn't even get him to switch to wearing shorts.

On Katantia, Fylox spent half of his days showering his sweat away.

"What about you? Do you want to stay here?" I dared to ask.

Sharply inhaling, his nostrils flared. "I have unfinished business here."

"Did her father—"

"No. Kamila's father never touched me," Fylox revealed. His face turned cold, and his whiskey eyes went dark. "That doesn't mean that he's innocent. There are hundreds of children being abused in this country. He doesn't do anything about it. He will pay."

"You can't make him pay," I said.

"But I can."

"She'll never forgive you." Would she, though? I'd say anything to get Fylox out of trouble.

“Kamila will kiss my feet if I murder her father.”

“Please, Fylox. Don’t do this. You can’t get to him,” I urged him. I rubbed the back of my neck. “We can leave and be happy somewhere else. Kamila wants to be with us now. You can live with her, and I’ll join you whenever I’ve got—”

“Happiness is reserved for the likes of you,” Fylox commented. He approached one of the cupboards, the one where Kamila stored her underwear. He reached inside, removing one of her dark blue thongs. She didn’t wear thongs much around us. She went bare most of the time, and that freaked me out. Fylox found it amusing, but it messed with my head since she walked around with our shirts only. She didn’t wear any shorts.

Kamila Ruby Wraith was a walking tease. She didn’t shy away from her sexuality. She didn’t care that half the world had seen her naked at some point.

I did.

With her thong in hand, Fylox took a seat on the edge of Kamila’s bed. He’d made it for us this morning. The bedsheets crinkled where he sat now. He lifted the dark blue fabric to his nose, and he inhaled.

Jealousy was unbecoming of me. I was perfectly aware of that. Especially after the three of us had made a pact to share Kamila. She wanted to be shared among us, and I wouldn’t be the one to break my wife’s heart. Fylox’s inhale of Kamila’s thong was a break of his promise. He didn’t do such things. When he told Kamila he’d wash her panties, he actually washed them. He didn’t stash them away for secret jerk-off sessions like a pervert. Odors disgusted Fylox. That was his thing.

My best friend broke out of the shell that he’d built around him after his return. It had taken us years to get Fylox to solely flinch at a curse word instead of suffering an anxiety attack that resulted in an attempt to beat the shit out of the person that had accidentally cursed in front of him.

It almost felt like all Kamila had to do was snap her fingers, and Fylox was tame.

“You work hard to be happy, and I see it. You haven’t been happy since we came here,” Fylox commented. The thong was on his lap now, and he stared at it like it was a science project. “You don’t want the complications.”

“That’s not true,” I argued. “I want to understand—”

“But you can’t. You never will. I don’t want you to. You shouldn’t have to get inside the head of an abused person.” He cleared his throat. “I have unfinished business here, and I won’t leave until it’s settled.”

“This isn’t permanent. We’re leaving soon,” I reminded him. “I only have one more week left. Then I have to return. What will you do in a week?”

Fylox’s fingers fondled the fabric of the thong, and I felt my heart harden at the sight. Why did it bother me? In his signature monotone, he responded, “We won’t be done in a week. What I plan takes much more time.”

“I can’t stay here,” I revealed.

“I know that. I’m not asking you to.”

I cursed under my breath. “What are you asking of me?”

Fylox exhaled. “I’m asking you to leave.”

“But I’m her husband.”

“And I want to hurt her. I have the right to. She asks for it.”

“She won’t forgive you,” I told him. “If you make me leave, I won’t come back. I’ll leave you to it.”

Fylox’s chuckles were rare and a strange sound to my ears.

Wrath ascended the stairs in loud stomps. “ALEX!”

“We’re in here,” I yelled back.

My father shoved the door open. Out of breath, he panted. Sweat dripped from his skin, and he looked like he’d sprinted over here. “We need to get you out. Now.”

I shook my head. I wouldn't leave without saying goodbye to Kamila first.

“There's an earthquake coming. Travis assumes that it'll be followed up by a tsunami, son. The island is too small. You have to leave.”

“Fuck no.”

I felt a sharp pinch in my neck. Before I could shove whatever had stung me away, everything went black.

CHAPTER 38

DOESN'T EXIST



INSTANTLY, JORDAN CHARGED AT ME. HIS SON LAY unconscious on the floor, a massive obstruction of movement, but Jordan managed to climb over the body to aim his fists at me. “What the fuck did you do?”

“He wouldn’t have left otherwise,” I gasped. Jordan’s fingers were draped my neck, squeezing the sanity out of me. “I-I did you a f-favor.”

“FUCK THAT! My son’s been your best friend forever, and this is how you repay him?” Jordan seethed. The man was old, but he worked out harder than anyone. One push and he had me pressed against the cold floor with his knee digging into my chest. He could break my ribs with one shove. I almost anticipated the sweet pain. “What’s your endgame?”

There was no need for a response. I took in the fury on his face, feeding my deepest desires. This was my family, and I did the best I could for them. It was all for the greater good.

“SPEAK NOW!” he spat at me. “Or I’ll kill you. I won’t fucking hesitate! YOU FUCKING IDIOT!”

Every bad word caused a flash of red in my eyes, spots of breathtaking blood. I wanted to reach out and touch the liquid, feel it with my fingertips, and taste it with my tongue. Breathing was secondary. I could do without air. If I only could touch the blood that I envisioned. Fascinated by the veins on his neck that were about to pop, I replied, “Put him on an airplane. Get him back to the States where he’s safe. He doesn’t have to be involved in what’s about to happen.”

“What are you planning, Fylox?”

“There’s no time. If there’s a natural disaster coming, we have to get Alex out of here.”

Jordan inhaled, his grip around my neck loosening. My chest heaved in response. He shook his head. “You shouldn’t have used that syringe on him. He would’ve left on his own.”

“He would’ve taken Kamila with him, and that’s a hard no,” I blurted out.

“What is your obsession with Kamila? Leave the woman alone. She’s married now.”

“And we still share her. We will share her forever.” I took a deep breath, and Jordan scrutinized me, his eyes full of distrust.

“If she’s dead, she can’t be shared,” Jordan stated coldly. “Was that your plan all along? Do you want her dead? Is that why you infiltrated Katantia? You sent the guard to get her out before the wedding. You made me believe it was Spencer, but it wasn’t. I taught you well, it seems. The other day, he discussed Kamila’s disappearance with Aram, and I found out. I’ve bugged the palace. He doesn’t care about Kamila or the Wraiths. He wants Katantia, and he has it now. Legally speaking.”

“I wanted her dead. That is the truth,” I revealed. I didn’t feel any better now that I had come clean to Jordan. He didn’t judge me for my other killings. The victims weren’t innocent. I did what I had to do for my peace of mind, Jordan always claimed about me. But killing Kamila crossed a line, even for him. “I planned to make it look like a suicide in Chicago. But then you disappeared, looking for Mandy. Alex popped up in the safe house in Indianapolis, and his interest in the princess hadn’t been diminished. I’ve decided that she won’t die on my watch.”

Jordan flared his nostrils at me. He clenched his fists. His patience was running thin.

“She won’t die, Jordan.” I went on, “She’ll become the Queen of Katantia.”



JORDAN AND HIS MEN TOOK CARE OF ALEX. HE'D HATE ME FOR this, but it had to be done. He couldn't be here. He'd distract the red siren, and they'd leave the island together.

That wasn't going to happen. Not if I could help it.

I wasn't invincible, but unlike the group of five men that Jordan ordered to accompany me, I didn't wear a bulletproof vest.

A blaring alarm rang throughout all of Katantia, warning the citizens to take shelter. The palace streets were empty now after Jordan's convoy escorted an unconscious Alex toward the airport. The private jet was fully fueled and ready to take off.

With Jordan's men as my shadow, I snuck into the palace from the staff's entrance. Murmurs and anxiety-inducing cries intruded on my concentration. The usually chirp staff with Katantian emblems across their chests ran around the halls, seeking shelter.

I couldn't bear the stress in the air. It tasted abhorrently on my tongue, and it made me gag.

It was an earthquake. These people were running around like they were about to be hosed down with gasoline and set on fire.

Rolling my eyes, we sauntered further into the palace. The staff didn't mind us, but once the guards noticed that we were in their territory, they didn't appreciate it.

I didn't carry a gun today. I had my knives with me, so I let Jordan's men do the heavy lifting.

The bloodbath began before I even lifted a finger. Lovely. The local guards were shitty employees with zero background references other than their endless love for Katantia. Death to them, it was, and I enjoyed hearing their final yelps. I memorized their cries of pain, and I played them on repeat.

“Where are we headed?” one of Jordan’s men asked.

“We have to find the queen.”

“Queen, sir?”

“The Queen of Katantia. She’s waiting for us to save her. She’s a delicate woman that only I am allowed to hurt. If anyone else lays a finger on her, I cut it off, and I feed them their finger until they choke to death.”

Unfortunately, I didn’t put a tracker on my queen. It could’ve prevented this scenario: six floors and countless rooms to search. We should’ve stayed outside. A magnitude 5 earthquake was upon us. I’d never experienced an earthquake, and I had few qualms about it.

The men that followed me around had panicked faces that annoyed me. Finding Kamila was of uttermost importance.

Scattering across the palace, we searched for Kamila and the men she was with. On the fifth floor, I swept through the room in which they were supposed to have dinner. I could smell her presence in the air, but it was merely an afterthought. There was no trace of my queen.

They were nowhere to be found.

CHAPTER 39

KAMILA



I COULDN'T SEE A THING.

Travis had rushed us into a hidden safe room behind my father's office. I'd heard rumors of these rooms, but I had never believed they existed. It wasn't a tidy and spacious room like the one in Alex's home.

I almost felt my father's breath on my skin.

The older Wraith brothers, my brother, Travis, and I were squeezed into fifty square feet with no windows or any source of light.

"What are we doing here?" Spencer asked. "I demand to be taken to my hotel."

"You can't go anywhere. We must stay inside until the earthquake stops," Travis insisted. He remained by the door. From the outside, you couldn't see it. I'd knelt by this bookshelf for years. I'd never touched it. My father wouldn't have let me read his books anyway, so I didn't bother investigating his belongings.

"And where is that earthquake? Or is it all a trick to get us in here?" Spencer asked. He sounded just like my great-grandfather, entitled and annoying. I wished that he'd zip it.

Wherever you go. Whatever you do. Once you've been fucked by this cock, you'll never want another. Slurp it down. Drown in my come, cunt. Perfect. Now, let me fasten this new toy I've been sent to your wet cunt. I don't care that it turns your "private parts" into a puddle. When sex toy makers send

me the wands, I have to test them. What sort of a king would I be if I rudely refused my citizens' gifts?

I hadn't heard that voice in a while. I shuddered, and I thanked the darkness for not revealing my weakness to the Wraiths.

"Where are Mandy and Valentina?" Weston asked Travis.

"I messaged them to stay inside. Valentina knows what to do. I've taught her," Travis elaborated.

The tiny room reeked of cigars. I'd grown used to odorless environments in the past couple of months. Being forced to inhale this sickening scent gave me nausea. I grabbed Weston's arm, and I held on to it while I leaned against the wall.

What could go wrong with us five in one room?

"While we wait for the earthquake to grace us with its presence, why don't you tell us what you've been up to?" Aram asked. I swallowed at the smug nature of his question.

I took a deep breath, and I built on what I'd told Weston earlier. I wanted to change. I began, "I've been hearing your voice in my head. I haven't forgotten all the lovely things you've spat at me over the years. I have a question."

"What is it?" Aram asked, inciting me with his supposed boredom.

"Did you always plan for me to replace my mother, or was it a spontaneous choice?"

"What the fuck, Kamila?" Weston blurted out while Spencer chuckled.

"Once I learned that you were a girl, I knew that you were supposed to serve a purpose beyond what your mother saw in you. The truth is that your mother became unattractive to me once she gave me a first-born daughter. Neither Aris nor Weston could change how stupid I felt for entrapping her instead of somebody who'd breed only sons," Aram revealed. My heart pounded heavily. "The royal house of Katantia isn't supposed to have princesses and all that nonsense. We

represent the strength of our country. Women aren't it! I knew your mother would have to die one day, and what better way to die than by the hand of this man right here."

Nobody breathed in the tiny space. The silence was eerie.

"I could've done worse. I could've ordered a slaughter. A cruel dismemberment of her worthless body! She sterilized herself without my permission. She robbed Katantia of its future kings." He raised his voice like we weren't standing right next to him, breathing the same air as him. "Alas, I didn't. I was satisfied with smashed pills and an injection. She went like a traitor, dishonored, and weak for choosing suicide."

"The people still love her," Weston exclaimed. "Mom's name hasn't been forgotten."

"The little losses don't concern me," Aram stated. "I had a decade to fuck Kamila. That was all I ever asked for. To answer your question, cunt, yes, I planned to fuck you once you grew tits."

"SHUT UP!" Weston erupted.

"Let him speak," I urged my brother. "He doesn't get to fuck me anymore. He's sore. I'm a married woman now, and all of that's in the past. He can cry baby all he wants."

"I won't stand here and let him dishonor you like that!" Weston blurted out.

I let out an abrupt laugh. "You let him do much more than that. There's no need to play the hero now. It's all over."

"Indeed," Aram agreed.

"You don't have to sound so proud of him," I responded, sighing sarcastically. "We all know how much you love Aris over the rest of us."

"Are you going to let her talk to you like that?" Spencer commented. His accusatory tone amused me.

"I've licked his asshole, I've swallowed his pee, and I've had his dick in my pussy more times than I can count. So, yes, Taron Wraith, I talk back to my tormentor," I blurted out.

Straightening my spine, I let go of Weston. “Fuck you, Daddy. I’ve always wanted to say that. You’ve sold out your country, waiving your responsibilities. I should’ve known that you’d pull a stunt like that. You abused your own flesh and blood. What else should I have expected? You caved into Taron like the weakling that you are!”

“You weren’t so frivolous when you gagged on my cock, cunt,” Aram seethed.

“Guess what? I’ve found a cock that I can’t even fit in my mouth because it’s so big. You’re minuscule in comparison, asshole,” I barked, heaving. “And I’ve found a hand that chokes me so hard I see stars. They’re fucking you out of me, one piece after the other. Soon, I won’t even remember what you felt like. Does that scare you? All these years’ work dissolving into nothing?”

“You’ll never forget what it felt like to get fucked by Daddy,” Aram hissed.

I chuckled. “I already have. See, I remember your words, but that’s all they are. Empty words. They mean nothing now, do they? Do you want to mess with me? Do you want to call upon the wrath of my new men?”

“Alex Winters will crumble if I have his knees broken!” The image made me shudder. Jordan wouldn’t allow that to happen. He’d keep his son safe. Alex was safe. Nobody would hurt him or his dreams.

“There’s one person that you don’t want to upset,” I warned Aram. Heat covered my skin, exfoliating my fury out of me. “He won’t take it lightly that you’re threatening the two most important people in his life.”

“I don’t care about the crazy kid. He’s—”

And that was when the shaking started. Five seconds was how long it took, but those five seconds were the longest of my life. Up until that point, I’d experienced some heavy shit, courtesy of one of the other occupants of the tiny room we were squeezed in.

Once the initial shaking and the aftershocks ended, Travis shoved the door open, and I took a deep breath. I was the last person to leave our private bunker. I stepped outside, barely able to control my panting. Sirens resounded, and I could hear the distressing sounds that the staff was making all over the palace.

One look outside of the huge windows with the glorious view of my home, and all I felt was panic. There was something different about the skyline I was intensely familiar with. It grasped my attention, and it had me glued to the scene.

I didn't hear the shuffling behind me. Their agitated voices became background noise to me. At that moment, my heart beat for my people. If we had been scared, I couldn't imagine what they had gone through. The sirens numbed my ears, warning us to take cover.

It wasn't over.

"... you're going to let that little bitch disrespect everything our grandparents built! Aris should've died in that car! I should send someone to finish the job in the hospital! Your offspring needs to learn its place..."

"KAMILA!" The faint call of my voice ruffled me. I stepped away from the window, intending to talk some sense into whatever was going on behind me.

The moment I turned, there was a gunshot.

Just breathe, sweetie. I'm so proud of you.

CHAPTER 40

MANDY



I CLUNG TO MY PHONE, PRESSING IT AGAINST MY CHEST. Weston hadn't messaged me back, and an hour had passed already. Valentina didn't want to move from our position under the table.

She urged me to remain steady until one of our people came to the house to let us know the danger had passed.

"Something's wrong," Valentina stammered.

"We're fine. The earthquake's over," I assured her. It had been like an injection, in and out. However, then came the aftershocks.

I hated sitting on the floor, and I dreaded having to get up. I needed my therapist and an appointment with my doctor. I needed more effective painkillers. "How's the baby?"

"I still feel her, so she's good," Valentina replied. The frown on her face puzzled me. She said things like that frequently. Her connection to her baby was abnormal and somewhat fictional, but who was I to tell her? "There's something else."

I unlocked the phone in my hand, and I dialed Weston's number. There was no response. Then, I started ringing the others. Jordan. Travis. Fylox. Nobody responded to my calls. Meanwhile, the alarm rang louder than ever.

Unmoving, Valentina, and I remained on the floor. She wasn't in the mood to chat, and neither was I. Awkwardly, I stared at the furniture from below the table. At some point, I yawned. Minutes stretched like hours.

“Do you forgive me for being such a bitch to you?”
Valentina croaked.

My eyes widened at the sudden change of conversation.
“Of course. Don’t even sweat it.”

“I don’t deserve your forgiveness. I’m a—”

I interrupted her, “Look, I don’t know what happened to you when you came here, but whatever it was, it shaped you into who you are today. I love Weston, but I’m pretty sure his family had something to do with your behavior change. You were a sweet girl back in Chicago, absorbent of your surroundings and obedient. We fit together because we were both the shy daughters of maniacs. I’m stuck in that frame, but you’ve jumped out of it. I’m starting to think it’s not that bad to evolve.”

“This change was my downfall,” she confessed, lowering her gaze.

“Don’t say that.”

“I should’ve stayed in my lane, Mandy. If I had never strayed, I wouldn’t be here right now. I could be in Milan with Carmelo, living out my dreams...” Valentina’s bottom lip trembled. Her eyelashes fluttered in agony. “Anywhere but here. I never wanted to stay here. I didn’t want to become one of them!”

“What are you saying?” I asked.

“Nothing,” she murmured. “Filthy fucking cockroach...”

Valentina’s whimpers made me forget the pain. I surged forward, ignoring the stabbing pain in my gut. I embraced her. She shook in my arms, and I consoled her. One of these days, she would have to open up to me. Keeping her issues bottled up would only lead to more damage in the long run.

I let her cry against my shoulder. We remained in that same position for a while. Valentina needed a friend. She was incredibly lonely now that Aris was in the hospital. She spent most of her time in her room with a notebook. She never let us in. She didn’t show us what she was working on. I worried about her. We’d spent a considerable chunk of our childhood

together, but it was evident that we weren't those little girls anymore.

Something had happened to Valentina, and I was too scared to ask about it.

The palace's alarm stopped. I felt instant relief, ready to tackle the task of getting up from the floor without tearing up my vagina some more. Just as I removed myself from Valentina and attempted to rise from the floor, another siren resounded. Longer and more threatening than the one before, the menacing sound already haunted my dreams.

Valentina cursed under her breath. She moved so promptly that I couldn't keep up. She urged me, "Come on! We have to go!"

"What's happening?" I asked.

She didn't answer. I rose from the floor, cringing at the pain, and I followed her up the stairs. The pregnant woman raced through her house like she was being chased. When we reached the top floor, she halted. They didn't use this floor as a living space, so there were no chairs, just moving boxes stapled upon one another. I couldn't sit on the floor again. I decided to lean against the wall. While I panted and broke out in sweats, Valentina studied the view outside of the window. The water was a three-minute walk away from this three-story house, but the gardeners had trimmed the trees just enough to glimpse at the beach.

"Fuck!" she cursed. "The ocean water is receding! Keep calling the others!"

Panic laced through me, and I picked up the phone to continue my calls. While I waited for responses, I typed in messages.

"Valentina? Where are you? Mandy?" A female voice roared through the house, battling the sirens from outside.

"We're up here, mom!" Valentina yelled back. "You should've stayed home!"

In frantic steps, Felicita joined us. She looked like death, but I wasn't going to comment on it. We had bigger issues at

hand than Felicita's lack of sleep. She took a seat on the floor, hugging her knees tight. Valentina's mother stared ahead into nothingness.

Too preoccupied with the view, Valentina overlooked her mom. I didn't. Her silent sobs scared me.

"I have to tell you something," Felicita gulped.



ABSENT-MINDEDLY, WESTON DANGLED THE KEYS OF THE Wraith with his fingers. We'd walked for half an hour to get to the area where his mom's vacation home had once been. It had been an old construction. It was one of the houses that didn't survive the tsunami that hit Katantia.

Before, this street was full of houses, cars, and joy. It was one of the calmer districts of Katantia. Whorehouses kept quiet in this area. Families resided here, enjoying the beach.

Now, it was all ruin. Most of the houses hadn't survived. First responders skimmed every corner.

Weston had been summoned here by his goodwill. We were supposed to stay inside and hide in the palace, but Weston wanted to come out here.

"He went and got himself killed protecting my sister," Weston blurted out. He didn't look at the ruins of his mother's vacation home. "He gets to—"

"I know you're grieving, but you shouldn't talk ill of the dead," I said.

"Look at this shit." He gestured around us. "People died here because we were too busy biting each other's heads off."

"You can't fight nature," I stated. I didn't have a connection to the houses here. I didn't bear responsibility for any of the damage. Yet, I found myself staring at the bricks. The first responders murmured around us, working and digging people up.

Valentina and I had been spared, but the women of the South Side hadn't. Most of them had been left behind. Almost every other body that the first responders found was female.

"Spencer wanted us out," Weston told me. This was a reoccurring statement from him. "He wanted us out, but if he sends us away now, he'll have an angry Katantia. People know we're under a hostile takeover."

"The people won't ever recognize Spencer as their king," I assured him, hoping that there was truth in that belief.

Weston shook his head. For all intents and purposes, he'd attempted to look as put together as possible today. The country suffered, but they needed their beloved celebrities to shower them with hope. His suit was perfect, but his eyes were sunken and hollow.

"You don't know that. I've disappointed the people of Katantia. Look at the chaos around you. It's been a week, and they're still digging up people. Protesters have started assembling in front of the palace..."

Weston hung his head, and my heart broke for him. He wasn't supposed to show emotion publicly, but there was so much going on that he couldn't keep it in anymore. Katantia was his home. Yet, it wasn't what it used to be anymore. In solidarity with the victims, Hole Stores remained closed. The protesters in front of the palace claimed that they only closed because many of their workers died in the tsunami.

"It happened so quickly. I had no idea about Aram's hidden guns in his office. He wanted to show off to his brother. Spencer talked our ear off, cursing us out for disrespecting the Wraith name. Aram picked up a gun, and he tried to shoot his own daughter... Kamila cried so hard. The last time she cried like that, it was for our mom," Weston told me. "Fylox had to calm her down. She was outraged."

"You don't blame her, do you?" I asked cautiously. Outside of the palace, every other citizen was upset. Inside the palace, there was grief. Things were changing, and Spencer was eager to take control.

Spencer being my father was kept quiet because Katantians were not too shy to tell me how much they hated my father. There was no violence in public. People that moved here wanted to fuck, not fight. Katantians didn't assassinate people. The palace did. Spencer Rawlins attempted to have Aris assassinated. Remotely controlled, he sent a driverless car to Katantia to cause a fatal car accident. Aris and Valentina should've died that night if things had gone according to Spencer's plan. According to Jordan, Aram was in on everything. He played Spencer's puppet to earn some cash and live out his retirement in the Bahamas.

Valentina knew who had harmed her husband now. Instead of going after him like she had promised, she didn't get out of her room. Actually, she hadn't left her bed ever since...

Felicita was right by her side. I doubted that she had realized what had happened just yet.

Denial was a stage of grief, after all.

There hadn't been a funeral, and there wouldn't be one with Spencer and Aram ruling the palace together. Jordan had assembled us in the Cross home, and we all paid our respects there until Jordan could figure out a way to remove Travis' body from Katantia.

"If Spencer didn't need my father to solve this mess, he would've kicked Aram out the day he announced he owned Katantia." Our things were packed, and at any moment, we were ready to depart the palace. But that time hadn't come yet. Jordan, who had taken over now as our advisor and the one man we trusted the most, didn't think it was wise to leave with a target on our backs.

"What are we going to do? We can't afford this. The palace doesn't have enough funds to rebuild the South Side without Spencer's help. Fuck, what am I even saying? We're not in power anymore. We're show figures."

"It'll be fine," I said. To distract Weston, I approached him for a hug. He stared at me, bewildered at my offer. Then he accepted the hug, pulling me so close to him that I fought for air. I didn't see him cry, but I felt his pain after he had spent

weeks trying to understand mine. He wasn't heartless. Death took a toll on a person.

Weston was less emotional than his other siblings, but after the Katantian catastrophe coupled with the eviction from the palace...

We were in a state of limbo.

And I had no idea how we would get out of it.



TWO MONTHS LATER

THE PROTESTS OUTSIDE WERE THE FIRST THING I PERCEIVED every day. Sighing, I moved to get out of bed. The blinds were wide open as always.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Weston asked. His eyes were shut, but he was wide awake. He slept for a couple of hours every other day. Exhaustion had become second nature to him.

“There’s the dinner at the palace today,” I reminded him, stretching my arms above my head. Moving didn’t sting anymore. My physiotherapy had started to become more physical these days. I was slowly advancing into yoga territory. I’d never done yoga before in my life. “I have to get ahead of the day if I don’t want to gag the minute I see them in the palace.”

“We don’t have to go,” Weston told me. My eyes traveled from the faint stubble on his jaw to his toned abs. He didn’t work out anymore, but lucky him, he never gained any weight, nor did his six-pack suddenly decide to take a breather. Like a sculpture, he remained frozen in time. “We could stay inside and hide from them. They’d never know we’re missing.”

“Oh, but they would,” I retorted. His morning wood was a situation I couldn’t quite handle yet. I watched him take care of it on some days, but so far, I didn’t feel confident enough to have him touch me yet. The doctors assured me that I was back in shape. I did my pelvic floor exercises religiously. I

could have all the Katantian fun I wanted to, but I wasn't in the right mindset.

I didn't want to have fun while the world around me fell into ruin.

"Half the people on this compound are either furious and ready to go to war, or they're hiding away in their rooms. Aram and Spencer will notice if we're absent," I argued. I left the bed, heading for Weston's bathroom.

As I brushed my teeth, Weston appeared at the doorframe. He rolled his lips, studying me while I observed him through the mirror. He suggested, "If you want dinner, we can go to the Italian place you like."

Finishing up the brushing of my teeth, I set my toothbrush aside. I turned to face Weston directly. I said, "You're saying you'd rather push through hundreds of angry Katantian protesters in the middle of the worst crisis ever than eat dinner with our dads?"

He nodded.

I sighed. "Me, too."

Weston's smirk brightened up my day. He asked, "Are you going to talk to Valentina today?"

"I'll try." Valentina wasn't easy to access these days.

Pushing past Weston, I attempted to go stroll to the closet. He grabbed my waist, pulling me close. "I can't wait to have you all to myself in our new home."

His hands wrapped around the back of my skull. He massaged the sensitive flesh. Sleepy as I was, my eyes rolled back in relaxation. Weston planted a kiss on top of my head, and I couldn't resist. I hugged him, not really wanting to let go.

I was already over the day ahead.

While Weston got ready for the day, I wandered away from his room. Mentally, I prepared myself to face Valentina. She didn't deal with situations the way the rest of us did. I took deep breaths, counting down the seconds in my head.

Valentina chose to occupy one of the bland guest rooms of her home. She didn't go near the bedroom she shared with Aris, and she didn't touch the nursery. Felicita, Weston, and I went shopping for the baby, designing the best room for the little one. Jordan assembled the bed and everything else we threw at him like it was as simple as having breakfast.

I knocked on Valentina's door. While I waited for her reaction, I remembered how alone I'd felt after the Cross family left Chicago. My body felt weak at the memory. I took a deep breath, and I knocked again.

Today wasn't the day that Valentina finally opened up.

Unable to repress my curiosity, I slid the door open just enough for my head to fit through. I examined the room. Bad air filled my nostrils, and I felt the urge to open the window. Valentina lay on the bed. The sheets were on the floor. She was in the same shirt and sweatpants as the day before. Even in her sleep, relaxation was nowhere to be found. I couldn't see her eyes, but her puffy face revealed enough.

Her belly was rounder than before. I found myself staring at it, praying that the little one was doing okay. We tried to get Valentina out of bed, but she had submitted herself to bedrest she didn't need. When she didn't sleep, she spent her time up here, closed off from the rest of Katantia.

She barely ate. Jordan had to come here and force her to eat for the baby. The rest of us couldn't do it because we were too close to her. I didn't even know if she ever showered. There was an attached bathroom to this room, so at least she didn't have to get out.

I cleaned up after her, picking up the sheets from the floor. I'd wash them downstairs, and I'd bring her new ones. I also went into her bedroom to get new clothes for her, but she never wore them. She only responded to sweatpants and shirts from Alex's team. In her grief, she picked up on clothes of comfort.

She trembled as if she sensed me in the room. Her eyes fluttered, and for a moment, I felt like I'd been caught.

But I hadn't. Valentina didn't open her eyes. She let out a small whimper instead.

I gulped down a sob, and I hurried out of the room with the sheets in my arms. Gently, I shut the door behind me.

Descending the stairs, I headed for the washing room. The staff was gone, and they weren't coming back. Valentina didn't want them here, and Weston was content learning how to run a household on our own.

I ran into Weston on my way out of the washing room. He asked, "How is she?"

"The same," I blurted out. I couldn't stop the tears. "I-I don't know what to do. It doesn't get any easier. I worry about the b-baby. I know Valentina doesn't want to feel this way right now. S-she loves the little one."

"We can't do much right now," Weston said. His arms wrapped around me, holding me while I wept. "We have to sit through this. It's only a bunch of weeks, and then she can give birth."

"These things don't get better once the baby is out. She might go through postpartum depression. What are we going to do?" I asked.

Weston didn't respond. We both knew what it felt like to lose a parent.

There was no cure to it.

CHAPTER 41

DOESN'T EXIST



DID I ENJOY DESTRUCTION AND DISTRESS?

I sure did.

The South Side of Katantia had been devastated the most. The family homes weren't habitable anymore, and business lost their properties to the ocean's cruel water. The death toll was relatively low because the systems warned inhabitants to leave for the inner city relatively early.

The floods destroyed properties across the coastlines of the island. Beaches were turned upside down, the schools in ruins. The results of the tsunami that hit Katantia two months ago weren't seen on television. You could only see them up close if you were unfortunate enough. The roads were closed off, and electricity hadn't been reinstated yet in all of Katantia.

The palace hadn't suffered because they had taken appropriate protection measures. The palace wasn't built near the beach. There was a footpath to the beach, but it took a couple of minutes to reach the water. That had saved the royal properties in time of emergency. They had generators just in case there was an emergency. Travis Cross had thought of everything in his career as Aram's royal servant and leader of security.

Tensions had been rising before. After Kamila's departure, Katantians started doubting Aram's bullshit. Kamila's return flustered the citizens, but it didn't take away their wrath. Their precious princess had been wronged. Her brother was in the hospital, struggling to stay alive.

Aris Wraith was still alive. Barely, but he was breathing. The more days he spent in a coma, the less likely it was for him to return to his former glory, but he was worth more living than dead. Especially since he had a baby on the way.

And now, here we were. Katantia's government had been exposed for the negligence of its people. Two months ago, most deaths were women left behind by their employers in their time of need. Since the rescue response was unbelievably lazy, bodies were being discovered every other week. Most of whom were unowned women who had drowned. Some had been crushed by the walls of their workplaces. Others had been trapped in ruins, unable to get out.

Katantians did a lot of shady shit. One death could be overlooked. Two... Well, accidents happened. But three was too much for the horny fuckers.

It had started about six weeks ago. After the death of Travis Cross was announced, Katantians urged their government for help. They needed something, a financial relief, counseling. Earthquakes weren't unusual in the area, but the tsunami that followed was one of the worst to hit Katantian shores. Aram Wraith didn't deliver the help his citizens needed. He'd been stripped of his power. Spencer Rawlins had taken over, and he celebrated nature's wrath upon the sex island.

Spencer Rawlins saw this as an opportunity to demolish the family-friendly South Side and turn it into an even hornier version of the inner city with its Hole Stores and Crack & Nut. He had ideas for the future, and he couldn't wait to earn dirty cash from his endeavors.

There was a tiny problem, though.

A block of five hundred Katantians was stationed outside of the palace's gates at all times, yelling out anti-Katantia slogans for the royals to hear. Over the day, the numbers sometimes rose to five thousand protestors assembling to speak their piece of mind.

International news outlets were stationed outside, awaiting the next big move of the palace. I heard the helicopters in my

sleep. We were all being watched by the world. The disaster had drawn more attention to Katantia than any of its sex scandals ever had. Kamila and Aram fucking wasn't even close to a news bite.

Rawlins was at an impasse. He couldn't kill the protestors because he didn't want to alienate his wealthy friends. He wanted his sex island to keep an elusive flair, not turn into a blood bath.

"I don't want to go," Kamila protested. Dressed in a turquoise dress with no makeup, she stood by the door with her arms crossed in front of her chest. "I. Don't. Want. To. Go."

Her eyes were bloodshot. I'd familiarized myself with torture until Kamila waltzed into my life, testing all of my theories. I was desensitized to pain. It didn't mean much to me. I even found pleasure in it. I hurt the little queen because I got a kick out of it.

Witnessing the little queen hurt by somebody other than me genuinely messed with my ego.

She grieved the loss of her mother's murderer. She didn't speak of Alex's absence. She struggled to find a solution to help the people who were suffering outside of the palace.

Kamila didn't play anymore.

"We've been here before," Jordan said, glaring at us. He'd lost the beanie. Now, his hair was braided, and his beard was back. "You have to do this."

She muttered something at Jordan under her breath, but he ignored it. The little queen stormed out of her house, past the guards that were still stationed on her property.

Why wasn't I the source of her distress?

I had earned it. I had failed to protect my little queen. I'd committed a horrible mistake, yet she wasn't angry at me.

Alex was. He hadn't spoken to me ever since he landed in Indianapolis. Eight weeks were far too long to exist without Alex's warm, prying nature.

Two months ago, once the earthquake was over, my favorite set of Katantians left their bunker in the palace. My little queen was too stunned by the destruction. You see, she thought we were the same, but that couldn't be farther from the truth. Kamila shuddered at the sight of suffering while I reveled in it.

Kamila was distraught by the aftermath of the said earthquake. She didn't notice that her father had miraculously produced a gun to shoot his daughter.

Spencer's guards stormed in, ushering the brothers away before I could mess with them for harming my little queen.

When I arrived, Travis was bleeding out at my little queen's feet. He couldn't have found a more suitable way to die. I envisioned my final breaths the same way.

However, I didn't want Kamila to cry over me. I'd tell her to smile and kiss me goodbye, for I'd finally reached the end of my miserable existence on this horrid earth full of deceit.

Once I caught up to Kamila on the street to the palace, she grabbed my arm. I didn't mind being seen in public when she was near. We hadn't discussed the touching part. One day, she started touching my arm for support. She found comfort, knowing I was close. If she had been looking for punishment, she didn't receive it. Jordan didn't allow kinky play in Kamila's house, and I obeyed him. I'd drugged his son with a syringe full of drugs that knocked his 6'9" out. For the rest of my days, I'd sleep with one eye open.

"Do you miss him?" I asked Kamila as we strolled toward the palace. She took my breath away in her cherry red waves of hair and her turquoise dress. She had asked for a lot in life, but looking this effortlessly electrifying hadn't been on her wish list.

"Can we not discuss him? Please."

Once upon a time, I couldn't stop her from blabbering. Now, I found myself begging for her pretty lips to move and reveal all her secrets.

“Your husband misses you as much as you miss him,” I told her. She shook her head.

“Stop it. I don’t care who misses whom more. Can you hear this?” She gestured with her slender arms. I followed her movements, mesmerized by her flawless skin. Her delicate fingers were long, and the cubicles were chewed on. She’d forgotten her royal etiquette, and it wasn’t a product of my repugnance of her roots.

“My country’s in shambles. They’re suffering, but nobody’s listening to them.” I ignored the chants from the crowds outside. Their time was coming.

“And?”

Her dry laugh made my scars itch uncomfortably. “I can’t do this for much longer. The pretense has to stop. People have died. Homelessness has risen by twenty-five percent. Guess who the frontrunner is? Women.”

I found out the true meaning of joy when Kamila finally started growing into her role of my little queen. Nonchalantly, I repeated, “And?”

“Aram and his measly big brother can go fuck themselves!” My heartbeat stopped for a moment. She didn’t even notice it because she was trapped in her cell of worry. I didn’t fit in there at the moment. “They’re letting their people suffer. They’re waiting for all of this to blow over. Spencer’s stupid aircrafts have been waiting empty at the airport because nobody wants to leave their home behind. Katantia isn’t just a sex island. It’s a way of life, and you can’t just kick people out. Spencer has no right to remove those that want to rebuild. Watching Katantia burn and hoping that it won’t backfire is the most idiotic decision my father’s ever made.”

Inertly, I sighed in satisfaction. “Agreed.”

Quickly, I added, “What do you want, Kamila?”

She rolled her eyes at me. A gesture that she’d pay for one day when the game was back on. “It doesn’t matter what I want, Fylox.”

It matters a great deal, my little queen.

Kamila hated coming to the palace and playing along, but we always ended up as the first to arrive. Inside the elevator, I clicked number five. The little queen checked her face in the mirror, but her somber face made her look away again.

We arrived on her father's floor, and I sent a quick message on my phone.

It's on.

Unassuming, Kamila followed me to her father's office. There wasn't a dinner tonight. The time for friendly conversations was over.

The guards posted outside of the king's office were chatting to each other when we arrived.

"There's been an emergency," I told them, and they gawked at each other. The Wraith brothers had attempted an imitation of Jordan's men, but it had been futile. Jordan's men were trained in the harshest conditions. These men were after a paycheck, chewing gum on the job and rubbing one off at the sight of the princess.

"Emergency? Didn't we have a—"

With a heavy heart, I shushed my little queen. "Let us in. Don't let anyone else in. The princess has private matters to discuss with her father."

"But—"

"Shut up," I addressed her, and she flinched. The guards didn't move, so I decided to take it a step further. "Look, she shaved and bathed for hours. Let us in? He'll fire you if you deny us entrance."

No response. I rolled my eyes.

I shoved Kamila out of harm's reach. With precision, I punched one of the guards in the face twice. While he dropped to the floor unconscious and with a bleeding nose, I let the other guard wrap his arm around my neck like he was about to cause damage. He wasn't. He forgot to restrict my arms. I took advantage of his idiocy. I slammed my elbow against the side of his face, and then I kicked him where it hurt, multiple times

to work in the infertility real good. He lost balance, joining his friend on the floor.

I bashed his face in with my boot. I did the same with the other guard.

Chances were that they had seen me mutilate the guards. More guards were on the way.

“What’s that noise?” Kamila asked in a jittery voice. The chants were nearing us. The gates had been opened.

I shoved the door open. Kamila followed closely behind me like I’d taught her to. Aram was getting his dick sucked by a woman who was about to become a casualty. “Lock the door, little queen.”

“Excuse me?” Kamila asked.

“I said to lock the door. I have a score to settle.”



KAMILA SAT AT HER FATHER’S DESK.

She’d begged me to spare the woman whose mouth was filled with her father’s come. I knocked her unconscious instead of killing her. She didn’t have to see me in my element.

My little queen observed me as I maimed her tormentor. I rolled my neck, taking a deep breath. He reeked of Cuban cigars, the good ones I remembered from my childhood. My father smoked them in his spare time. He didn’t anymore because he knew that it messed with my brain.

I focused on my rage, letting it take over every cell of my body. Outside of the king’s office, chaos had erupted, but I couldn’t waste my time on that.

We’d incited this riot.

The hundreds of protestors had been allowed into the compound of the palace. Men were stationed outside Valentina

and Aris's home to protect the pregnant woman, Felicita, Mandy, and Weston.

Aram Wraith's labored breathing sounded like chirpy birds singing in my ears.

I'd broken his knees so that he couldn't get away from under me. I didn't have to restrain him. His youthful face in his late fifties didn't fool me. He'd fucked all his life and had managed to hold onto skin free of agony.

That would find its end.

"W-why..." I didn't have to interrupt him. He was wailing underneath me, rocking to his side.

Kamila asked, "Do I have to ask?"

"No," I responded, grinning at her father. I pulled out the knife I'd picked up from Kamila's kitchen.

She gasped. "I chop my chicken with that!"

"I'll get you a new one," I promised.

"W-what do y-you want? I'll g-give it t-to you. Any p-pussy you w-want... D-dick, too..." Aram whimpered.

Kamila snickered.

I sighed. "You don't remember who I am, don't you?"

He shook his head timidly. Veins threatened to burst. I could feel the adrenaline shooting through him.

"I'm one of the many children that were raped under your jurisdiction. They took me in broad daylight while I was on vacation with my family. My father's job endangered me, but it wasn't really his fault, was it? He was just a lawyer, doing his job. But your friends wanted revenge. It was a deliberate attack, and I wasn't supposed to ever get out. I was supposed to die being mutilated by your people. It wasn't your fault, you know? I don't think you're into kids. You just fucked up Kamila. That's your vice..." I cleared my throat. "From the age of eight to eighteen, I spent ten years in limbo. I had no idea where I was. I lost the ability to speak. I existed for your friends' sick pleasure only. On most days, I didn't even see the

sunlight. When I did, it was only for me to be of service to vicious humans that were triple my age.”

“Fylox—”

“Let me speak,” I urged Kamila. She quieted. “I was a child, one of many. I witnessed the deaths of disobedient children. I must have been the lucky one because it didn’t matter how often I spat at my captors and their servants. I was never killed. I lived on to see another day. Your friends must have despised my father and his job of bringing justice. ”

I removed my shirt with one firm grip. Aram’s eyes went wide at my chest. “Do you recognize these scars? You don’t. You never had to see them. You let your friends roam free. When they’re not supervised, they don’t humiliate the women you so proudly humiliate. These women bore them. No, they humiliate children of all genders. On some days, I take mushrooms to numb the images in my head.”

“I don’t have to ask if you know what I mean. You have a clear image of abuse in your head. You did it so brilliantly with Kamila.” I took deep breaths. This didn’t have to be a clean cut. In fact, I never cut people. I usually broke their bones until they died on me.

I removed Aram Wraith’s clothes while he howled. There would be no debasement. “Take a good look at your father’s face, little queen.”

I grabbed my knife, and I meticulously picked apart the skin of Aram Wraith’s face. I addressed Kamila while Aram’s eyes pleaded for me to stop. “Tell me, what would you say if you were to become queen?”

“Queen of what?” Kamila asked.

“Queen of Katantia.”

Aram’s Adam’s apple bobbed, and his eyes widened. I was doing my job, unmasking a monster. It bored me. I moved lower, trying my luck with his chest. Perhaps I could take a glimpse at his heart? Did he even have one?

“Why would I become Queen of Katantia when—”

“Would you want to become Queen of Katantia?” I stabbed my knife into Aram’s skin, taking off far more than I wished. He started bleeding out, and I rolled my eyes.

I wasn’t an expert at flaying people. I barely knew what all the muscles were called. I’d never studied in a regular school. I only knew what Alex taught me, and he’d said there were specific arteries you didn’t want to get cut.

The blood swamped my eyes, and I had to move fast if I wanted to cut Aram’s dick off while he was alive.

I shifted on top of him, sitting on his broken knees. He winced some more, but it was an afterthought for me.

Kamila gasped when I carved Aram’s flaccid dick. “I want to help my people. Are you sure this is the way?”

“For sure.” I inhaled. I felt a sudden urge to drink this man’s blood, but I let it be. I wouldn’t do that to Kamila. She deserved justice, not a freakshow.

Chop. Chop. Chop.

I sliced open Aram Wraith’s penis, and blood spilled out, painting my vision black. I drew in a long breath, relishing in the suffering I caused.

Looking down upon myself, I discovered that I was covered in fresh blood. It had begun to dry on my skin, and it made me gag. I removed Aram Wraith’s penis, his weeping echoing in the room, and I chopped it into four small pieces.

Aram Wraith was still alive, but not for long. He was already bleeding out at his chest.

I picked up the pieces, and I shoved them down his throat.

“Do you promise to turn this country into a better version of itself?” I asked Kamila while I attempted to feed Aram more of his own flesh.

“Y-yes.”

“If anyone tries to harm you, who will protect you?”

“Y-you will,” she mumbled.

“Are you going to call Alex?” Aram Wraith’s mouth was full of his own ego. There wasn’t any space left, but I pushed the final piece of his dick between his lips. His eyes rolled back as he choked on his doom.

“I will.” She hiccupped. “Make it stop. Please. I-I can’t see no more...”

What my queen wants, that’s what my queen gets.

“Once upon a time, I wanted Kamila Ruby Wraith dead. She isn’t to blame, though. You are. See you in hell, fucker.”

I cut Aram Wraith’s jugular. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. He bled out in front of me, and he probably didn’t go to heaven.

Removing myself from the corpse, I was dripping in his blood. Kamila couldn’t look at me, and I couldn’t stomach myself either. The high of the kill had passed. “Where’s the bathroom?”

“To your left,” Kamila said. She showed me the way. “I’ll fix you some clothes.”

I entered the bathroom, flipping the lights on. The surfaces were clean, but Aram’s scent lurked in the air. First, I had to clean up.

“Fylox?” Kamila was still at the door while I tested the water in the shower.

“Yeah?”

“Well done.”

That was all the confirmation I needed.

CHAPTER 42

KAMILA



ARAM WRAITH WAS DEAD.

Just breathe, sweetie. I'm so proud of you.

My mother may rest in peace now. I'd watched him intake his last breath, and I'd shivered at the sight. It filled Fylox with satisfaction, but it made me hyperventilate. I'd dreamed about the end of Aram, but it hadn't been such a gory event in my mind.

Having spent half my life in this office, I knew where Aram stashed his emergency clothes. I rummaged through the cupboards behind his desk, past the sex toys and various thongs. I grabbed a clean shirt and pants. I placed them on the bathroom counter for Fylox once he finished scrubbing his skin clean.

He'd been showered in Aram's blood, and I couldn't stop picturing the disgusting sight. Being near Aram's lifeless body didn't help.

Fylox turned off the water, stepping out of the shower in all of his glory. He patted himself dry, and then he sniffed the clothes I'd handed him. They reeked of Aram, but he had to put them on. He couldn't leave this room naked. Eventually, he put on the clothes I'd prepared for him.

He kissed me on the mouth once he exited the bathroom, and I let him feast on me while my father's corpse decayed in the same room.

"Let's announce the good news!" Fylox exclaimed, taking my hand.

“But there’s chaos out there? You said something about a riot?” I reminded him.

His chuckle warmed my heart. He said, “There’s a new ruler in town.”

“What about Spencer?”

“Jordan’s taking care of him.”

The door fell open. The guards lay unconscious on the floor. We strolled down the hallway to the reception, where I picked up the phone and called Katantia’s news channel, demanding to have my call broadcasted on live television.

“This is Kamila Ruby Wraith. I’m your new queen.”

The receptionist fainted, and the other end of the line went quiet. “How?”

“Aram Wraith is dead, and I will take over to reform Katantia.”



ADONIS HAD SHAVED HIS HAIR OFF.

He sat next to me on the sectional sofa of my home. This was where I held audiences now. Jordan sat at the table on the other end of the room, possessed by his laptop. Fylox stared Adonis down, scanning him with his judging eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I blurted out.

“You don’t have to be sorry for me,” Adonis responded, a weak smile coating his tired face. “I was just his—”

“He loved you,” I told Adonis. He tended to think of himself as Travis’s secret, but he wasn’t. The ones who loved him knew of Adonis. “He valued the time you spent together. I’ll never regret introducing the two of you.”

“It was an honor for Travis to serve you. I’m sure Felicita told you already... If he had the chance, I’m sure he’d do it again,” Adonis said, lowering his gaze. He sniffled. “He’d protect you the way he couldn’t protect your mother.”

“Are you okay?” I asked him, scooting closer to him. Immediately alert, Fylox straightened his posture. My protector cleared his throat.

“I’m fine,” Adonis said.

“You don’t look fine. Where do you live these days?” I didn’t want to make a comment on it, but he didn’t seem healthy. I recognized an addict when I saw one. Plus, he reeked. When was the last time he had taken a shower? I tolerated this because I knew Adonis, but I wouldn’t have permitted him entrance into my home if it were any other man.

“I’m staying with friends.”

“Elaborate,” I demanded.

“I’ve been disowned by my family after your dad had me raped as part of his weekly sex fests. Punishment boys don’t deserve my family’s name. I’ve been sucking dick for money, is that what you want to hear? Jesus, Kamila,” Adonis blurted out.

“That’s your queen. Address her with respect, or I’m going to kill you like her daddy killed your lover,” Fylox threatened Adonis. His nonchalant voice didn’t affect me, but his words were cruel. Adonis started sobbing, and I glared at Fylox. Jordan would’ve lectured him if he weren’t enraptured into whatever went on in front of him on the screen.

“I know you’ve been involved with social issues before,” I told Adonis. Travis had always gushed about Adonis’ skills. He hadn’t gone to a fancy school because his father had only started making money with condoms once he arrived in Katantia. Adonis’s family was new money, and Adonis had a drive that enthused Travis. “Do you want to work in the new government? You can earn good money and get your own place.”

“I don’t need or want your charity,” he stated, sobering up. He held back his tears. “I’ve got friends.”

“I know you do. You’re my friend, Adonis. Travis wouldn’t want you out there—”

“He’s dead. I don’t.... I don’t fucking care what he wanted anymore!”

Adonis stormed out of my home, and he didn’t look back.



TO MY SURPRISE, CHAOS SEIZED WHEN I WAS ANNOUNCED AS the new Queen of Katantia. I was the first woman to hold the title. Sure, manic phone callers were asking for Weston to murder me and take over the crown. Death threats found their way to the gates in envelopes and boxes.

But they never entered the palace.

Once I took over, the reorganization of the palace began. The staff and the guards were fired if they didn’t adhere to the new rules. The guards were fired anyway; Jordan Winters became the new security advisor, taking over from Travis Cross. Aram hadn’t even been dead for more than a day, and Jordan came up to me with elaborate plans for new security measures for the palace.

They would cost us. Anything I planned from now on would cost my country.

And I had no fucking idea how I would find the money.

Then there was Spencer Rawlins.

While Fylox mutilated my father in front of me, Jordan sought out Spencer. He was hidden somewhere in the palace, safe from the riots that Jordan had induced. But you couldn’t fool Jordan. In the few weeks that he’d spent on Katantia, he already knew the palace better than some of my family did.

Jordan found Spencer, letting out his frustrations on him.

That resulted in Spencer needing to be hospitalized.

This was then followed by a public statement of Spencer Rawlins’ retreat from Katantia. Taron Wraith wasn’t resurrected, and he wouldn’t be while I was in power. Spencer Rawlins had sent the other car to crash into my brother’s car.

Once upon a time, Spencer had been destined for the throne. He was younger than Aram, but his father believed in him. For years, we'd ignored the truth. There was only one person who wanted my grandfather dead. That was my father. Aram wanted the throne to himself, and he wouldn't have his parents give it to his younger brother.

Spencer left Katantia, but he became larger than life.

He came home, wanting to avenge his father's death. He had attempted to kill Katantia's most-beloved couple. Spencer had played with my family. It wasn't our fault that he and Aram had issues. We wouldn't pay for their sins.

Spencer left the country once. He could've helped us rebuild what was once there, but Taron Wraith cared about his ego and wallet, not the people. Rawlins disagreed with the new Katantia that grieved its once-blooming South Side. We didn't want more Hole Stores. Katantia was a community, and it was time for its crown to strengthen the community's bonds.

Jordan never told me what he did to Spencer. Rawlins retreated from public life, hiding away in his Chicago estate.

That was the mess of my first couple of days of being Queen of Katantia.

Then came my coronation. Symbolically, we scheduled it to occur in the ruins of the palace. The structure of the building was still there, but the inside had been looted. The gardens were destroyed. Windows were broken. Messages of protest were sprayed over the walls, the ones that still stood. Dirt had sullied my former home, and for some reason, it also gave me peace among my anxiety attacks. Jordan promised to clean everything up in a matter of weeks.

Big events with me at the center promised to be hectic.



“ARE YOU SURE YOU DON'T WANT TO WEAR A DRESS?” MANDY asked. She fiddled with her hair absentmindedly. Weston was

downstairs, waiting in the living room. Fylox was there, too, but I doubted that they were in deep conversation.

Fylox and I hadn't spoken to anyone about what had happened to Aram Wraith.

Jordan's men cleaned up the scene, and they dug a grave for him in the family's graveyard. There wasn't an official ceremony for his funeral. Some of his friends assembled at the gates to pay their tributes, but they weren't allowed inside the compound of the palace.

Why would I wear a dress to my coronation? This wasn't a celebration. I wouldn't become the laughing stock or an iconic meme. *Look at her, dancing on her father's grave.* "I've proven my womanhood to them for years. I want to wear a suit for this occasion. It'll be a fashion statement."

Mandy nodded. She'd got ready in Aris and Valentina's home, hoping to cheer Valentina up. It hadn't worked. Valentina didn't get out of bed today. Again.

Felicita ended up helping Mandy dress. She'd done an excellent job, resembling a makeover. Mandy's dark hair was in curls, and her eyes shone in the decadent makeup of her face. Felicita had been generous with the glitter, and it looked foreign on Mandy. She kept touching her face.

"Felicita really wanted to be here," Mandy said as I put on my diamond earrings that went with one of the more delicate necklaces my mother had gifted me.

"I understand. There's no pressure. We, out of all people, know what it's like to lose a parent," I responded. I'd spared my skin the glitter for today. I went with smoky eyes and nude lipstick. People would remember this day. I had to appear timeless. "The Cross family deserves to be a part of the new Katantia. If it weren't for Travis..."

Mandy understood. She nodded, turning away from me.

"If it weren't for Travis, I wouldn't be standing here." I took a deep breath. "He was a blessing and a curse. At this point, he's saved me more times than I can count, and I intend to do right by his family."

“What about Aris?” she asked. The tremble in her voice mirrored my inner turmoil.

“We wait.”

“What if he never wakes up?”

I shuddered at the thought. “My brother won’t die in that hospital. He won’t. If he were to die in there, his wife would murder us all. We can’t let him die. We have to hold on to hope. He’s out of surgery, and he’s stable for now. We just have to wait until he wakes up.”

I could’ve rambled for an hour. There was nothing to celebrate. My family and my country were broken.

It was my turn to fix things.



IN THE THREE DAYS OF CHAOS POST-ARAM’S DEATH, I managed to prepare a speech for my people. Cameras were set up at the entrance of the palace. This would be broadcasted worldwide.

Hiding behind a podium with Katantia’s emblem on it, I stood in the middle of it all. I was surrounded by ruins and my loved ones.

The sun shimmered down upon us, revealing the ugly and the beauty of my family for the world to see.

Fylox and Jordan roamed around somewhere, meddling with the guards and keeping things in control. The press wasn’t allowed to see them. Fylox was too shy for the cameras, and Jordan simply didn’t have the patience for it.

On my right side, Weston and Mandy stood behind me. They’d put on engagement rings for the appearance, although my brother hadn’t actually proposed to Mandy yet. He wanted to do it in their new home in the States. He didn’t want to reveal where they’d live to his family just yet. It upset me, and I was this close to asking Jordan to snoop on them. But I didn’t. Jordan wasn’t my errand boy. It was disrespectful to

involve him in my petty family business. He had a whole palace to protect now.

“Are you ready?” Alex asked, placing a gentle hand on the small of my back. I turned to glance at him one last time before my speech. He hadn’t slept well on the flight here. He had jumped on a plane right after winning a game last night. He broke hundreds of rules with his impromptu visit, and I could see that it pained him to be so torn. He wanted to be my husband, but he had a career in the States.

One that I had no right to disrupt.

Just like he couldn’t ask me to leave behind my home. I would’ve done it a couple of months ago, but now, I had a job to do. My country needed me, and I wouldn’t abandon it. I’d help Katantia flourish.

Queens were stoic and focused. My mother had prepared me for this moment, and she’d be proud of me today.

I nodded at Alex. Not wanting to ruin my makeup, Alex kissed me on the cheek. He whispered, “You got this.”

Clearing my throat, I stepped forward. I placed my flat palms on the podium, and I began my speech. “Welcome to Katantia...”

Goosebumps slid along the back of my neck as I addressed the nation. There weren’t many people here because Jordan wouldn’t allow more than twenty guests at a time like this, but I could feel the crowd’s eyes through the cameras.

“They broke us, but we will rise. I promise you, my people, we will be reborn. We will be stronger than before. You will not be displaced. As we speak, I am assembling a team of crisis responders. We are making sure that the victims of the South Side will have a roof over their heads. I promise you, my people. Your first queen will not let you down. We are Katantia, and—”

The commotion behind the cameras caught my eye. I squinted to see what was happening. The lights blinded me.

“KAMILA!” Jordan pushed through the crowd of the innocent press. Some journalists and their cameras crashed to

the ground. “Out of my way. Out of my way...”

I had lost my train of thought, and now I was standing there, being filmed while doing nothing.

“The baby!” Jordan yelled.

Jerking awake, I leaned forward. “What’s going on?”

“The baby’s coming. The water broke.”

I froze. It was too early. I calculated the weeks in my head... Fuck. I rattled myself out of my worry. I cleared my throat. “My beloved people, it appears we have breaking news. To those that pray, pray for us. My niece is coming. I have to go. We will hold another coronation once the baby has arrived.”



THE ENTIRE FAMILY WAS ASSEMBLED IN THE QUEEN I hospital. A couple of floors above us, Aris’s room was empty. Nobody visited him tonight. The hallway in front of the delivery room was filled with worry. Weston and I paced around the space. Mandy leaned against the wall, watching us.

Fylox and Alex sat on two chairs that the nurses had brought for them. They weren’t speaking to each other, and it flustered me.

Jordan was on his laptop, working and barking orders at his men. Being here meant that there was an entire cavalry of guards outside. The hospital had been emptied except for the staff and the patients in their rooms. Visitors weren’t allowed while we were here. If there was an emergency, there were other hospitals in the country.

In the delivery room, Felicita attended the birth of my niece.

The facts troubled me. The water had broken too early, at twenty-eight weeks. My niece was in a position to get out and bless us with her presence. Luckily, she wasn’t a breech baby. Valentina didn’t want a c-section, and she was already pushing

on our way to the hospital. Preterm baby labor was pretty quick.

Penelope Jade Wraith was born, but we weren't allowed to see her. She weighed almost three pounds, and she was approximately sixteen inches long. The newborn intensive care went to work right away because my niece shouldn't have come out so soon.

Our world stopped.

Aris should've been here. He was right upstairs, but it hurt that he couldn't be present. Valentina and Penelope Jade needed him right now.

Outside of the delivery room, we waited for hours in the hospital room's cold and impersonal climate. Nurses came and went. I experienced the first time somebody called me their queen in that hallway. Weston and Aris didn't have a good relationship with the medics of Katantia, but I did. I'd spent weeks in the hospital because of my addiction. They knew me.

They were happy for me and my new position.

Midnight passed, and I could see that Alex was exhausted. He couldn't keep his eyes open, but he pushed through it. His dedication warmed my heart. I urged him to go home, but he insisted.

The palace was empty.

All the royals were in the hospital.

It was past three in the morning when Felicita emerged from the delivery room. I had experienced Felicita at some of the lowest moments in her life. I'd never been prepared for this. Jordan put aside the laptop and his phone, rushing to comfort his sister.

"She needs help breathing, but... She'll be fine. They promised us that she'll be fine. She's so precious. You have to see her..." Felicita mumbled. The hallway rejoiced, but Felicita couldn't stop crying. She heaved, and I could feel her stress from a mile away. "Valentina can't believe it. She's in a state of shock. The doctors want her to rest for now."

I glanced at Alex, and his tired smile gave me the confirmation that I needed. We'd be fine. Our niece was here early, but she'd come home to the palace soon. Fylox didn't let me read his indifferent face. He sat there like a soldier, ready for the next command. But his eyes were soft when they met mine.

"F—" Weston almost cursed. He cleared his throat. "I'm sorry. Amid all the panic, we forgot to bring the gifts!"

Mandy's eyes widened. She raised her chin, regenerating. "Let's go and get them now while Valentina rests. Kamila's here. We'll be back in a bit!"

"It's four in the morning," Fylox reminded them in his monotonous voice.

"And I'm the Prince of Katantia. The entire country's waiting for news concerning the baby. Not a single soul slept tonight." My brother observed his girlfriend. "We should make an announcement. Would that be okay?"

I nodded. "Please, do. I'll make another one later today."

Mandy and Weston left the hallway. I took a seat next to Alex. "You should go back to my place and sleep. We'll be here for some time."

"She's right," Jordan agreed.

Alex shook his head. He grabbed my hand, his thumb rubbing my skin dizzy. "I'm staying right here."

"We could arrange for a bed," Felicita suggested, addressing Jordan.

"That's a good idea!" Jordan distanced himself from his sister, picking up his phone. The orders began, and in no time, Alex had a place to sleep close to Valentina's room. Fylox followed Alex after he left, and I saw him stand outside the room Alex would sleep in. It broke my heart to see them in an argument, not speaking to each other.

"She wants to see you," Felicita said, taking a seat next to me. "She asked me to tell you that."

"Of course. Anything she wants."



WEARING A PANTSUIT HAD BEEN A WISE DECISION.

I could've asked one of the nurses to bring me a change of clothes, but it wasn't like I was sweating. I sat next to Jordan and Felicita while we waited for Valentina to wake up. All we did was discuss the baby and the new living arrangements.

Jordan insisted that they moved into Felicita's house until Aris woke up, but Felicita argued that it wasn't what Valentina wanted.

They ended up agreeing on setting up two rooms for themselves at my brother's home.

"You don't have to stay here with us," I blurted out. "We can—"

"Fuck no," Jordan argued, shutting the laptop in front of him.

"Travis's death has hurt us, but we can manage. They don't need a patriarch in the house," I said, crossing my arms in front of my chest. From what I understood, Jordan didn't stay in one place in America. He followed his son's games, and he didn't have a home base. I didn't want him to feel obligated to help us out.

I was Queen of Katantia now. I would find a solution.

Felicita quieted, but Jordan said, "I want to help my sister and her daughter out. I'm all they have left now."

"They have us," I argued.

"I'm not leaving, Kamila," Jordan said. He inhaled. "Travis only ever asked one thing of me. He wanted me to keep the people that meant the most to him safe. Being on Katantia isn't ideal. I don't dream of sex dolls. However, the small space is perfect. The borders are controlled. I can work in peace here and travel less."

"What about Alex?" I asked, fidgeting with the lapels of my jacket.

“He’s a big boy,” Jordan smirked. “I’ve got people in the States. Don’t you worry about your husband. Nothing will happen to him. You might be confining me to Katantia, but my reach is worldwide.”

I sighed, chewing on his statement. It was futile to ask Travis about the details of his network. He wouldn’t say. We didn’t even know the names of the guards that protected us. We weren’t supposed to speak to them. I asked, “Where should we bury Travis? In our graveyard?”

Felicita shook her head. “No, my husband wanted to be buried in his family lot in the States. He should be moved there as quickly as possible.”

“Considered it done,” I assured her. Once I was back in the office, which was my home, for the time being, I had several things to do. Giving my mother and Travis proper burials was a top priority. I already envisioned the flower arrangements that would brighten up the family graveyard.

“Kamila?” one of the nurses approached us. The sun had risen, bringing on another day. I was pretty sure I looked like a hungover panda, but the nurse addressed me with a gleam in her eyes. “Congratulations. I wanted to inform you that Valentina is up and asking for you.”

Felicita muttered, “She should sleep some more...”

“I’ll see her for a short moment, and then I’ll let her rest,” I told Felicita. She nodded in acceptance. I understood her worry, and I wasn’t planning on exhausting Valentina.

I followed the nurse down the hall, passing Fylox, who still stood outside of his best friend’s room, and after a light knock on the door, she let me into Valentina’s room.

“Congratulations,” I said the moment we locked eyes.

“Thank you,” she croaked. Her breathing was heavy.

“How are you doing?” I asked, taking a seat by her bed. The sheets covered most of her body, but her weary eyes glimpsed at me.

“Fantastic,” she replied, a weak smirk plastered on her face. “I couldn’t even keep a baby in. She wanted out.”

“Don’t go there,” I told her.

“Is my new queen commanding it?”

I nodded. “It’s not your fault that things have gone to shit. The baby will be fine. We have the best facilities at Queen I hospital. PJ will come home with us sooner than you can say Katantia.”

“Her name is Penelope Jade,” Valentina warned me.

“Yes, our little one’s name is Penelope Jade. I love the name, by the way,” I told her. It had something to it, an uncontained energy.

Valentina brightened up at my words. “I love it, too. It’s the name of a princess.”

“I agree.”

“We’ve come a long way from you calling me a cockroach, haven’t we?” she asked.

I sat back on the chair. Fuck. She’d been so young when she’d first arrived on Katantia. I hadn’t been in my best of phases back then. I’d catch her observing me through the windows of the house she grew up in. At times, she also came up to me while I gardened.

You’re the most gorgeous girl I’ve ever seen in my life.

“I apologize for being so mean to you,” I blurted out, tremors filling my voice. “I-I should’ve known better. You were just an innocent child.”

“Don’t cry, Kamila. Don’t you dare cry on me right now. I pushed a baby out of me a couple of hours ago. I’ve got back pain. My head’s killing me. I don’t need to see your tears right now,” she said, and I swallowed, drying the tears before they could roll down my cheeks.

“I want you to know I’ll be there for you. Whatever you need, it’s yours,” I assured her.

“Okay,” she said, her eyes fluttering close.

“Get some rest now. We’re all outside. Weston and Mandy are making the announcement as we speak. We’ll see you when you’re ready,” I promised her.

She nodded sleepily. “She’s the most beautiful baby I’ve ever seen. She was such a tiny angry thing when they showed her to me...”

I removed myself from the room, shutting the door gently behind me. Outside, I needed a moment to myself.

Fuck. All I’d ever wanted...

Katantia was mine.



ALEX HELD THE DOOR OPEN FOR ME. I STEPPED OUT OF THE car, and I took the hand he offered me.

We’d left the hospital after he’d got some sleep. Fylox wandered behind us, staying in the shadows. He and Alex were ignoring each other. It pained me to see them behave like children, but we were in public. I couldn’t scold them.

The palace had organized this event so that my husband could be seen at the sight of the disaster. People needed the imagery for comfort. Of course, they needed much more than images. Alex donated money to charities that had been set up after the disaster.

“Kamila, it’s so nice to see you,” Walden Hart approached me, offering me a handshake. I reciprocated, and then Hart greeted my husband. There was no need to include Fylox in the conversation. He didn’t want any part in it. “The ladies have been up all night. They’re filling out their applications right now. We’ve been following the news. How’s the baby? When’s Aris coming out of the hospital? Was he awake when his child was born?”

We were surrounded by my security, and I noticed that they wanted to intervene. I halted their attempts. I said, “I’m afraid I can’t discuss my brother’s family with you. Weston made a statement earlier, and that should suffice. I’m here with

my husband to see how this organization is taking care of the disaster's victims.”

“Of course,” Walden Hart responded. He was an older man with white hair and cold eyes. He'd opposed my father on numerous occasions, and that was why he'd been allowed to organize his charity. He'd been a banker in his former life. He had more money than he could count, and he liked his fucks raw and dirty. He kept away from the palace when he moved to Katantia, and for that, I respected him. “Let's proceed. It's an honor to meet you, Mr. Winters. I've been watching all of your games, and you're one of the best players!”

“Thank you,” Alex replied. He heard these compliments a lot, but it never got to his head.

We were five minutes away from the palace, and the Queen I hospital was just a block down this place. Walden Hart owned this property, a mansion with empty rooms of sex and sin. He led us into the building that he had filled with the women who'd been abandoned and eventually rescued from the tsunami that ravaged my country's South Side.

I heard voices down the hall as Hart gave us a tour of his property. Money spoke volumes, and I could see that he meant well with his charitable efforts, new beds, clean bathrooms, no mold anywhere. Jordan kept an eye on suspicious people, and this man had certainly appeared suspicious to us. What would he do with a harem of hurt women?

I was just about to see it for myself.

On the second floor of the building, the women were assembled in a space full of desks. They were busy with documents and electronic devices. It looked like a high school setting, one that I saw on television. The actors here weren't happy, though. The energy of the room was low, and I could feel their deflation.

“Ladies, the Queen of Katantia,” Walden Hart announced me to the working crowd. All movements stopped. For a moment, there was a silence in the room that only my father had once instilled.

“How are you all doing today?” I asked, stepping forward. I had a role to play, but in moments like these, roles didn’t matter. Hart introduced my husband and me to the women. Some of them gawked at us. Others checked my husband’s body out. I wasn’t a jealous woman, but they were tempting me.

They broke the ice by telling me their stories.

“... my boss left us there. The customers walked out as soon as the alarms started ringing. They didn’t offer us a ride back into the city where we would have been safe. I take the bus to work every day, and I had no way of leaving the South Side. The girls I work with and I climbed to the top of the building, and we remained there. It took rescue responders hours to get to us, and some had fainted by the time we were rescued. We work with our bodies. A day in a whorehouse is straining. We were weak, abandoned by the people who we bust our asses for!”

“My best friend and I had been bought by this older gentleman and his young wife to entertain them for a day. When they announced the earthquake, my friend and I wanted to leave the South Side. We know that busses stop commuting when there are emergencies, so we begged them to let us leave. We’d leave on foot. We didn’t care. But they didn’t let us! They kept us there. The man fucked us like we were worth nothing while his wife made us lick her. When the sirens changed, they started panicking. They left us in their house that was on the beach. My friend drowned when the tsunami hit. I knew how to swim, so I kept myself afloat somehow. I must have lost consciousness, but when I woke up, I’d been brought to a hospital.”

“Thousands of women work themselves to death every day,” one of the women raged. “We perform our duties. And how do they thank us? Half the working women of the South Side are dead. If this tsunami had hit the city, ninety percent of Katantia’s sex workers would’ve been wiped out! What would you have done then?”

I listened to their struggles and frustrations.

We'd all lost a part of ourselves in the disaster. These women had lost their faith in the system. It was a flawed system, and it was upon me to fix it.

The house my mother built for my family's vacation was ruined by the disaster. We kept this information quiet because this wasn't about us. None of the Wraiths were harmed by the earthquake or the tsunami. My mother's estate was gone, but her legacy wasn't.

"Things will change," I announced, clearing my throat. "This will never happen again. I promise you. My father worked hard to create a narrative in which you don't matter, but you all do. You're the backbone of Katantia. It's going to take me a while to get my affairs in order. The government needs fundamental restructuring. Relief for the victims of the disaster is a priority. Under my leadership, I won't allow anyone to take away your right to live. You come here to live out a fantasy, but this fantasy doesn't permit this neglect. I'm sorry for what you have endured. When you tell me that simple acts of kindness could've helped save 163 lives, I worry about the state of this country. Aram led us into ruins, and I won't stand for it. Those that wronged the women of the South Side will face punishment. Our finances are being scanned by experts right now, and we will have a plan to revive the South Side soon. Change is inevitable."

I talked to the women until my voice broke, forgetting that we had a little one and her impatient mom in the hospital. The sun had gone down, and my exhaustion was unbearable. I hadn't slept at all while we waited in the hospital, and now, I could barely keep my eyes open.

Walden Hart offered us coffee and biscuits, which I consumed, but my men didn't touch either. They eyed him suspiciously. I knew my men, and I was aware of what this operation looked like. Hart seemed like a glorified pimp. The women I'd encountered were hurt. They weren't warmed up to Hart, and after what had happened to them, I feared that it would take them a long time to trust any man in power.

We needed men like Hart, though, and we would abuse every penny in his pockets if it meant that there could be an

ounce of stability in Katantia.

Back in the car, I sat between Fylox and Alex. None of us spoke. I drifted in and out of consciousness while they took us back to the hospital. I'd been fucked for two days straight in my late teen's early career as Aram's cunt, but back then, I hadn't even felt a particle of this fatigue.

It wouldn't be easy to fix the country. Two months of being Queen of Katantia, and I was barely keeping it together. It didn't help that my family was falling apart.

Once upon a time, I was the fiery red that ignited fires.

As Queen of Katantia, I had to quench the fires.

EPILOGUE

MANDY



SOMETIME LATER

OUR LOCATION WAS UNKNOWN TO ME.

I didn't like being blindfolded.

Weston promised that it would be worth it, and these days I trusted him with my life.

"Do you think Valentina will be okay someday?" I asked.

Weston sighed. "She has to be."

"I worry," I revealed.

"We all do, and she knows that. She's not alone," Weston assured me. I heard a painful thud, followed by Weston cursing under his breath. "Fuck... I need new shoes, don't I."

"If you'd just tell me where we are," I uttered, fiddling with the cloth on my face. If this was a new type of foreplay, I didn't want it.

Weston let out a hasty breath. I heard his footsteps approach my side. His fingers touched my skull, and he loosened the blindfold.

The cloth fell to the ground. I took in the sun, the fresh air. We'd flown to the States in a jet from Katantia, dropping off half the family in Indianapolis. From that point, Weston hadn't told me our final destination. We had our luggage, which consisted of clothes, Katantian sex toys, and lube. We traveled light because we didn't have a home just yet.

Now, we did.

“Weston, what is this?” I asked, gesturing at the two-story house in the middle of nowhere. This wasn’t Illinois or Michigan. It was too hot, too green but not in a northeastern way, too windy.

“This is our new ranch,” he explained, and his excitement was contagious. “Far away from other... People. There’s a lot of space for us. We can do whatever we want here.”

“We’re all alone here?” I asked, my eyes scanning the area. Everything was brand new.

Weston nodded. “The next neighbors are ten minutes away.”

“And where exactly is this magical wonderland of nothing located?” I asked, teasing him.

“I thought you’d ask. We’re transplanted Texans now!” Weston stated this with a gleam of content in his eyes. Proudly, he stood by the rental car, posture open and inviting.

“Transplanted?” I repeated, slightly amused.

He nodded happily. “Let’s go inside. I have to give you a tour of this place.”

I took his hand, and we spent an hour walking around in our new place. Weston showed me each room, explaining its function. “... This can be your office.”

Weston revealed a room full of light and empty shelves, ready to be filled. The windows were huge, and there was a desk in front of them. I hurried over there, wanting to test out the feel of the place. A laptop waited for me on the desk, untouched and neat. I gawked at it.

Weston joined me. “The twenty authors and journalists I referred to for advice said this device is what all sophisticated writers use.”

I gulped down the tension in my throat. “A writer?”

He nodded.

“But I wouldn’t know where to start,” I blurted out. “I never even finished my degree!”

“Everybody starts somewhere, Mandy,” Weston said. He wrapped his arms around me from behind. “Do you want to go back to college and finish your degree?”

I shook my head.

“Then what do you want?”

I breathed him in. “I’ve got everything I wanted. We can start anew. I’m going to fill this room with all the books...”

I could already envision it. Frowning, I asked him, “What will you do?”

“I’ll consult my sister whenever she asks for it,” he said, his tone somber. “Other than that, I’ll fuck you a little bit, here and there. I’ll try myself as a cook. Perhaps we can start a farm! Isn’t that what ranches are for?”

I chuckled in his embrace. Shifting, I turned to face him. “Are you sure you want to live here? We can move to a city. I wouldn’t mind...”

“We both wanted something peaceful, quiet, and removed from other people. You like it that way because you have zero social skills, and I can stand it because, quite frankly, the only American I like is you.” I almost laughed at his statement, but he wasn’t joking.

“What about Alex?” I asked pouting. “And Fylox? And Jordan?”

“Don’t even say their names,” he said playfully. It had been a little over a year, and Weston hadn’t fully warmed up to the new men in Kamila’s life.

Weston cursed under his breath, kissing the top of my head. “Fine. I don’t hate them.”

“But you envy them,” I added.

He gave me a quick nod. “Their bonds are strong. Jordan is everything my father never was. He’s the caretaker. He’s got shit under control. Nothing gets past him. I can’t hate him because when I let you leave, he came and saved you. He saved my sister, too. There aren’t a lot of things I value in this world.”

He exhaled, running a hand through his hair. “I value loyalty, family, and friendship. Jordan, Alex, and Fylox show me that my values aren’t a pipe dream... What my mother instilled in me is possible. She wanted us to remain close no matter what. That’s why I could never despise Kamila for being mom’s favorite.”

I gaped at him. “She was?”

Weston nodded. “Kamila tells her old stories in a way that it seems we were equal, but we weren’t. My mom’s bond with her first child was unbreakable. When Kamila started going off the rails, my mom was hurt and disappointed. Whatever anger brew between them came from a place of love. Meanwhile, Aris and I got the short end of the stick. We were there, but we were Dad’s favorites, the heirs to the throne my mom hated.”

“When mom wasn’t there anymore, the lies were uncovered. We weren’t a unity. We were a shell of a family. My... Aram used us for his benefit. He needed us to make people believe in Katantia. We were young, fresh, and deeply embroiled in Katantia’s traditions.”

“You fucked a lot. I get it,” I uttered. I couldn’t comprehend the estimates he’d once given me. On most days, I attempted to forget that we were two entirely different people. The doubts seeped in at night, and when I woke, they still troubled me. What if we had an expiration date?

We’d decided to stay on Katantia a little longer for the family’s sake. Penelope Jade was growing so quickly, and everyone in the family was mesmerized by her. It was almost a contest. Who’d get PJ the most gifts? Weston and I went shopping one day, and we were stopped by a skinny model-type with hips that could fit in me three times. She’d been pregnant and glowing like she was Beyonce, but the Korean version.

She’d trotted toward us, almost jumping into Weston’s arms. “I haven’t seen you in such a long time! What a year it’s been. I can’t believe Kamila’s queen now. Congratulations! I’m sorry about your brother.”

Weston had hugged her back, and a strange feeling found its home in my body. Jealousy. I wasn't possessive. I didn't even consider him to be mine most of the days. He was of the people, a public figure owned by Katantians who adored him and his siblings. When this pregnant woman hugged him so freely, all of my insecurities trickled down upon me.

"Is this... Are you Mandy?" The young woman addressed me. While I was drenched in jealousy, there wasn't a hint of it from her. Her interest was genuine. "I saw you at the coronation on TV. You looked gorgeous, by the way. So you're the girl that's taken Weston off the market?"

Stunned, I stood there, unable to respond. It would take some time for trust to build again. A lifetime of my father's bullying wouldn't fade in a couple of weeks.

The young woman continued, "Whenever anyone manages to get him on the phone, he's all about the foreigner that stole his heart. And he never came to my wedding! You promised, Weston! My owner and I reserved you and the family the best seats."

Weston wrapped an arm around the small of my back. When I felt his warmth, the knots of tension began to loosen up. I had to work on myself. It wasn't his responsibility to make me feel good about myself. Weston said, "We'll make it up to you..."

She interrupted him, "By the way, I'm Hae-Won. I was born here. Weston and I met in high school. Funnily enough, I married a foreigner, too."

She lifted her hand, proudly displaying a ring that rivaled my mother's most expensive jewelry.

I finally spoke. "We're not married."

"Yet," Weston added.

Hae-Won said, "Are you guys pregnant, too?"

Her eyes fluttered with excitement. We were in a baby store, after all. I shook my head. "I can't have children."

Her face fell. "I apologize. I'm so rude..."

“No, it’s okay,” I assured her. Weirdly enough, I’d come to terms with my lack of uterus. I couldn’t wait for my body to finally realize that I’d have no more periods. Once that fake period pain stopped, I’d be free.

“No children means even more sex! Enjoy it. I’ll surely miss it,” she exclaimed. “Anyway, I’m talking your heads off. I’m sure you’re busy. Call me someday. My owner wants to meet the famous prince. Let’s have dinner at our place.”

“We’ll see,” Weston responded.

I added, “I’d love to.”

“Yes! I have so many questions to ask you. You see, my owner is not from here...”

“Mandy?”

“Huh?”

I took a glance at where I was. We weren’t on Katantia anymore. His former conquests couldn’t sneak up to us and make conversation. He’d got us a home in the middle of nowhere so that it could just be us.

“What’s going on in that head of yours?” Weston asked. He tucked a strand of my hair behind my ear, and I shivered at the simple touch.

“I was thinking of Hae-Won,” I told him, taking a deep breath. It was only us out here. The property was empty. Would we get bored? “And how we met her in the baby store.”

Our embrace broke, and he approached the windows. His eyes traveled the corners of our new property. “I can’t change my past.”

I followed him, standing beside him. “I know. It’s a lot to get used to for me. I’ll manage.”

“That’s why we came here. We’re starting anew. Paint our picture. Make it a good one. We all need some color in our lives, and you’re mine,” Weston said, tracing a line on the window. “Don’t forget that, my pretty little whore. We’ve got each other now.”

A moment of silence passed in which I collected my thoughts.

“We need to get you new shoes, comfortable ones that don’t cost a fortune. What’s our address here?” I asked him, and he cocked his head in my direction with a smirk on his face. His fierce blue eyes were bright today, although there was a hint of sadness at what we’d left behind in Indianapolis and Katantia earlier this week.

“I thought you’d never ask!” Weston pulled out his phone, and he summoned our address.

“That’s my name,” I said, flabbergasted.

“Yes?” He put his phone on the desk next to the new laptop. “It’s on the contract, too.”

I cleared my throat. “On the contract?”

“Don’t sound so surprised.” He added, “I will not confirm whether we forged your signature or not... It was a joint effort on Jordan’s, Kamila’s, and my part. I promise I’ll never do it again. We didn’t want to ruin the surprise.”

The trip to our new home had exhausted me, so I had zero energy to debate what a forged signature meant to me. I simply stated, “You know I can’t afford this. I have zero money to my name.”

Weston shrugged. I playfully shoved at him. “Hey.”

“What?” he asked, grinning from ear to ear. “Start typing on that laptop. I’m sure people would love to hear about your crazy Katantian adventure.”

Yeah, right.



KAMILA

A LITTLE LATER

ANYONE WHO TOLD ME THAT POLYAMORY WAS AS SIMPLE AS A sex on the beach cocktail had lied. It cost a lot of money to be

with two men at the same time.

The government and I cut budgets for unnecessary spending. We funneled it into society, hoping to spice up the Katantian economy. That was two years ago.

Aram left the country in a mess, and his ghost haunted us beyond his grave. Spencer and his tactics still undermined us at every corner. Soon, we would run out of billionaires to buy out his property on Katantia. I could see it coming.

I was supposed to be home and take a day off, but I decided to hop on the jet while Fylox was busy with the new knives I got him for his birthday. Jordan made sure to keep him out of my sight so that I could surprise visit Alex in New York City. He'd be in NYC for a week.

With the itinerary in hand, I let a driver that Jordan vetted take me to Alex's hotel. It was late at night, and the streets were crowded. Not that there was ever a quiet moment in this city.

I checked myself into my husband's suite. The moment I stepped in, I inhaled him.

After kicking off my shoes, I hurried to take a shower. I wanted sex, and I wanted it bad. I wasn't afraid to need it. I missed my husband. I missed lying in bed next to him. Fylox was nice, but... He wasn't a good companion at night. We were both subject to night terrors.

Once I finished my shower, I dried my hair. I strolled into the suite's bedroom. As expected, Alex's bed was made. I hopped on it, and I sought out his pillow with the black silk pillowcase.

I heard the door click. My eyes found the clock on the wall. Alex was right on time. Like me, he first went into the bathroom. He'd already showered after his game, but he washed off the tension of the day in privacy.

Hugging the pillow he slept on, I stared at the door.

I wanted him home, but I knew how much this meant to him. I couldn't ask him to leave it all behind. What he was doing was bigger than all of us.

The door opened.

“Fuck! Baby, what are you doing here?” He walked out of the bathroom naked, and I took in every detail of his beautiful body. He kept pushing it to its limits. Every game night, I sat in front of the television screen, and I hoped that he wouldn’t get injured.

“Surprise,” I said, snuggling the pillow.

Alex was on me in a matter of seconds. He showered me with kisses while his long fingers savored me to see if I was real. I felt his hardness on my skin, and I rubbed myself against him. He asked, “What did I do to deserve you naked on my bed today?”

I spit on my hand, grabbing his erection. He liked it when I worked him with my hand, so I did my best. “I missed you.”

I added, “And it was Fylox’s birthday the other day. I hate that you couldn’t be there.”

His groan made me wet. Alex kissed my mouth, silencing me from talking about Fylox some more. I tickled his side, and he lifted himself instantly.

“I checked his phone. You didn’t even call him or send a message,” I accused him. Still stroking him, I led him to my wet folds. “It’s been enough time now. You have to forgive him. Please.”

Alex removed my hand from his cock, taking control. Towering above me, he thrust inside without any further preparation. I didn’t need it. I was wet just seeing him in person after four months of zero body contact with him.

It stung. Every time, it stung, and I found it hard to breathe. He didn’t like doing this, but I enraged him when I talked of Fylox.

“I don’t discuss him anymore.” Every word was followed by a harsh thrust. His balls slapped against me. He’d opened up a new portal down there because I don’t ever remember feeling his balls on my skin so much. Fuck, I was rambling. “He drugged me. I trusted him with my life, and he drugged me. I’ll never forgive him.”

“He wanted to keep you safe,” I cried out. Alex’s fingers tortured my pussy. He played my folds like one of his games. I wiggled beneath him, unable to sit still. I met his every thrust. “We lost almost two hundred people—”

“No lives were lost in the palace. I could’ve stayed—”

“We love you. We need you. Please... Please, don’t shut him out,” I begged Alex as he fucked me into the mattress like I was the one he had an issue with.

“The glass broke, baby. Only time will tell if we can heal it.”

Alex grabbed my leg, and he threw it over his shoulder, angling himself in a position that had him even deeper inside of me. I’d be sore on my flight home tomorrow.

He rubbed my clit expertly with his fingers, playing me so that I could keep up with him. He was ready to come. He picked up his pace, making me explode around him. My pussy pulsed around him, begging for his come. He flooded my insides, and we were both spent.

After we washed the sex off, we cuddled in bed.

“You’re breaking my heart,” I told him. “We’re already apart. Don’t make it any harder for me.”

Alex’s arm was draped around my shoulders while I covered half his body with mine. He stared at the ceiling when he said, “I need this. I spent all of my life chasing my friendship with Fylox. I share my woman with him. I share everything with him. Our lives are intertwined forever. I can’t even look at him right now. You don’t know what it feels like to wake up alone and betrayed like I did that day when they put me on the jet. I’m almost thirty. They can’t keep ruling over my life like this.”

“Jordan and Fylox only mean well,” I argued. “I... I wished somebody would’ve meant well when Aram...”

Alex took a deep breath. “You can’t use Aram against me in this situation. Jordan controlled almost every aspect of my life because he was afraid I’d be harmed. Fylox... I don’t even want to start. Leave it be, Kamila. They’re my family, but I

can't stand them right now. We only have a couple of hours. I don't want to argue with you."

"You can't blame me for wanting peace," I said sleepily.

"I can't." He kissed my hair.

I asked, "Can we fuck in the car to the airport tomorrow?"

"Whatever you want, baby."



KAMILA

FIVE YEARS AFTER KAMILA BECAME QUEEN

TAKING OFF MY HIGH HEELS, I EXHALED IN PAIN.

"Big events exhaust me," I blurted out, stretching my arms above my head. I was ready for bed, but I couldn't ignore the elephant in the room.

One year ago, I'd given birth to my first child. My husband missed out on most of the pregnancy, but he made an effort to be here when I gave birth. Alex and I had an understanding with each other. I was willing to wait for him.

We hadn't planned the pregnancy. Over the summer, when Alex's season ended, he flew to Katantia to spend some time with me in person. During those weeks, Fylox took off and did whatever the hell he wanted to do all around the world. He didn't speak on what went on during his travels because I was pretty sure there were mutilation and revenge involved.

Years had passed. Fylox and Alex still hadn't spoken after Fylox had drugged Alex to get him out of Katantia.

After Alex had left that summer, like any other summer, going back to Indianapolis to start prep for his season, Fylox returned, and we moved on with our lives like we always did. It took us a couple of months, but eventually, Fylox noticed something was off about my belly. In secret, we had tests done.

I'd been five months pregnant, and I hadn't noticed.

When I revealed my pregnancy to Alex, he all but wanted to quit the season and move to Katantia. It took three long nights of discussion to scrap that idea. Jordan wasn't having it, and I didn't agree either.

Fylox already spent most of his time with me, codependency and other romantic notions. During my pregnancy, he became my shadow. He came out in public with me, too. People knew Fylox now, but he still didn't talk to anyone outside of the family. He kept to himself.

I gave birth. I'd thought it would soften up the ridge between the two most important men in my life.

But they still didn't talk.

Today was one of the most critical days in the country. Big weddings either went spectacular, or they ended up a mess. This time around, everything went splendidly. Jordan made sure that there were no security leaks. He had a lot to lose with this event, so every measure was top notch.

After the disaster five years ago, we remodeled the palace. I lived in the palace now. My bed was big enough for both of my men. Unfortunately, I rarely got them in one room at the same time.

I loved spending time with my Kendrick, but tonight, he stayed at his aunt Felicita's house. She offered to babysit him for one special night.

"I can't take this anymore," I exclaimed, taking a seat on the bed. Alex was taking his clothes off in the walk-in closet. Fylox brushed his teeth in the bathroom. They turned toward me. "Come here. Now."

"Has being queen gone to your head, baby?" Alex reentered the room in his briefs. Fuck. He was the hottest man I'd ever seen naked. His body was sculpted by God. In his late twenties, he'd worked on his body some more. Now, he was even more massive than before. His strength was overwhelming.

"Yes, it has gone to my head," I said pouting. "FYLOX! Don't make me come get you."

I heard a hiss from the bathroom, but I chose to ignore it. A couple of moments later, Fylox came out of the bathroom. He spotted Alex and I being cuddly on the bed, and he turned around. "Join us."

Fylox didn't say anything.

I let out a harsh breath. "We have a baby together now. You can't keep this up. I won't stand for it. Kendrick deserves a united family, and not two boys still bitching about something that happened years ago."

"Language," Fylox warned me. He stood far away from us, looking down upon us.

"I'll watch my language if you make up with your friend." I got up from the bed. "You mean the world to me, you and my baby. I won't let you two end your friendship like this. I didn't sign up for one of you. I wanted the both of you."

"Kendrick has a united family," Alex said, rubbing his forehead.

"No, he doesn't," I argued.

"Nobody gets to harm Kendrick," Fylox stated. I didn't expect Fylox to channel his protective energy toward my baby with Alex. It made me tear up that Kendrick had two men being his role models. Sure, Fylox had violent tendencies, but he turned easy-going and tender when he was around Kendrick. His sole focus was on keeping us safe and happy.

Whenever I cried or became frustrated about whatever went on in the family or the country, Fylox offered a game. He showed his love the way he knew it, and I didn't want him to change. I needed his rough edges to go with Alex, who all but spoiled us with love, even from afar.

I asked, "Do you forgive Fylox for drugging you?"

"I fear that if I forgive him, he'll do it again or worse," Alex muttered. They didn't even look at each other. Fuck. This night wasn't going as planned. I knew what Fylox was capable of. He loved us, and he did what he did to protect his loved ones.

He'd murdered my father brutally to honor me. He had a strange way of showing his love, but it was there. His love.

"I won't do it again."

I turned to glance at Fylox, who stood there in a towel wrapped around him dangerously low. His scars were there as my eyes traveled north. They would never fade, for they were too deep. My heart broke every time he allowed me to touch them.

Fylox's hair dripped onto his shoulders, tiny drops rolling down his chest. He had started growing his hair out, testing what it would look like longer in his natural dark brown color. The locks on his head were still wet from the shower he'd taken earlier. He had changed his hair color after Kendrick was born.

Fylox was sorry. He'd been sad for a while, but we hadn't overtly discussed it. Alex and Fylox's relationship ran deep, more profound than what I had with them, and I was their baby's mom. Kendrick was ours, and we didn't care what it looked like from outside. In fact, on Katantia, our triple union had a legendary status.

I had to tell Jordan's men to kick bitches out of my face sometimes. They all wanted a piece of my Fylox. Every other woman asked about my Alex. We had a contract with his league now, and they showed games legally on one of our pre-paid channels. For any of my husband's games, I personally signed the documents for them to be broadcasted for free. Sports were starting to gain traction on Katantia, and Alex was my country's icon.

He married the Queen of Katantia. He must fuck the shit out of her!

I chuckled to myself. Then I glimpsed at my men, and their puzzled faces reminded me of our discussion. "You won't do it again?"

Fylox shook his head. "I won't ever jeopardize your career or your life. I... I apologize. What I did was wrong. I've done many bad things in my life, but that was... one of the worst

things. I betrayed your trust. I meant well. I hope you know that. I had a plan for Kamila, and I needed you to be safe.”

Alex exhaled, lowering his gaze. He rolled his lips. He stretched his neck. Fuck, I’d love to have him here every day. Fylox was enough, but I had them both, and I needed them both. To control our OCD and obsessive natures, Jordan, Fylox, and I had begun seeing this therapist we’d brought in from Taiwan. The palace paid her to provide free services to the wounded of the disaster five years ago.

Her schedule never ceased to be packed, but she fit us in every week. I was able to take a bite of an apple that I had only washed for three minutes instead of five, and I could leave dust be for a day before I maniacally removed it from my space. Fylox’s developments were utterly opposite. He was a big anal enthusiast, and we didn’t understand why, but we explored his kink anyway. We tossed a couple of salads here and there. I enjoyed his tongue on my well-cleaned butthole much more than on my pussy these days, which was a first. We tried sex toys made in Katantia. He didn’t appreciate them, so I never tried to stick any toy into him again.

When my fingers accidentally slipped and dipped into the unsolicited territory, he punished me for it, and his punishments were as delicious as ever.

When we weren’t working, Jordan, Fylox, and I smoked weed on top of the refurbished palace, watching over my country as the sun went down. Jordan loosened up from the stress of carrying an entire nation on his back. Fylox and I fought the demons in our heads.

“Thankfully, you and my father have realized that I’m not a little child anymore,” Alex commented. There was faint amusement in his tone, and I latched on to that. He’d picked up on my thoughts. I knew he did. Alex studied me closely now that we spent most of our time on cameras. He knew that I was having naughty thoughts. “I’ve got to thank Katantia for that.”

“Please, don’t ever fight again,” I urged them. I grabbed Fylox’s arm, and I dragged him to the bed. He let me do things

like that now. After he saw me push a baby out of my vagina, he grew a whole new level of respect for me. When we played these days, I reminded him to stay focused on me as a person and not me as Kendrick's mom.

I was much more than that.

My men took their places on the bed, and I joined them. "Alex, I want to try something."

"Okay?" Alex shifted, turning to face me. I could bite down on those arms of his. They were in shape five years ago, but now, they were breathtaking. I knew how much effort went into every detail of his career, from his sneakers to his muscles, the food he consumed. We watched every game with Fylox. While I salivated over the screen and my husband won a record amount of games each season, Fylox pretended to be reading or snooping on his special laptop that connected to the dark web. I knew that he saw the development of his friend, though.

"I know we haven't had sex together in a while," I said, gulping down the pain of the past few years. I remained strong for Fylox, and I held it together with Alex, although I missed the fuck out of him. I wanted Alex next to me and not on the screen. But we had to do what needed to be done. Cameras were much more advanced these days. Plus, we had Jordan setting us up so that Alex and I wouldn't get hacked while doing it on the webcam. I wouldn't care because I was the Queen of Katantia, but my husband wasn't that comfortable with his cock on display for all to see. "Fylox and I have been practicing. We've made progress, and I think it's time to test our new strength."

Fylox's gaze turned hungry, eating me up with his cognac eyes.

"I want you both inside of me at once," I blurted out, squirming like I hadn't endured a double penetration before. The truth was that I had. At one point in my life, Aram had attempted to fit three dicks inside my pussy. It hadn't worked at the time, so we went airtight instead.

“But Fylox...” Alex uttered. He still worried about his friend. Fuck, that turned me on.

“He can do it. Trust me,” I assured Alex.

We both gazed at Fylox. Shamelessly, Fylox ogled my body. He did that more frequently now. In our intimate moments, we rediscovered our bodies. We took everything they’d robbed from us back. Fylox and I couldn’t do vanilla forever, but we spent more time going slow ever since we moved to the palace. There were days when I couldn’t escape my past. Fylox often retreated to his shell. Together, we learned patience.

Thankfully, Kendrick balanced us out. Ever since he arrived, Fylox put his best foot forward, and his moods had improved. He even changed diapers. We bathed him together. Fylox and I challenged each other, battling on who made less of a mess. If I let myself believe in conspiracies, I’d say Kendrick took Fylox’s side. He sat by my side when Alex called in from the States, talking to Kendrick on the camera...

Kendrick was with Felicita now. The entire family placed bets on the outcome of tonight. Alex would leave again tomorrow. All I had was today.

Leaning over Alex’s almost naked body, I stretched to reach the nightstand. Goosebumps covered my skin as I felt the shape of him press against me. A familiar set of hands groped my butt, kneading, and massaging me. I leaned into it. While Fylox’s fingers were sturdy and rough, Alex’s were slim and long. I recognized their touch in my sleep. I had two men who both appreciated every detail of my anatomy, inside and outside. I grabbed the special lube from the nightstand, and I shifted on top of Alex, enjoying the tortured look on his face. His cock was hard beneath my thighs, and I teased him, causing friction.

I held up the bottle of odorless water-based lube. Alex gazed at it questioningly. I was a brat, and brats didn’t deserve lube. Fylox and I still played that game, and Alex hadn’t forgotten.

Drawing my eyebrows together, I pouted. “Just because I pushed a baby out of my vagina, that doesn’t mean I can take two dicks at once. Especially if one of them is yours, Alex. I need lube.”

Alex raised his eyebrows. “So you want...”

I nodded. “Both of you in my pussy. I deserve a special gift after five years of not having both of you. Who gets inside first?”

I gazed at them, noticing every bit of luck I’d been blessed with. Torture and love were united.

“Climb on top of Alex.” I could feel Fylox counting in his head. The therapist had suggested he do that. He moved behind us, and I heard the towel drop the floor. “Warm your pussy up. Then I’ll join you.”

I took a deep breath, rolling my eyes back. We didn’t need fancy aftershaves or cologne. There was a hint of citrus in the air, mixed with their essence. I was on top of Alex, but I twisted on top of him to face Fylox behind me.

Without second-guessing it, I surged forward, embracing Fylox. He froze against my touch. When we were sexual, I wasn’t supposed to go off-script. “It’s only us. I love you. If you need to stop, let me know, and we’ll go get Kendrick, okay? We don’t have to do this.”

He nodded, refusing to reciprocate my embrace. I swallowed, and I intently studied him for a moment. I understood him, but some of his quirks were too deep, even for me. Was he doing this to please me? Would this trigger him? Fuck.

“Ride him, my little queen. You asked for double penetration. You’re getting it,” Fylox said, and I exhaled in relief. *My little queen*. It was the most arresting contradiction I’d ever encountered. I handed Fylox the bottle of lube while I settled on top of Alex. He didn’t let out a sound as I grabbed his cock, palming and stroking it. I could have sworn that his erection grew bigger every time I saw it, but you’d call me delusional. Perhaps I was.

I led him through my wet folds, rejoicing in the sounds my pussy made. Video sex was nice, but nothing beat this. With a smirk, Alex commented, “The things we do for you.”

My legs were toned enough to withstand my weight without my arms helping me out while I rode Alex. I let my fingertips wander across the sculpture that was Alex’s body. Whereas Fylox was marred, there wasn’t a single scar on Alex’s skin.

There would never be because his family wouldn’t allow it. We had his back, and whoever harmed one of us would have to deal with the rest of us.

It was a lot to process for me. Twenty plus years had passed since my mother had been murdered, and I still couldn’t wrap my head around the fact that I had a family again, a real one.

Alex picked up on the tears that spilled out of me, picking them up with his thumbs. Before he could ask what went through my mind, I led him inside of me. The gasp that erupted from me was natural. Every time felt like the first time. Alex was lucky that I liked him so much because that cock of his was far too big for anyone in a normal state of mind. That came from me, the former Katantian Princess.

I noticed the amusement that danced in his eyes, and I felt like exploding. But then Fylox peppered my back with kisses, traveling from the back of my neck to the small of my back. Each curve was theirs. The marks on me were Fylox’s, but they could be Alex’s if he were ever interested...

“Do you need more time?” Alex asked.

I shook my head. “Let’s do this. I’m ready. Pour that lube on me, Fylox. Pour it all over my filthy body.”

Alex gripped my hips with one hand, tantalizing me with his care. His other hand grazed and flicked my nipple. Rolling his lips, Alex asked, “What’s in the lube?”

“A special aphrodisiac and that chemical they put in the oral sex lube to dilate—”

“Okay, I retract my question,” Alex interrupted me, and I couldn’t hold back my innocent giggle. “Fuck, baby, you feel too good to be true.”

“I am, though,” I pointed out. He might have signed his contracts in Indianapolis. He might have won his games. He didn’t have the number of rings that he had initially dreamed of... I was probably to blame for that. But who could resist being the center of Alex’s universe? He was in the States, but his heart breathed in Katantia. Every day, it took all of my strength not to ask him to come back to us for good.

I didn’t have the right to do that, not when jobs and legacies depended on him. I understood the role of a public figure.

I was one myself.

Fylox was quiet behind us, but I heard the counting. I counted with him for moral support, and I knew that he felt it.

“This is the strangest thing I’ve ever done,” Alex said.

“Stranger than marrying the queen of a sex country?”

“Stranger than that, yes.”

I chuckled in response, but the chuckle died once Fylox nudged at my entrance. My backside felt wet. He must have emptied the lube on my skin. The sheets below us were ruined. I tried not to think too hard about that. I lost myself in the sensation of having them both fight for entrance. Once Fylox dipped inside, joining his best friend, I tried to read Alex’s expression. He wasn’t giving me much. I took over while their erections were intact, and I controlled the pace.

Alex was deep inside of me, lodged in for good. His movements were small. Mostly because whenever he moved, Fylox had to fight for entrance again. It was a slippery slope down there, and I couldn’t hold back the giggling and the purring.

“How does it feel?” Fylox asked from behind me. He kept his hands to himself, allowing Alex to do all the work of fondling me. I didn’t mind. I knew that this was a challenging situation for Fylox, and we had to go slow for him. The fact

that he was inside of me, his cock touching Alex's cock, was just about enough for now.

"Perfect. It's never been like that before. So tight. I've never had a high like this," I blurted out.

"My little queen." I quivered at the sound of my name from Fylox's lips. "You're going to get us all into trouble one day."

"I thought I brought you trouble every day?" I pouted.

"Same difference," Alex said. He had that look on his face. The one I memorized at night while Fylox tucked me into bed after a long day of work. Alex was about to come. Fuck, it was early but much needed. I couldn't keep both of them inside me much longer. I was a heavy petting girl, but this amount of heavy petting was too much even for me. At that moment, I decided that we'd keep the double anal for a very late special wedding anniversary gift. No more doubles for the foreseeable future...

While Alex spurted hot come inside of me, Fylox pulled out. I expected him to distance himself, but he didn't. Fylox didn't make a noise as he finished on the skin of my back. At the same time, Alex panted beneath me, grabbing anything in his periphery while he calmed down.

I climbed into bed beside Alex, smearing their come all over the sheets. I snuggled into his side. Fylox stood at the side of the bed, and I could feel the war inside of him. I asked, "Do you want to take a shower?"

Fylox nodded. He didn't have to say anything else. I rose from the bed, and I led the way into the bathroom. My men were right behind me.

"I love us." One look into their eyes and I knew they felt it, too. "And... I want more babies."

"You do?" Fylox asked. Panic stormed his face, and I chuckled at him.

"Whatever the queen wants, that's what she gets," Alex said, strolling past me and stepping into the shower first.

I agreed.

Just breathe, sweetie. I'm so proud of you.

OBSESSED

3



PLAYLIST

“Too Much To Ask” by Arctic Monkeys

“Cold Sweat” by Tinashe

“Toxic” by Britney Spears

“X (1 Thing Wrong)” by JoJo

“Link Up” by Tinashe

“Begging For Thread” by BANKS

“Backin’ It Up” by Pardison Fontaine & Cardi B

“Fuck With Myself” by BANKS

“Tonight (I’m Fuckin’ You)” by Enrique Iglesias, Ludacris, DJ
Frank E

“MOVE TO MIAMI” by Enrique Iglesias, Pitbull

“Dirty Dancer” by Enrique Iglesias, Usher

“Into You” by Ariana Grande

“Daddy Issues” by The Neighbourhood

“Yeah, I Said It” by Rihanna

“Thotiana (feat. Cardi B, YG) [Remix]” by Blueface, YG,
Cardi B

PROLOGUE

ARIS



I'VE FORGOTTEN A LOT OF THINGS, BUT SEX ISN'T ONE OF them.

Valentina spreads her legs for me, her eyes big and expectant. I can't bother myself with her expectations. I've been made aware of my past. Who I used to be. I can't live up to that.

My wife's pussy opens up like a flower to me.

I dive in to have a taste, the first one I can remember.

And she tastes like a sinner. Addictive. Her shy moans have me craving more. I lick, wondering if she's actually as special as she feels to me.

"Your pussy tastes divine."

"Well, thanks." Her voice is murderously seductive. Not too low. Not too high. She sounds like she chain-smokes, wearing nothing on a balcony in Paris with a glass of Champagne in hand.

What did I ever do to deserve her? "How many women have I slept with?"

Valentina frowns. "I can't give you a concrete answer. You spent most of our marriage fucking other women. Before that, you were the most eligible bachelor of Katantia..."

I can't ignore the nostalgia in her voice as she reminisces the past. I sit back, removing myself from her luscious skin. "I cheated on you?"

“It’s not exactly what it sounds like,” she backtracks.

Deep shame fills me. I think of our baby. What does my cheating say about our relationship? “You still want me? Do you trust me after I cheated on you with half of the population?”

“Aris, please. Don’t do this.”

“Don’t do what? Hold myself accountable?”

Valentina draws her legs close, and I feel a sudden flood of panic. Her black hair falls behind her shoulders as she draws her knees to her chest, keeping quiet.

“What was in it for you?” I ask.

“What do you mean? I’m your wife...”

A sudden realization dawns upon me. “You wanted me for my status? You’re a gold digger, aren’t you?”

She tries to hold the sob back, but she fails. “What you just said hurt me more than any of your cheating ever did.”

Valentina rises from our supposed marital bed, covering her voluptuous body with her silk robe. Tying her robe so tight, I fear she’ll suffocate. Her eyes tell a story of fury and disappointment. She doesn’t say a word, but I feel better off that way. I’m massive in contrast to her tiny body, yet the unsaid words between us startle me.

She slides into her healed slippers, and she takes one last glance at me. Then she turns around, slamming the door behind her.

“Where are you going?” I yell after her.

“I’m taking my baby, and we’re going to the palace. I need some time... away from you. Don’t come looking for us. I’ll tell Kamila to ban you.”

“But I’m the prince,” I respond.

“And she’s my baby’s aunt. And the Queen of fucking Katantia.”

CHAPTER I

VALENTINA



I DON'T KNOW WHO I AM ANYMORE.

Mandy sits in the examination room with me, holding Penelope Jade in her arms. My daughter looks awfully cuddly in my best friend's embrace. A little over a month ago, she was still inside of me. Now, she's out here stealing the family's hearts one by one.

"Are you okay?" Mandy asks, catching me as I gawk at her with my daughter. Mandy's the only friend I have ever had in my life.

I give her a quick nod. My premature baby was born a month and a couple of weeks ago. Under normal circumstances, Penelope Jade would still be inside of me... I ruined it.

We're at my doctor's office so that I can get the last of my stitches removed.

Mandy will leave Katantia soon. Weston Wraith, her boyfriend, has grown tired of our home, so he's moving to America with my best friend. Mandy feels guilty for leaving me after we've just had our reunion, so she's spending almost every day with us. The baby loves her; she keeps falling asleep on her lap. Right now, Penelope's eyes are fixed on Mandy's long chocolate hair.

"Who do we have here?" my doctor Danai enters the room, smiling from ear to ear. Her brown hair's tied together in a ponytail. She changed her glasses. Today, she looks older and more sophisticated. Not that she's anything less. Danai's the

personification of a nerd. She studied to become a doctor in the Greek military, finishing up her studies in record time. She would've risen in the military ranks if she hadn't met her husband. They moved to Katantia a couple of years ago, seeking peace and quiet from the world. She's the top ob-gyn in the Queen I Hospital's Department of Gynecology. My husband made sure she'd be the one to treat me because we wanted the best for our baby.

"How's Aris doing?" Danai asks, settling down on her seat. Her eyes are now scanning the computer screen on her desk. She clicks on the mouse too much, too fast. It gives me a headache, but I don't mention it.

Instead, I reciprocate her smile. "Oh, my husband's doing great! His body has healed. We're now waiting for him to wake up from his coma."

A few minutes away from the Department of Gynecology, Aris is sleeping without a care in the world. I don't have a good feeling. Mandy knows, but she doesn't talk about it. The doctors that are watching him don't tell me everything. I'm sure of it.

"You want to meet your daddy, don't you, sweetie?" Mandy asks Penelope Jade, cuddling her. My daughter squirms, blinking her big eyes at Mandy. She doesn't do much but look at people like they're her entire world. She's only a month and a couple of weeks old, but it feels like it's been ages. It's almost like she can see us, but, in reality, she can't just yet. Every day that Aris isn't here to watch her do something new, I break inside.

But I don't show it. They already think I've gone nuts. A lot has changed in a small frame of time.

Katantia doesn't have a king anymore. He's been replaced by his daughter Kamila Ruby Wraith, out of all people. Tensions inside of the country have loosened up because Kamila is Katantia's darling. Nonetheless, after the incident that led to my husband's hospital stay, we've taken precautions.

The Queen of Katantia has her special guards following me everywhere I go. Dressed in immaculate black clothes, they openly carry guns. Half of their job is working out and obeying their boss's every absurd wish. Their uniforms don't include the Katantian emblem, although they are palace employees. Their brand is my cousin's jersey number, who's the son of their boss—my uncle. There's a golden four on every shirt, right on top of their heart. It's subtly placed there. They don't want to stand out, but they're far too self-assured not to. They're waiting outside the examination room to take us back home.

It doesn't feel like home anymore.

“Are you ready?” Danai inquires. She's documented everything, and now it's time for the stitches to be removed.

I nod.



TO MY SURPRISE, WE FIND WESTON OUTSIDE THE QUEEN I hospital. My husband's brother waits for us in his Wraith car, windows rolled down and soft music playing. Everyone that passes the car does a double-take. Some people approach him for a selfie.

We reach the car, special guards included. They immediately check the Wraith as if my Weston would plant bombs to harm Penelope Jade or Mandy. Holding my daughter, I wait as they get the car ready for us.

Weston's blues gawk at his object. Mandy's not officially his object yet, but I categorize her as such already. They're bound to tie the knot at some point. Their newfound love irritates me. Before Aris ended up in the hospital, I couldn't give a fuck less about their relationship. Now, all I see is their delirious love for one another, and it cuts me.

“Look at the seat!” Weston gestures at the backseats. A pink baby seat pokes through the blackness of the car. “It's custom-made for Pen. It's got her name on it in glitter and all.”

I thank him for the effort because I'm not sure what else I'm supposed to say. Mandy puts the baby bag in the front seat. Then we both climb into the back with the baby.

The special guards escort us back to the palace with two cars, one in front of us and one behind us.

“How did it go?” Weston asks. He's changed. Mandy's the reason for it, and I don't blame him. When my childhood friend came to Katantia last fall, she was the catalyst for a lot of fucked up developments in our lives—none of which are her fault, obviously.

Aris and I never thought Weston would ever settle down with anyone.

Mandy changed that.

Now, Weston's getting his fucks whenever he feels like it, I'm sure. My best friend's seemingly secure with him. They look at each other with a need I was once familiar with. Mandy's got darkness inside of her ever since she lost the ability to have kids. They live in Kamila's house for now until they leave Katantia soon. They're waiting for Aris to get well.

We're all just sitting ducks, waiting for my husband to wake up.

I say be careful what you wish for.

My baby warned me when she was still in my belly. She gave me dreams, bad ones. I still wake up in sweat and tremors because of them. She's told me to stay strong for the both of us because something's up with Daddy.

We arrive at the palace, but it takes much longer than before to pass security. The Queen of Katantia's team isn't joking when it comes to safety. The fences are bigger. There are guns at the gates now, dogs sniffing for suspicious items. Trained men and women alike have been hired to keep the royal family safe. They all passed the new head of security's hundreds of tests. My long-lost uncle, Jordan Winters, is responsible for all of this.

My uncle has become a constant in our lives. He almost had to force-feed me during the final weeks of my pregnancy

because the rest of my family was too pussy to deal with my moodiness. He's the father of us all now that our actual fathers are dead. When he notices that I spend too much time inside, he drags me to the barber with him, where I watch him get his weekly haircut. I've even learned how to style my uncle's natural hair.

Jordan Winters has taken over, and I don't mind. I feel safe in his presence, so does everyone else in the family. He helped Kamila in her time of need, and nobody will ever forget that. He holds everything together now.

After what feels like half an hour, we pass the gates. Weston drives to the end of our road, parking the car in front of the house we once resided in together. Sure, Aris and I annoyed him. A lot. He despised us most of the time, mostly me. I was dirt in his eyes. That's another thing that's changed. People don't look at me like I'm filth anymore.

Now, they pity me. I'm twenty-one, just pushed a baby out of me prematurely. My husband's been in medical care for months, unaware that our baby has been born. While he sleeps, Kamila is changing the country step by step. While he sleeps, I'm slowly drifting.

When Penelope Jade was still in my belly, she gave me tons of energy. Toward the end, the energy evolved into a consuming sadness that I couldn't shake. Now that she's here with all of us, I feel drained. I don't have the strength to fight anyone. I used to feel this urge of retaliation inside of me. Whoever attempted to kill my husband, my baby, and me, I wanted to strangle them with my own two hands. Now, there's this indifference inside of me that I can't get rid of. We can't ask Aram if he ordered a hit on Aris because Aram's dead, and we can't ask his brother Spencer either because he's... unavailable.

In the end, I don't care anymore about who did it.

It happened, and now, we live with the consequences.

Weston and Mandy work together effortlessly. My brother-in-law grabs the baby bag while Mandy helps me get the baby

out of the seat. They walk me to the door like I need their help with every single detail of my life.

My mom greets us at the door, waving us inside. She takes the baby from me expertly. Felicita Cross might be a widow, but her grandchild has breathed new life into her. I smell food in the air, and I hear the television playing, some American news channel.

“Want to stay for dinner?” my mom asks the happy couple.

“We’ve got plans today, but could we come over tomorrow?” Mandy suggests, tilting her head to the side. “I’m still waiting on the pacifier I ordered for Pen.”

“Her name’s Penelope Jade,” I comment. It comes out harsher than I want it to. Then again, I don’t care.

“Yes, of course,” Mandy responds, blushing in embarrassment. She grabs Weston’s hand, silencing him before he can say anything. After everything, years of us hating each other, he’s trying to put out fires left and right. “We better get going then.”

“See you tomorrow!” Mom kisses them goodbye. They snuggle the baby before they leave. I stand at the side, watching them. Once the door shuts and they have left, my mom addresses me. “What did the doctor say?”

“Everything’s fine. She wants to see me again in a couple of weeks to talk about how things are going with Penelope Jade. She also reminded me that I need to put in an order for all the vaccines that she needs now because they take ages to arrive,” I tell my mom, putting on my brave mommy face.

“That’s good to hear. Let’s feed Penelope Jade, and then we can bathe her. Jordan’s coming home at eight, so we’ll eat with him.” Penelope Jade shuts her eyes. She opens them again, blinking a couple of times. Her tiny hands seem so fragile as she lifts them. “Are you okay?”

“Of course I am,” I tell her.

But, really, I’m not.

CHAPTER 2

VALENTINA



I SIT IN THE EMPTY GARDEN WITH PENELOPE JADE ON MY LAP. She's leaning against my bloated stomach, watching the trees with curiosity. When Kamila became queen, she offered to remodel the backyard of our house. I let her because I couldn't care a less about what this place looks like anymore. I never bothered with the backyard back in the day, and I don't bother still. Every week, Kamila sends gardeners over to upkeep everything.

Mom talks to Penelope Jade all the time. She tells her nice stories, sings to her even. She's found this kids' music album on a streaming service, and she plays it for her grandchild up and down daily.

I can't speak to her when we're alone. I talked to her when she was growing in me, but I can't do it anymore.

The breeze is almost nonexistent. It's a hot Katantian summer, and the sun's out. Penelope Jade and I hide underneath the thick shadow of the veranda alone. Mom's out, getting some shopping done.

We sit there in silence. In the far end, I can hear the waves hit the shore. We live only a couple of minutes away from the beach, but I haven't gone there in a while.

Penelope Jade's tiny fingers try to grab my shirt. Her attempt is futile, but she doesn't whine. She starts staring at me like I'm the only one in her world. She's a quiet little baby, and she's been through more than I wanted her to ever experience.

Mom says I was never this calm, not even in the early days before the teeth start popping out.

Sometimes, Penelope Jade doesn't even seem like a product of Aris and me. Her calm nature worries me. Mandy and Mom keep reassuring me that it's all in my head.

We keep very few phones in the palace's compound; my uncle and his minions don't trust phones. Our country's main enemies are dead or imprisoned, but there are tons of hostile opponents out there, waiting to worm their way into our systems.

I hear the phone ring from where it's charging in the kitchen. Without any staff, the house is eerily still.

Baby in arm, she latches unto me as I stroll inside to pick up the phone.

I swipe to accept the call, putting it on speaker. "Yes?"

"He's awake," Dr. Smolyakov reveals.

My daughter coos in excitement as if she understood what my husband's doctor said.



THE LAST TIME WE WERE ALL ASSEMBLED IN THE QUEEN I Hospital, Penelope Jade was born prematurely. I swallow. Aris waking up is good news to the world I inhabit.

Why doesn't it feel so good then?

Everyone's here except my uncle. He rarely leaves the palace to be in the public eye, unwilling to jeopardize his family's security. He works hard to keep the security operations in check. I know not because he tells me. I know because I hear him and my mom talk about it when they think I've gone to bed.

They don't know that I haven't slept much in the past weeks. When I do, I'm haunted by nightmares of death and the destruction of everything I'm close to.

“You’re not very happy, are you?” Fylox says. Kamila’s boyfriend steps closer to me, eyeing my baby. He doesn’t touch Penelope Jade, keeping a safe distance from her. My daughter is curious, so she keeps glancing at him with her big eyes. She attempts to reach his bleach blonde hair, but she can’t muster enough strength. Fylox is a tall man. He’s in his own world, but he’s the only one that leaves me alone. I barely see him.

“That obvious?” I reply.

He nods, pursing his lips. “It’ll be okay. At least now he’s awake. We won’t let anything happen to you.”

I kiss my daughter on the forehead, and I walk past Fylox, ignoring the numerous scars decorating his tough skin, to join the rest of the family in the waiting room. Holding Penelope Jade so much will come back to bite us in the ass, but so far, we pretend like she doesn’t have a stroller.

Weston and Mandy are huddled in one corner. My mom rises to help me with Penelope Jade. Fylox and Kamila murmur things to each other while watching the baby and me.

A couple of minutes later, Weston, Kamila, and I are called into Aris’s room.

We’ve been over the procedure multiple times. Recovery won’t be simple. He’s been lying down for so long that he’ll need physical therapy. The doctors have lined up medication for him, imported from overseas. Dr. Smolyakov keeps warning us to keep our expectations low. The rest of the family seems ecstatic while I’m barely hanging on.

We enter the familiar room where Aris sleeps. Four white, bleak walls invite us in. On the bedside table, I replaced the framed picture of the sonogram with Penelope Jade’s first picture. She might not have a dramatic bone in her body, but she’s photogenic like both of her parents. Everybody says their baby is the most beautiful, but, honestly, they’ve never met mine.

Said picture isn’t on the nightstand anymore.

The man in the bed is holding it in his hands, staring at it helplessly. His gray eyes take Penelope Jade in. The agony on

his sculpted face crushes me.

The tall people of the family, Weston and Kamila, hide behind my small body. They let me step forward carefully. Dr. Smolyakov is in the corner with his notepad, looking all sorts of skeptical.

“Hello,” Aris says, sounding far-off. He places the picture on the nightstand cautiously. He offers me his hand for a handshake, but I don’t move from my spot. I never once shook his hand. Why should I start now? “What’s your name?”

He renders me speechless, but I force the words out anyway. “Valentina Cross. Who are you?”

“I’m Aris Wraith,” he introduces himself, welcoming me into my worst nightmare.

“She means to say she’s Valentina Cross Wraith, Princess of Katantia, your wife, and the mother of your child,” Kamila intervenes, joining me where I stand unmoving. She places a hand on my shoulder to soothe me, but my anxiety spikes. I stare at Kamila’s red hair to distract myself, but it’s doing nothing to calm me. I never needed help talking to people. This is humiliating. I wear this man’s ring, but I can’t bring myself to talk to him. He seems like a stranger.

“It’s very nice to meet you,” Aris responds to his sister. She shakes his hand gracefully, unlike me. “You must be my sister? They told me the redhead’s my sister.”

Kamila nods. “That’s me. Over there, that’s your brother Weston.”

The Queen of Katantia points at Weston, who’s leaning against the wall. He comes forward at the mention of his name.

Kamila and Weston look like their mother, a woman I never met. They have a royal aesthetic to themselves, while Aris has always had a playful nature that contrasted his rough exterior.

“Where are our parents?” Aris asks.

Collectively, we glance at Dr. Smolyakov. He said to take it slow, no info-dumping on his patient. My husband suffers from retrograde amnesia, unable to access some of his past.

“They’re not with us anymore,” Weston tells his brother. Aris nods, accepting the information without any fuss. How can he look like the old Aris now that he’s awake? While he was asleep, he looked in pain. Now, he’s carefree again. His dirty blonde hair is cut short. Since he spent most of the year so far in this hospital room, his hair is darker than usual. Once the sun sees him again, his hair will brighten.

“So what do we do now?” Aris asks. He doesn’t sound like my husband. His voice is lighter, more amused. “Can I go home? The doctor said I live in a palace.”

“Now that you’re awake, we’ll run some tests. Then we’ll decide upon what to do,” Dr. Smolyakov explains. He starts discussing that throughout his coma, I signed off on all decisions concerning his health. My husband absorbs the information, nodding along. We’ve decided on taking it slow, meaning that he’ll come home once he’s truly ready. The baby complicates things.

“They say I have a daughter. Can I see her?”

Aris doesn’t look at me when he asks the question. It hurts me.

Kamila responds, “I think we should leave you with your wife. I’m sure you two have a lot to catch up on.”

I shake my head, ready to step away. Weston studies his brother like he knows what I know.

Things will never be the same.

CHAPTER 3

ARIS



I'M LEFT ALONE WITH THE WOMAN THAT THEY SAY IS MY WIFE.

She doesn't seem very happy to see me, and I can't blame her. I don't remember her. Her eyes are as dark as her hair, paint black against her porcelain skin. She wears a white short-sleeved t-shirt with a stamp in the middle. Indianapolis, it reads. Above her heart, a golden number four blazes at me.

Her legs are hidden beneath a pair of white sweatpants. She looks comfortable in her clothes but out of place in this room.

"I'd take you out to dinner, but I can't move my legs properly," I tell her to break the ice. She's my wife and the mother of my child. I suppose that I have to take care of her?

Her nonchalant reaction shocks me. "We don't do dinners."

Valentina's voice belongs on the radio. Four words and I feel like fast-forwarding the medication and physical therapy. I need to get out of here. I ask her, "What do we do then?"

"Dr. Smolyakov says you're not to be scandalized," my wife replies. She's not flirting with me. My eyes fall on her full lips. Her pale face lies to me. She might be standing in front of me, pretending to breathe, but she's not with me.

"So, tell me. What have I missed? What can you reveal to me?" I feel good about myself. Sure, I'm confused and lost, memory-wise. But I feel awfully confident. I don't need memories. Dr. Smolyakov described my accident in detail. The list of injuries that I endured should bear me down, but I don't

let it drag me down. I'm proud of my body and the strength it has proven.

Valentina doesn't speak.

"Did we have problems before the accident?" I ask her, unsure of what to do with her strange behavior. "I don't want you to feel forced to be here."

"I carried our child for twenty-eight weeks," she blurts out. The lack of emotion turns into something dark. "You promised you'd be there for us."

She goes on, "You broke all of your promises. Everything... Gone. Penelope Jade warned me. She spoke to me in my dreams. No, we didn't have problems before the accident. We'd finally found a balance, at least, for the duration of the pregnancy. Which you missed the half of, by the way. I gave birth, holding my mom's hand while you were in here, sleeping. Now, I'm in that house with our baby, and it doesn't feel like home anymore. I don't know who I am. My doctor says it's postpartum... I say bullshit. Your father fucked our lives up when he was alive, and he keeps the fuckery going on from hell..."

"I'm sorry," I tell her, meaning it.

"What for?" she snaps. "I don't need your apologies. I want everything to go back to the way it was. Back when we didn't have a care in the world. I'd even let you lock me up in a Hole Store for life. I would. Just to feel like the old times again..."

"I'd never hurt you," I interrupt her. What is a Hole Store? "I'm accepting responsibility. I'll do whatever is needed. I'm not hurting you."

Next to my siblings, my wife seemed petite. Delicate. Unhappy. I don't have much to hold on to, but being a husband and a father seem like roles you can't waive responsibility from just because you lost your memory. I'm determined to make it work. I'll fast-track my recovery. I can't be in the hospital while my wife is struggling.

"Can you stop talking like this?"

“Like what?”

“You’re scaring me,” she claims, stepping away from me. Her face is devoid of happiness. “You’re not my Aris.”

I don’t know how to respond to that.

“I have to go,” she blurts out, hurrying out the door. I watch her body move, and it stirs something in my own. It feels wrong to look at her that way, even if she claims to be my wife. Whatever transpired has driven a wedge between us.

CHAPTER 4

VALENTINA



FIFTEEN YEARS OLD

I TAKE THE STRAWBERRY GUM OUT OF THE PINK CARTON BOX, popping it between my lips. I chew it, savoring the forged taste of strawberries. I crumple the carton box, and I throw it away. Dad will have to buy a new pack of gums from the States. This was the last of my supplies.

Grabbing my gym bag, I descend the stairs in my pink dance tracksuit. Underneath it, I sport a black sports bra and shorts. Mom says I have to cover my skin when I leave the palace to avoid trouble because I'm the youngest in the family. I entertain her because I don't like it when she's upset. Especially because she's always incredibly tired when she comes home from work. Then she gets extremely sour when things aren't done her way.

I fear turning eighteen, but it also excites me. I won't have to sweat in the summer underneath all this fabric anymore.

From upstairs, I hear my brother yell something. I flinch as I put on my new sneakers. Ryan's upstairs in his room, playing some sort of video game that Dad imported from overseas. He's connected to the internet, socializing with boys from all over the world. If you can call yelling at each other socializing, that is.

My parents are at work, so I sit out on our porch, waiting for the palace staff to pick me up. I have a dance class in the city center. I'm homeschooled, but Mom allows me to have

two recreational activities to meet other people. I've chosen dance and fashion design.

I have no phone, so I sit on the stairs in front of our house, waiting aimlessly while chewing my gum. Occasionally, I hear my brother curse from upstairs, so I feel less lonely.

Palace staff rarely mess up schedules. I'm tempted to call up Dad, but I know he's always busy... I'm sure they'll arrive soon enough. The palace is only ten minutes away from my dance class. We'll still get there in time. I have to be punctual.

Exhaling, I wait. And I wait.

"Sweetheart."

My heart jumps out of my chest. Where did he come from? I rise from the stairs, almost swallowing the last of my strawberry gums. I blush, but he can't see it because I've mastered the art of make-up. Against my mother's wishes, I have Dad buy me the expensive foundations from overseas.

"Hi," I say, adjusting my voice. I don't like sounding my age when I'm near him. I want him to see me as if I were one of the girls he hooks up with, the beautiful ones.

"What are you doing out here by your lonesome?" he asks, and my heart flutters. I'm tempted to believe that he cares. His siblings despise me, but he never makes me feel like I'm worth nothing in his presence.

"I'm waiting for my ride," I tell him. His eyes betray his exhaustion as badly as he wants to hide it. "What brings you here?"

"Do you want me to take you to your class?"

I nod right away, forgetting how I promised myself that I would never look desperate in front of him. He has to take me to class, or I'll be late. I can't have that.

"Wait here." I watch his features from the back as he jogs to the garage of his house. He's shaved his dirty blonde hair, leaving behind nothing to grab. I think he did it to rebel against his dad, who took away his passport after he failed his college classes.

A couple of minutes later, he pulls up in front of my house in his brand-new black Ford Mustang GT. It's so shiny and suave that I want to kiss its hood. Then again, I don't know how the car's owner would react.

I slide into the passenger seat, settling the gym bag between my legs. I put on my seatbelt, and I inhale deeply, engulfing myself in his scent. Sure, the car smells like weed. But it also smells of his tobacco and sandalwood aftershave.

As he pulls away from our neighboring houses, I feel like I belong in this seat next to him. His sharp features must have been molded to torture me. From whatever angle that I observe him from, he never stops to amaze me.

Ryan says I should stop lusting after the prince because he'll never look my way.

Sitting next to him as he drives into the city for me in his fast car, I feel like my brother is so very wrong.

We arrive in front of the studio without any issues. He didn't even need me to give him directions. There's a famous warehouse next to my dance studio, so perhaps that's how he knew where I took my dance classes.

"Who's picking you up?" he asks. I swear my heart is going crazy. I count every syllable he speaks to distract myself, but it's not working.

"Palace staff, usually," I respond as nonchalantly as possible. If I stay stranded at the dance studio tonight, Mom and Dad will throw a fit, and they'll never let me come back here.

"When are you done?"

"At five."

He surprises me when he says, "I'll be here."

"There's no need..." I reply, my voice trembling. He's intimidating like his father, but his father doesn't cause my heart to flutter. His father isn't in my thoughts before I go to bed every night.

"I said I'll be here."



THE MAKE-UP ON MY FACE DIDN'T SURVIVE TODAY'S DANCE class. The instructor punished me for coming late, having me run laps around the non-airconditioned space of the studio. When I rejoined the class, I stank, and the girls made fun of me. While we practiced one of the cheer-inspired choreographies, a Paris Hilton look-alike called Taylor, a banker's daughter, accidentally hit me in the eye. If I let the conspiracy grow inside me, I'd say the girls worked together to have Taylor land on my face.

I wait for the gym to empty before I take my shower. I need some time alone. Also, I don't want anyone to see me cry. My face hasn't stopped burning ever since the punch. I've never been hit in my face before, so I don't really know what to do. Standing under the spray of warm water soothes me.

Eventually, I dry myself and the tears on my cheeks. I put on my clothes, leaving the empty locker rooms. I come here to make friends, but so far, I've failed. Splendidly.

When I see the black Ford Mustang GT waiting in front of the dance studio, I halt in my step. I whisper to myself, "Holy shit."

Turning around, I play with the idea of walking back to the palace as if I didn't see the car.

Then he sounds the car's horn, forcing me to face the embarrassment.

I climb into the car, and I thank my mom's genes for my long and full hair. I unleash it to cover the bruised half of my face.

"You're late," he states. The digital clock on his car's radio announces that it's forty-five minutes past five.

"I lost track of time," I reply joyfully as if nothing's wrong.

The ride back to the palace is a quiet one. I'm glad. I can't wrap my head around what the hell is going on. I'll have to tell

Dad that he drove me to dance class. Dad won't like it. Dad hates it when I come into contact with the royals.

We pass through the gates, and he pulls up to our street where our neighboring houses are. He parks the car, and I wait for him to exit the car, pretending to have a stuck seatbelt so that he doesn't see the bruises. He's not the type to open doors. I unlock my seatbelt, planning to make a run for it as soon as I step out of the car.

My plans vanish when he appears on my side of the car, inspecting my face. "What happened?"

"Nothing..." I smile at him, hoping that what the girls chat about is true. Girls that smile and laugh at everything are the most sought-after.

"Who did this to you?" I don't know how to react to the rage in his voice. I scan the street. Thankfully, there's nobody here. They're all still at work.

"I'm not telling you," I state, crossing my arms in front of my chest. My gym bag is getting heavy, and I really want to put it down, but I stand my ground.

"You'll need to find a new dance studio then. This one's getting shut down, and everyone present today will be getting fined."

I scrunch my eyebrows together. When Dad first announced our move to Katantia, I thought it'd be as easy as moving to Florida or even Canada. It wasn't. Everything is different here. There are no rules. The Wraiths are Gods, the rest of us mere mortals. I swallow. "They already hate me. I live in the palace, but I'm not the princess. They call my dad the king's slave, and my mom's the king's cumdump... I haven't even done anything to them. I've never been late before, but I get punished. The other girls are constantly late, but they've never suffered any consequences..."

By the end of my speech, I'm breathing hard.

He takes the gym bag from my hands, and he walks away from me, headed for his house. Reluctantly, I follow. I don't

like this house because it's always busy with palace staff. They're always cleaning up or cooking for the princes.

Today, it's surprisingly empty. He leads us into the kitchen, where he discards my gym bag on the floor. He grabs a fresh kitchen towel, the Katantian emblem saluting me. The fridge makes its own ice cubes, so he pours them into the towel, making a knot. Then he hands it to me. "Press that against your face."

I do as told. I welcome the freezing cold because he gave it to me.

We stand there in silence. He looks out of place in the kitchen. I do, too. Mom does all the housework at home. I help with the laundry occasionally.

He doesn't have his usual aura of energy around him. His exhaustion is even more apparent now. The bags under his eyes tell me to leave him in peace because he needs some rest. But I don't. I stay in his kitchen until he moves.

"Come with me," he instructs me. It's almost a question, but then again, it's not. The royals get what they want whenever they want it.

I nod, following him out of his house and through the woods. He speeds ahead of me, and I have to pick up my step. He has long legs while mine are pathetically short. The ice towel almost falls out of my hand, but I grip it harder. He made it for me; I won't let it go.

Eventually, we reach the beach. I've never been back here, and I've lived in the palace's compound for four years already. It's a secluded beach. I don't think anyone ever comes here. It looks deserted, but I don't understand why. The water looks much clearer than the one on the other side of the island. The sand is the same, but there's no trash lying around.

Aris sits down in the middle of the secluded beach, facing the ocean.

I join him. There's a bit of space between us that I would obliterate if I were braver, but I'm not. I'm just the king's

slave's daughter. A do-no-good. A rat. Better yet, a cockroach with all of the black hair on my head.

We don't talk, which surprises me because he's not the one to entertain silence. His brother is the quiet one, reserved and calculating. Aris is the energetic brother, willing to make mistakes. He likes to make a fool of himself. He can be goofy. His reputation says he can be much more than just goofy, but I don't trust myself to think about his late-night activities.

The ice melts after a while, and I'm left with a damp kitchen towel in my hands.

"Do you swim?" he asks, and I brighten up, nodding. I haven't swum yet this summer. Aris gets up, and he starts removing his clothes. I look away, giving him privacy, although we've all seen every inch of his body splattered across the news.

I don't remove all of my clothes because that wouldn't be appropriate. I leave my sports bra and boxers on. The last time I was this excited to swim, Mandy was waiting for me in the new indoor pool of her mansion. Faintly, I wonder what she's up to. Dad doesn't allow me to contact her, but he lets us know what she's up to. He says she just started an internship at one of her dad's firms. That makes me feel happy. She's moving on with her life, going to high school, and having all the experiences I'll never get to have.

By the time I'm in the water, Aris has swum ahead. Taking a deep breath, I go to work. I might be tired from dance class, but I won't spend a moment away from him. He brought me here. He can experience how good of a swimmer I am.

"How did you do that?" I hear him ask once I reach him.

I grin at him, slightly out of breath because I'm out of practice.

"I never knew you swam."

"There's plenty of things you don't know about me." I feel an intense sentiment of pride because I've impressed him. It feels silly, but I latch onto that.

We float on the water, and Katantia's so far away that I don't even register it.

"You have to stop."

"Stop?" I ask, flustered.

"You know exactly what I mean."

Unfortunately, I do. It makes me want to cry, but I've never cried in the water. Swimming is my happy place. He brought me here to embarrass me, go figure. I should've known. That's what the royals do. They're conniving. My heart plummets, and my chest grows heavy.

"I don't mean to offend you," I explain. "It... happens. I'll do better."

"You don't offend me," he says. I wish I could rub my thumb against his eyebrow, just to know what it feels like. He has a small scar above his right eye. I know almost everything there is to know about Aris, and my gossip magazine sources say that he earned that scar after an object's owner threw a broken piece of a beer bottle at him. It barely missed his eye. He almost lost his eye because he fucked a girl that had an owner.

Aris exhales, and my eyes widen. He goes on, "They can't know."

"I'm sorry."

"They can't know because if they find out, they'll take you away from me."

I don't want that. Never. I bite back the sob. He can't see me cry. "I'm truly sorry."

"I can't protect you if you act this way," Aris explains.

"I don't mean to..."

"You have to toughen up."

"I will," I promise him, and he swims closer to me. Out here in the water, we're eye to eye.

“What you said earlier?” He rubs his eyebrow with his index. “That’s what makes you special. They’re all jealous.”

“Even your family?” I ask.

He nods, and then his hand reaches for my head, threading through my wet hair. “Yes. They can’t know about our pact.”

You can’t know about my feelings for you. Ever. “No, they can’t.”

He plants a kiss on the top of my head, and my heart explodes. “You’re not going back to that dance studio. I meant what I said. They’re done. You’ll tell me the name of the girl who punched you. She’ll be blackballed for the rest of her stay in my country.” He inhales, and I watch the twitch of his nostrils with fascination. “I’ll talk to your dad.” Nobody likes talking to Dad. He’s scary when he’s not my dad. “I’ll explain what happened, but it can’t seem like anything suspicious.”

“It can’t.” I shake my head. “Dad can’t know. He’ll hurt you. I don’t want you hurt.”

“You can’t say things like that, sweetheart.”

All of this might seem inappropriate. I’m fifteen. He’s twenty-four. He’s the prince. I’m the trashy girl next door from a low-class family. If he knew what went on inside of me, he’d deem it inappropriate. He’s a lot of things. He fucks around a lot, but he’s never touched me like that. If everything goes according to his plan, he never will. Because he doesn’t want me like that. But he hates his father enough to use me to annoy his family.

I don’t hate my dad. I don’t want to hurt my family. They’ll be disappointed, but I’m willing to risk it. At least, I get to tuck myself into bed every night, dreaming about my future fake wedding with the Prince of Katantia.

“Where am I going to dance?” I ask him, ready to move past the subject.

“You won’t,” he states, letting me go. I feel cold all of a sudden. “I’ll find you an advanced swimmer class.”

“Mom doesn’t want me to take swimming classes,” I tell him.

He tilts his head to the side, and his smirk entices me. “Quite frankly, what your mother has to say doesn’t mean shit to me. You like swimming, so that’s what you’ll do. I’m your future husband, sweetheart. My word’s the law.”

In more ways than one...

CHAPTER 5

ARIS



PRESENT TIME, A MONTH AFTER HE'S WOKEN UP

MY FAMILY WARNED ME ABOUT OUR COUNTRY'S OBSESSIVE citizens, but as we step outside the Queen I Hospital, I realize that I underestimated Katantia. There's a fence separating us from the overbearing crowd, and guards are standing in front of it, pushing it back as we walk to our allocated car. People yell my name in excitement, asking questions about my wellbeing. Kamila told me to smile politely and leave it be for the time being. I have no recollection of my Royal PR training. We don't need to set new fires.

"Where's Valentina?"

"How's the baby?"

"Are you happy that the king's dead?"

When we reach Weston's Rolls-Royce Wraith, I feel instant relief. The questions that these strangers asked were too personal. Too loaded. I couldn't even answer them if my own family asked.

Dr. Smolyakov is ecstatic that I feel connected to my family even without any recollection of the past. We're not yet sure where I'm at head-wise. I've been too focused on getting my body back on track. I feel too proud to walk around with a crane. I just do. It's one thing I'm convinced of in this time of uncertainty.

Our guards enter the cars behind and in front of the Wraith. Weston takes the driver's seat while I sit in the front passenger's seat. Kamila and her... husband? Fiancé?

Boyfriend? I don't understand their relationship. Fylox and Kamila sit in the back. They're constantly whispering things to each other, which has her blushing like they're still in their honeymoon phase.

My sister runs her fingers through Fylox's bleached hair playfully. The scars on his skin tell a story that I've never heard. Is he self-harming? He wears a long-sleeved shirt, so I can't see his wrists, but I see the scars reach up to his neck.

My brother catches me staring at Fylox, and he tells me to let it go. That's easy for him to say. He probably knows the story behind this man's scars. I don't.

Once our entourage hits the road, the car is quiet. I feel all the eyes on me, except for my brother's. He's focused on the road.

"What are you expecting me to say?" I ask.

My siblings remain quiet. My sister's man responds, "They want to know what you think of Katantia."

I glance outside of the window. Am I supposed to compliment the sights? All I see are cars, some skyscrapers in the distance. It's a sunny day, so the sky is a pleasant shade of blue. I don't feel anything while looking outside. It seems like any other day to me.

"There's nothing special about it," I comment.

Fylox reacts with a low chuckle. "I knew I liked the new version of you better."

"Are you just going to sit there and let them insult our home?" Weston asks Kamila.

She doesn't respond. For the queen of this country, she seems down-to-earth. The only indicators that she's of importance are her clothes and her make-up. She's always dressed elegantly. However, the make-up she applies to her eyes scares me. I never know what to expect; will she come with pink, green, or blue eyes?

And all the glitter...

Weston slows down the car, and I take a moment to appreciate her beauty. It's a well-kept car, looking new, even if my brother claims that it's been in his possession for years. I bet it can drive fast, too. Not as fast as I'd like my car to drive... "What kind of cars do I drive?"

"At the moment, none," Kamila replies. Then she clears her throat. "You had an inkling for sports cars. The car you had your accident with was a Ford Mustang GT, but you wanted to get a faster one. Of course, I hope that the baby changed your plans. I was planning to..."

"Didn't we say we'd let them decide it amongst themselves?" Fylox reminds Kamila.

"I want to get you a new car," Kamila states. There's guilt in her voice, but I have no idea why she'd feel that way. She's been the most forthcoming after I woke up from my coma. She runs the country, but she found time to visit me every day I was in the hospital. We did yoga together when I could barely move a limb.

"I'm sure I have enough funds to buy my own car," I reply. I've got a role to fulfill. I've been out of commission for months, but I won't let my family down anymore. I'm back. I'll be who I promised my wife to be. Even if I don't understand our relationship. "Thank you for the offer."

"You don't get it," my sister goes on.

"Please, don't be sad." I feel uncomfortable because she sounds like she's going to cry.

Weston pulls up to a massive gate. Armed guards are checking the car in front of us. I'm positive that our every move is being watched.

"I never got you a wedding present," Kamila blurts out. From the corner of my eye, I notice that Fylox is rubbing her shoulder. "I was always against your marriage to Valentina. After everything... I was mean to her. She didn't deserve it. I insulted her, and I distanced myself from you. I want to get you guys a car so that the baby can ride around safely. I asked

Valentina, but she declined. Your future's uncertain, you see. You and she had all these plans..."

The guards reach our car, and we all step outside. We're scanned and patted down while they have dogs smell our car. It takes ten minutes until we pass the gates.

"That was intense," I comment.

"Jordan, your wife's uncle, is making sure that we all learn from our past mistakes," Kamila explains. The trees are tall and full of life, but in between, whenever there's an opening, I catch a small glimpse of the palace. "We've upped our security game. All the fences have been updated. There are cameras everywhere, even the woods. We have drones watching the property. Every member of the family has their own team of guards. Yours will introduce itself tomorrow. Jordan is still putting it together."

"He's putting them through the wringer," Fylox adds. "It takes more than connections and family history to become a guard now."

I nod. What they say sounds logical. My accident was an attempt to end my family. I would never take my safety for granted again.

"We're going to give you a quick tour of the new palace," Weston reveals, pulling up to the back of what seems to be the actual palace. "After last year's earthquake, tsunami and riots, we've had to renovate, so you might not have an instant recollection of it."

"I wouldn't worry about that," I tell him. Dr. Smolyakov is satisfied with my body's recovery, but he claims that my brain could be doing better. My doctor talks to me like we're friends, and I appreciate it. My memories are frozen, and it doesn't matter what my family does. I don't recall anything outside of my basic skills, my father's face that resembles my own, and my mother's smile.

We leave the car with the guards, and we head into the palace. It's not as pompous as I had expected. It's kept quite simplistic. Everything's in white, and the massive two-sided

staircase gleams at me. The walls are covered in art that I don't have the patience for.

They take me to the main hall, meant for the important royal events. There are small spaces next to it, for dining and entertaining big groups of guests. We also have our own court, which shouldn't surprise me since we run the country, but it's still an impressive feat.

We take the elevator ride, and my siblings explain that they had to remodel the first floors. They were destroyed in the riots while I was away. Apparently, last year's earthquake forced the palace to get a more robust construction. The structure of the palace has remained the same. The first floor hosts the official guests. Conference rooms and our government takes up the second to the fourth floor.

The top floors are where my sister works and lives. She says, "The riots stopped before they could reach the former king's quarters, but we still threw all of his shit out. It took us weeks to transform the space into something that doesn't remind me of him."

We take the stairs towards the fourth floor. Once we reach it, I spot three massive portraits in the entrance. I recognize the women. "Mom. Grandma. Great-Grandma. Did I get that right?"

Kamila smiles wholeheartedly, squeezing poor Fylox's hand a little too hard out of excitement. She explains, "They were never recognized in the old palace. These women built the country alongside their men. A friend of Alex painted them for us all the way from California..."

"Who's Alex?" I ask.

Kamila's excitement fades.

"You'll find out in due time. It's a complicated story that we don't have time to explain right now," Weston tells me.

After showing me Kamila's office, her living space, and introducing me to her staff, my siblings decide that it's time to leave the palace to go home. I've been doing great so far, soaking in all the information. I'm not overwhelmed, which is

definitely a good thing. The palace is impressive, but I feel comfortable in it.

“Mandy’s with Valentina and the baby,” Weston tells me. Fylox and Kamila walk ahead of us, hand in hand. “My sister-in-law’s vulnerable right now. I want you to be aware of that. We think that she hasn’t been in her right mind since the accident. It’s a delicate situation. We walk on eggshells around her. I hoped that it’d get better once you woke up, but she’s still not back to her old self.”

“What was she like before?” I ask, honestly curious.

“Explosive,” Kamila exclaims. “She didn’t mope around in the house 24/7. That’s for sure. She was a mean bitch with a sex drive that rivaled my own. You guys were disgustingly close, always making out in front of everyone. She gave you headaches the same way you gave her headaches. You guys fought quite often, but you were never over.”

“It’s like I always feared,” Weston adds. “The world stopped turning after your accident. You guys had something freaky going on. I can’t even explain it, and I lived with you two for years.”

“She’s changed. I think it’s the baby, but... I don’t know. Just be careful. That’s my baby niece in there. She’s everyone’s priority. Brother or not, if you jeopardize her safety and sanity, we’ll have to think of a new solution,” Kamila explains. She means every single word that comes out of her mouth, and I respect her fierce attitude concerning my girls... I’ve never called them that. ‘My girls’ has a nice ring to it.

“I’m here to make it all right again,” I promise. “I won’t rest until everything’s back the way it was.”

“I’m not sure that’s the best idea...” Weston mumbles under his breath.



MY SIBLINGS EXPECT ME TO REACT AS WE WAIT IN FRONT OF ‘my’ house. We rang the bell, but the door hasn’t been opened

yet. I take in the house, but I don't feel anything.

A big man opens the door. He's skeptical as he lets us in. Who is he? He's wearing an Indianapolis shirt like Valentina and Kamila occasionally do. "Welcome home, son."

He offers me his hand for a handshake, and I accept it. It's a testing move, and I hope that I pass. His inquisitive gaze and the tense posture of his body reveal that he's alert around me. I don't want to be on this man's radar, not in my current state.

"I'm Jordan Winters. Valentina's uncle. Felicita's my sister," he explains. Jordan and Felicita don't look alike. They're foster siblings. Jordan's a big intimidating man while Felicita's tiny like her daughter.

I nod. "It's good to meet you, sir."

"No need for pleasantries, kid," he says, patting my back. There's a hint of a smile on his face, but it never truly shines through. He wears a beanie with the number four stamped on it. It catches my attention because four seems to be an important number for palace people. They all wear it.

Kamila and Weston are watching my exchange with Jordan like hawks. "Felicita and I will be moving next door so that you can reacquaint yourself with your home and your family. My niece might have lost her father, but I'm just as good at kicking your ass if you harm our girls. I don't care if you just woke up from a coma."

I nod again. "I understand. I wouldn't expect anything else."

"Let's go into the living room now," Jordan says, and the group falls in line behind him. The house is kept clean and sober. There are no spare decorations anywhere. It makes me wonder what type of wife Valentina makes.

The first woman we encounter in the living room is Felicita. She came to the hospital a couple of times, and we talked for a while. Out of everyone in my family, she seemed the calmest in my presence. I would've expected her to react like her daughter, hostile and distant, but she didn't. Felicita kept me up to date with the baby and with Valentina.

Felicita takes my hands with an apologetic look on her face. She's shared her worries with me, but I'm hoping that she's wrong. She moves to the side, and I spot my brother's girlfriend sitting on the couch next to my wife, who's holding our baby.

"You're here," Valentina says. She isn't happy to see me. Again. It's getting a little old, but I can't find it in me to blame her.

"I think we should let him hold Pen?" Weston suggests.

"Her name's Penelope Jade," she snaps at my brother. Noted. No nicknames for our baby. Then she addresses me. "Sit down."

The entire room watches in awe as I sit on the couch, close to Mandy. The poor girl is blushing out of awkwardness. Valentina meets me, standing in front of me with our baby attached to her hip. "Be very careful."

There's a please on her breath that nobody else hears but me.

Cautiously, she attempts to hand me the baby. Penelope Jade squeals and my ears discover their new favorite sound. The baby grabs a strain of Valentina's hair, pulling at it. My wife remains calm, not moving.

Mandy explains, "She grabs our hair, and then she lets it go. She doesn't pull it. She's the best."

I don't doubt it.

Valentina's hair is let go, and the baby lands on my lap. I list all the information Felicita gave me about the baby. I have to be careful not to crush her, especially since I'm just learning to control my own body again.

My wife sits down next to me, and I feel her presence there. She radiates heat and a complexity that I'm sure I'll never understand.

The baby keeps moving, shifting forward and backward. I'm holding her tight, but not tight enough to hurt her. She's so tiny in my hands that it does something to me.

Penelope Jade meets my eyes, and a silent exchange occurs.

This isn't my first child.

"What is it?" Weston asks. He noticed the sudden terror in my face. The baby on my lap keeps smiling at me, opening up a new world for me. "Did you remember anything?"

"I..." I don't know what to say. Something inside of me urges me to keep my thoughts to myself. Did I have another relationship before Valentina? Is this our second child? If so, where's the first one? I don't know the answers. I have to wait to ask the questions I want to ask.

The baby makes a cute little noise, and I decide to let the past fade for the time being.

I've got my girls now, and I'll do anything for them. I'll convince my wife that I'm the husband she needs. Penelope Jade needs her father, and I'm determined to be the best I can be.

CHAPTER 6

VALENTINA



SEVENTEEN YEARS OLD

I DON'T SEE HIM MUCH ANYMORE.

But that's okay. Our pact's still in place even if we haven't seen each other in almost thirty months. I don't want to count, but it happens organically every time it's the first of the month.

Aris has been sent away to finish his studies in England at a fancy school. Weston's already graduated, so he's still in the house next door... I don't live there for the time being.

Right now, I'm residing in the South Side of Katantia, where all the fancy beach houses are. I live with a teenage boy and his father. My dad's a close friend of this man, so when he found out that he needed an assistant, Dad suggested me. Over a year ago, I graduated from high school, and I needed something to pass the time until I turned eighteen. So, now, I'm interning at Carmelo's Italian fashion house—remotely.

Carmelo occasionally flies to Milan, but he spends most of his time on Katantia. His wife died a couple of years ago, so there are no other women in the house but me. His house staff is a group of males decorated with abs, for some strange reason.

Carmelo's son, Michele, is two years younger than me. He goes to the local high school, and he's going to graduate at the end of his school year. I don't see him outside of the brainstorming sessions with his dad. Whereas my dad buys video games for my brother, Carmelo buys Michele fabrics

and shoes. I swear I hear the souls of a million dead animals before I go to sleep every night. Michele is a fashionista, doing his make-up better than me. We're not close friends, or else I'd ask him to teach me how to get the foundation to look so smooth and effortless.

"Tesoro, come watch the television with me. The sketches can wait!" Carmelo calls from downstairs, sounding awfully jolly. I'm not in the mood for a fashion show. I have to perfect my sketching skills which are lacking, hardcore.

I sigh, putting aside the expensive pens. I ascend the stairs, smelling coffee in the air. He came back from Milan the other day, and he brought tons of caffè.

"There you are!" he exclaims, patting on the couch. He gestures for me to join him. When my eyes fall on the screen, my mood sours even further. "You look exhausted, Tesoro. You need rest."

"I still draw like shit, so no rest for me," I reply, crossing my arms in front of my chest.

"Language! Your Papà won't like it if I turn you into a cursing sailor!" Carmelo comments, smiling awkwardly. For the owner of an Italian fashion house, he picks kitsch home wear. Donatella sent him a golden silk robe, and he hasn't been able to take it off ever since. "Anyway. Look who it is! Aris has come home. I swear that boy grows more handsome every time I see him."

I'd like to disagree, but I don't. They say absence makes the heart grow fonder. I say bullshit. While I've turned a blind eye to Aris' activities with other women in the past, being away from the palace and the royals has made me see past the façade. Carmelo keeps showing me images of Aris and the European bimbos that he fucks. I ignore that he looks high as a kite on all of them, and I focus on the fact that they keep holding hands. They're always photographed late at night, going to a hotel. Shopping early in the day, where I'm sure that he pays for all these girls' bills. They're tall, blonde, skinny, and famous.

“Do you think he brought one of the women home? I’d love to dress them. Oh, I can’t wait until there’s a royal wedding. I’m first in line to design the wedding dresses, aren’t I?” Carmelo asks me. His gray eyes have nothing on Aris’s, but they still stare me down like I know what’s inside the royals’ heads.

“You’d have to ask the princes and the princess,” I tell him. I sound bitter as fuck, but Carmelo’s so in love with Aris that I swear he trumps my own obsession with the prince. He focuses on the television. The gossip channel that we’re watching gives us all the details. In two weeks, there’ll be an official celebration for Aris’ graduation. Weston never got one because he was adamantly against it. I wonder if Dad will have me come back home for the festivities. It’s Scorpio season soon, and I’m due home for my birthday. I don’t want to go back and forth all the time. Working for Carmelo has given me a sense of stability. Being here is relaxing while the palace just stresses me the fuck out.

“You lucky girl.” Lucky, indeed. “Growing up around all that glitz and glamour. No wonder you have an eye for the finer things in life.”

I exhale, loosening up my facial features. It’s not Carmelo’s fault. He doesn’t know that I’d learned from the television and the internet. When I was a preteen, I’d gawked at Mandy’s mom. She was the neighborhood’s fashion icon, always styled top notch. The entire US was mesmerized by the Rawlins family.

I may have lived near a mansion and inside the palace compound, but I’ve always felt out of place.



“I’M NOT GOING,” I STATE, COCKSURE. I’M SCOWLING, READY for this ordeal to be over with. Aris has been back for two weeks, and he hasn’t shown himself. Why would I see him on this side of Katantia anyway? The South Side of Katantia’s for

the families and the calmer citizens. All the chaos occurs in the city center behind the giant mountain.

“We’ve been invited,” Carmelo repeats. He doesn’t understand. He’s in his silk robe, assembling our outfits on his tablet.

The new addition is Michele. He took one of his bigger tests the other day, so we get to enjoy his jubilant self until he retires back to his cave. Surprisingly, he shoots me a glance of empathy. “Papà, she doesn’t seem comfortable.”

“I’m not going to miss the one chance I get to dress a lady for the palace!” Carmelo responds, his face reddening. “We’ll go in our finest.” Then he turns to me. “Whatever holds you back from going back to the palace, just envision the gold I’ll dress you in. You’ll look like a goddess, Tesoro.”

Michele’s further attempts to have me stay home and clean his leather shoes go futile. He tries hard, but his dad’s unyielding.

I clench my teeth, deciding to go through with it. Ever since I moved to Carmelo’s, I’ve gained a bit of weight. He and his cook fatten me up with their Italian delicacies. We eat chocolate dessert, whether it’s Tiramisù, Bonet, or Torta Barozzi, every single day.

My parents don’t say anything, but I experienced my mother’s shaken glances last time I went home. She grew up in a foster home, but Dad found her real family tree one day, and she found out that everyone in her family was skinny. Dad says I remind him of his mom. Sometimes, I wish I could’ve met her.

My grandma on my father’s side died in a car crash back when Dad was about to graduate high school. That was how he met my mom; she and uncle Jordan were his neighbors. Dad took them in as children when he decided to leave behind his old life.

A couple of days pass, and I sincerely hope that something puts an end to Aris’s graduation party before it’s even started. To my luck, it’s still on. Our outfits arrive straight from Italy.

Carmelo feels guilty for forcing me to go, so he's gone all out. We won't keep the clothes. They'll fly back to Italy once the party's done. But he thinks that the glamorous hair and fabrics will cheer me up.

They don't.

Carmelo and Michele take good care of me. Carmelo fastens my dress after Michele has transformed my face with his make-up skills. He's used contouring on me; it's a new thing from the States. All the celebs do it.

They help me into my heels. Now, I reach their shoulders. I should feel good about the night. I look positively out of this world. Nobody will even recognize me. My gown sparkles. My skin is flawlessly peeking through the deep plunge floor-length gown. My breasts pop, and I show the most skin I've publicly shown in my entire life. There was a massive high cut on the gown, but Carmelo altered it into something more subtle. Michele applied some sort of cream on my arms; if you look closely, I twinkle like I'm made out of glitter. Carmelo's handed me expensive jewelry, delicate rings for my fingers, and extravagant earrings.

The men are dressed in their finest suits, gold touches everywhere. Carmelo's in a celebratory mood while Michele and I just want this night to be over with.

We're picked up by a car, and we drive to the palace as guests. It feels strange to go home like this, but I can't change it. I haven't lived in the palace in over a year.

When we reach the palace, Carmelo snaps pictures of Michele and I like we're his models. He gives us instructions on how to pose, how to smile, or not. After a couple of minutes waiting in line, we're waved through, entering the palace. The two-sided staircase is decorated in diamonds, shiny as ever. The chandeliers look even more impressive than I remember them.

Carmelo's anxious to meet my dad and my mom because he knows they'll have a word with him about my suggestive outfit. But I don't care. All the glances that come my way

because of this gown elevate my confidence. The more stares I get, the higher I hold my chin.

Nasty cockroach? I say bullshit.

I look like a short flamingo made out of gold.

And for the first time in my life, I feel like a woman.



WE'RE SEATED AT A TABLE AT THE FAR END OF THE MAIN HALL. It discourages Carmelo. I see it in the tiny wrinkles that make an appearance on his face. We share our table with no-name people that not even my dad must know.

I don't mind one bit. I sip on my Champagne, imported from France, and I inspect my long fingernails.

We haven't seen Mom or Dad yet. Ryan is nowhere to be found. I doubt he even made an effort to come.

Weston's in the front, conversing with his wasted sister. Her hair's as red as ever, and she almost matches my levels of gorgeousness with her silver dress. She looks like a witch. Earlier, when Carmelo greeted her at the entrance, she didn't even say hello to me. If Carmelo hadn't been present, she'd have cursed me out in her drunken haze.

For a palace event, the graduation party is kept lowkey. The food they've served us has seen better days. I wonder where my Dad and Mom are. They're usually flaunted near the royals to let the photographers take shots of the royal servants.

I roll my eyes.

A long time after dinner has been served, the main attraction of the party makes an appearance. The king walks in, followed by Aris and a blonde fuckdoll that I know from the fashion shows Carmelo makes me watch. I'm clenching my fists in anger until Michele leans into me, whispering into my ear, "She looks like shit compared to you."

That calms me down. My heart flutters hopelessly when Aris acts like his usual goofy self, entertaining the crowd and

making jokes about how long it took him to graduate college. The woman next to him acts how she's supposed to act, quiet and obedient. She flashes everyone her perfect white teeth in her immaculate smile.

I grab a Champagne bottle from one of the waiters, and I keep it to myself, pouring myself more alcohol as the night continues. When the people surrounding us start to fade into the night, I sigh in relief. The guests are leaving. We'll be next.

Neither Mom nor Dad made an appearance today, which weirded me out, but they'll see the pictures. They'll have a word with Carmelo later.

Just as the night starts to blur into boredom, the blonde fuckdoll accompanying Aris decides to come to our table. Unaware of my loathing towards her, she shakes my hand. She introduces herself, and I drown her name in the back of my head. If she's here to stay, I'll move to Milan once I turn eighteen. I'm not interested in Katantia and owners. There are other girls, more suitable for the job.

"Carmelo, dear! It's so nice to see you. When Aris mentioned you'd be here, I knew you'd give me something to see! We're going clubbing tomorrow. Do you have any time to squeeze me into your schedule? I'm sure you're so busy..." I hate her feminine voice and her posh accent. She sounds like she was spoon-fed barbies.

"Darling, anything for you! I have just the right outfit for you. Come over to the house. We'll hook you up!" Carmelo tells her, and I almost throw up. If she comes to Carmelo's, it'll be tainted. She'll destroy the one place that Aris hasn't touched.

Carmelo and blonde fuckdoll chat about irrelevant things and famous names while Michele and I sit there, bored out of our minds. Music plays in the background. An orchestra was hired, but it doesn't play classical music. In typical Aris fashion, it plays reconstructed modern hits, upsetting the older guests.

"Here you are," Aris says, appearing out of nowhere. *He* doesn't address me. His words were meant for the fuckdoll.

My heart plummets. He's been smoking. I promised myself that I wasn't going to look, but I do anyway. His hair is long now, like a hippie. He's got a man bun which I wouldn't appreciate on anyone else, but add Aris's sharp features and gray eyes, and he ends up taking my breath away.

I start coughing, having gagged on the Champagne. Nobody turns to see what's happening with me. Not even him.

I turn to Michele, excusing myself to the bathroom. I don't go there, of course. I hurry downstairs to the cellar where they store the snacks. The staff glance at me like I'm an alien. I introduce myself as Travis Cross's daughter, and they leave me be.

When I start my snack search, I'm hoping for cookies, but I find strawberries instead.

I grab a box, and I go further into the cellar, finding a dark corner to consume my snack in peace.

Peace, I said?

"Sweetheart." Where the fuck did he come from?

"Go back to your fuckdoll. I'm busy here," I respond, munching on one of the strawberries. They're delicious. They must've just arrived. I cram my mouth with strawberries so that I don't have to talk.

"That's no way to talk to your husband," he says, smirking at me—the audacity.

I roll my eyes, swallowing the bites of strawberries in my mouth. "You're not my husband."

"Put the food away, sweetheart. We need to talk," Aris claims, stepping out of the shadows. Even in my heels, I'm a small nobody next to him. Cockroach. I felt sublime earlier. My ego had been pumped by all the longing stares. Now, I feel deflated.

Aris's body exists to torture me. I've said it before, and I'll say it until... I leave Katantia. He's massive, more muscular than ever before. Did he go to college or to the gym in England? The scar on top of his right brow is still there. His

gray eyes are glossy, telling me that he's on something. He didn't bother to shave his face clean today. A five o'clock shadow greets me, decorating his jaw.

I don't want to look at his lips. I know them by heart. I've been studying them in my head for years. I clear my throat, placing the half-empty box of strawberries on the nearest table.

I tell him, "I don't have anything to say to you."

"You look stunning today."

Although my inner teenager wants to throw herself at the prince that's been haunting her dreams for years, I don't respond.

"Are you enjoying yourself at your internship?" he asks. The bite in his tone makes me feel all fuzzy inside.

Without hesitation, I nod. Aris steps closer to me, towering above me. I face his white button-up shirt that smells like the fuckdoll. Did she rub herself against him? I want to cry, but I won't. I'm not the pathetic girl he left behind anymore.

Aris lifts my chin with his index finger, forcing me to meet his ferocious eyes. He inquires, "Are they taking turns with you?"

I'm this close to falling to my knees. I'm this close to explaining myself. My heart pumps loudly inside of my chest, and I feel goosebumps all over. Then I remember that I'm stronger now. Thirty months of bullshit absence, and I've grown balls. Beautiful ones, at that. Not the nasty ones. I take care of them daily, stroking my own ego.

I'm not a cockroach anymore.

And, today, I'm a gold flamingo. I feel like a fucking woman, and not something Aris gets to hide in his back pocket for a future checkmate play.

"Yes, indeed, they do. They take turns fucking my ass," I respond, surprising myself. I spit fire at Aris without any fear of the repercussions. "Are you happy now? I'm not your responsibility anymore."

One moment, I'm minding my business in my golden gown. The next, I'm grabbed by my neck and pushed back to the nearest wall. He almost sprains my ankle. One of my heels has broken off. Fuck. I can't ruin this outfit. It costs a fortune.

"Aris, please, I need to get back..." I urge him, but he doesn't let me go. He lifts me from the floor by my neck, stabilizing me against the cold wall. The alcohol inside of me is making itself known. I'm pretty sure the back of the dress is now dirty. Panic seizes me, and my thoughts start pacing. While it's lovely to be so close to the man of my dreams, I'm not the princess. If I ruin something, I have to pay for it. I've worked my ass off in the past bunch of months, but I haven't earned one inch of the gown I'm in. Even the glitter on my arms costs more than my salary covers.

"You're mine, sweetheart."

"I think it's time we stop. It's not healthy. You have a new girl now..." I mumble. His fingers grip me even harder, and I struggle to breathe. My head starts heating up. This isn't the same man who handed me ice when the Paris Hilton look-alike hit me in the face.

Aris leans forward, his lips almost brushing mine. I feel his breath when he speaks. He reeks of alcohol and weed. "When I say you're mine, I mean it. If they've taken what's mine, it's time I take it back."

"You're talking nonsense!" I blurt out. Our noses touch and I feel a shiver. I envisioned this moment so often. It was never this dark. Helpless. Gloomy.

"I don't have a condom on me."

"Really? What are you fucking the fuckdoll with? Cucumbers?" I spit. I kick at him, but it's useless. He holds me eye to eye to himself, up in the air, while I pant underneath his touch.

"You wish, don't you?" he asks, grinning at me like the devil incorporated. "Nah, sweetheart. I fuck her with my cock. Bare. She's quite entertaining in bed. The best whore on the

block. She thinks she's some opera singer with the high notes she hits."

I shove at him, but he doesn't even flinch.

"I'll fuck you bare, too."

"I'm not on the pill, you fucking idiot!" I yell at him, right at his face. My heart palpitates. It's not happy anymore. I'm stressed the fuck out. "You don't get to fuck me like this." More kicks. No response. I claw my nails into his skin, but he smirks like he enjoys it. "Not after leaving me..."

He drops me to the floor, and I need a moment to stabilize myself. Just as I think he's going to storm out, he fiddles with my golden gown. A tear escapes my eye. "Please, don't. I'll have to pay for it. I can't. Don't do this." I'm begging for the sanity of my dress, but, in reality, I'm trying to keep it together myself. In a matter of seconds, my entire world has crumbled. All the fantasies I had? I say bullshit. *Be careful what you wish for, Tesoro.*

The halters of the gown snap, and I gasp. Aris's warm fingers explore my skin. I swear he leaves burn marks as he travels lower, reaching my chest. I swallow back the sob. No fucking tears. He palms my naked breasts, massaging them like they fascinate him. They don't seem too big in his hands. I remember fuckdoll's chest, massive and juicy. With her slim and tall body, she must be every man's dream.

His fingers teasing my nipples, he claims, "They've grown."

"What?" I ask, flabbergasted.

"Your tits."

"No."

"Yes. Don't talk back to me." He sounds so final that it breaks my heart in two.

"Since when do you know what my breasts looked like before?" I ask, shaking.

"You've been teasing me for years, sweetheart. Don't act all coy now." He rolls my nipples between his fingers, and I

feel like bursting. What is he doing to me, and why the fuck does it feel so good?

I shake my head incredulously. “I never once teased you. I’ve been careful. I’ve kept my end of the bargain.”

“You’ll fuck me tonight.”

“No, I won’t,” I argue. The palace is my home. I can sneak back to my room, grab something to wear. I’ll face the consequences then. I’m shaking terribly while my nipples dance to the tune Aris plays for them.

When he leaves my chest alone, I take a deep breath. I’m half-naked, with a broken shoe, but I can still tiptoe out of this dark space while he’s fisting himself or whatever it is that he’s doing. Without any further ado, I make a run for it.

I might be a fast swimmer, something I gave up a couple of weeks after Aris left the island, but I forget that Aris doesn’t just look athletic. He is. His reflexes are fast, and he catches me before I even touch the doorknob.

“I don’t want my first time to happen down here. Please,” I beg—silly me. The royals don’t understand what the word ‘please’ means. The king has been pampering their asses since they came out of the womb.

Aris ignores me, as per usual. He tows me all the way to the nearest table, settling me on it. He pushes my knees apart while I keep kicking at him to stop. My gown keeps tearing until it falls off completely. Carmelo will murder me. I’m a dead girl walking.

I’m not only stripped of my clothes but my dignity as well. This is a moment that I won’t be able to bury. It’ll haunt me forever.

I couldn’t fight off the horny prince. I’m a weak fucking cockroach, and I’m about to pay the price.

“You sparkle.”

“You’re a fucking idiot.”

“And you’re my sweetheart.”

“I’m not. Stop calling me your sweetheart!” I yell at him. I shove at him, but he chuckles in response, agitating me even further. “I stopped being your sweetheart months ago!”

His fingers travel between my thighs, pressing against wetness that I wish wasn’t there. My teacher used to say that being wet doesn’t mean you’re consenting. She kept repeating that mantra. She said that it was important to remember on Katantia.

“You don’t shave for them?” he asks, and I heave.

“I’m still a virgin,” I whimper.

“I don’t believe you. You’re different.”

“Of course, I am. I’ve grown up! I’m…” not as blindly in love with you as I once was. “Fuck you.”

“You’re about to,” he remarks, pushing down his zipper. In my dreams, it was such a sweeter sound. Now, it just hurts my ears. “Lie back.”

“No.”

He twists me into the position he wants me in. It hurts—my back presses against the cold metal table. There will be bruises tomorrow, and I have to come up with a convenient lie to excuse it. “Don’t talk back to me.”

“This is wrong.”

“I’m your husband, sweetheart. There’s no right or wrong.” I feel him against my skin, and I curse at myself. Why did I ever do this to myself? “Get ready. In a month, I’ll be taking what’s mine on the regular. After you marry me, your pussy’s fair game.”

Then he thrusts into me.

CHAPTER 7

VALENTINA



PRESENT

PENELOPE JADE HAS A FEVER.

He came back home, and my baby has grown sick. Is she sick of him like I am? I don't know. I hold her close, trying to stay sane. He's upstairs in our bedroom, sleeping like he did in the past months. I didn't wake him up. Instead, I called my mom, and now, I'm waiting for her to come and help me out. Why did she and Jordan move out again? Right. "Your husband's back, and we don't want to intrude."

Fuck that. It's the first time Penelope Jade has had a fever, and I'm overwhelmed. I've also called the emergency number that Jordan set up specifically for the baby.

Penelope Jade doesn't seem sick. She smiles at me like it's any other day. But I felt her temperature. Then I checked it. Something's wrong.

Danai discussed this scenario with me, the baby having colds and such. She was born prematurely, and we can't help but be worried most of the time. Penelope Jade will be fine eventually, but... it is what it is.

My mom arrives with Jordan when I specifically told her to come alone. My uncle eyes the baby and me. Then he leaves the room to scan the rest of the house. His paranoia is something else, but I can't hate him for it. He's trying to protect us. It's what my dad would've done if he were still here with us.

I push that thought away, and I focus on what my mom's doing. She plays with Penelope Jade, and, together, we wait for the special ambulance. She tries to calm me down, but it doesn't work. Penelope Jade's not even three months old yet. She's still so tiny. We have to double-check whatever's going on with her.

The medics arrive. Surprisingly, they don't come accompanied by a shrieking siren. They look like they were dragged out of bed to come here, but, to be honest, I don't give a fuck.

Mom holds the baby as we follow the medics to their van.

"What's going on?" Where did he come from? I glare into nothingness.

We're in the van, and he rushes towards us, Jordan tailing him. Aris asks, "Is she hurt?"

"Are we good to go?" one of the medics inquires, looking at us.

I nod. "Hop in, or go back to sleep."

Aris and Jordan join us in the back of the medics' van. Aris's dirty blonde hair is disheveled. He put on his t-shirt backward. The basketball shorts he's wearing leave very little to my imagination. I don't even need to imagine what his cock looks like. It's been inside of me more often than I can count, but I refuse to let those thoughts linger.

This is no way for the prince to make a public appearance, but I'm guessing he doesn't grasp the concept of his royalty yet.

I glare at Jordan for dragging Aris out of bed. "We could've handled it on our own, you know."

"He's the father. He wasn't there when you gave birth to her. He wasn't present when you stayed up all night until she got used to your home." I still don't sleep. Nothing's changed. Out of everything that's his fault, my lack of sleep is not on that list. "He needs to suffer. Just a little bit."

“I agree,” I say, glancing at my baby in Mom’s arms. Penelope Jade fell asleep. She likes riding around in the Wraith with Weston and Mandy.

Car rides keep her calm, not that she’s ever stressed much.



SLEEPLESS, FED-UP, AND HUNGRY, I STAND IN THE KITCHEN, waiting for Penelope Jade’s milk to warm up. I’m a shell of the person I used to be, but I put that thought aside. My baby’s cold distracts me well enough for the day.

“Hey.” Aris walks into the kitchen, wearing the same outfit as last night. We haven’t had time to change or worry about anything other than Penelope Jade.

“Hello,” I respond as cordially as possible.

“She’s a cute little baby, isn’t she?” I had envisioned Aris being bewitched by our daughter a long time ago, back when I’d first found out I was pregnant. I’d known that my baby would be a girl. I’d never known that she’d come so soon.

Once again, Aris destroys all of my fantasies. Or does he? He’s not my Aris, the pain and torture I’d grown to love after falling out of love with him. But he’s trying. Again. It’s always like that with him.

I’m getting tired of it.

“She’s the cutest baby I’ve ever seen,” I add. Having grown up in the palace, that doesn’t say much. I never encountered any babies until I became pregnant.

The first time.

“Is this how it’s been the past months?” he asks sincerely.

I nod. “There are no babies in the palace. Mom had me over twenty years ago... We’re all freaking out—all the time. I swear Penelope Jade looks at me like she’s sorry that we’re all making such a fuss about the smallest things... But I don’t mind. She’s the best distraction one could ask for.”

I've shared too much. I grab the bottle, and I exit the kitchen.

"Distraction from what?" he calls after me.

Mom, who's grown into her role as Grandma better than I have into my role as a mother, takes over, feeding Penelope Jade. She's cried a couple of times after we left the hospital. We can't give her any medication that hasn't been approved by her doctor. She's too young. So we're just clasp at straws, trying to keep her happy and comfortable until we can give her a small dosage of pain relief later.

"Go spend some time together. I've got it covered over here," Mom suggests.

"No," I state. "I'm not leaving you alone with her right now."

"Valentina Cross. Go. You need to destress. She's sensing the tension inside of you. It doesn't help," Mom tells me. I frown. Looking between Aris and Mom, I decide to be the bad mom everyone thinks I am. I leave the house in my pajamas. I don't even know where I'm going. She said I need to destress. I say bullshit.

"Where do you want to go?"

"Nowhere with you," I murmur. I rely on the fact that he's fresh out of a coma, unable to keep up with me.

"I heard that."

I roll my eyes.

"I'd take you out to dinner, but a) our baby's sick, b) I don't have a car, and c) I have no idea what you like to eat," he rambles, and I feel twistedly revolted. These are mind games. I'm sure of it. The royals being royals, as always.

"You used to know what I liked to eat," I deadpan.

"And what was that?"

"Your cock." Your come used to be my favorite dinner...

That shuts him up. Whatever it is that we have between us, he's not comfortable with our sexual past. He might never be.

After he woke up, he suddenly grew a conscience.

I turn on the spot, and I decide to walk to the beach.

To my surprise, he follows me like a loyal puppy. I sneer. The first time we did this, the roles were reversed. I was lovesick. Foolish. Every cell in my body lived for him. Now, I just want to erase those memories.

“Do you remember how to swim?” I ask Aris, staring at the water ahead of us. He’s not out of breath which is a shock. He doesn’t limp that hard either. He puts a lot of effort into walking like the old Aris.

“Let’s find out.”

I slide out of my clothes in front of him, not feeling the least bit ashamed. I haven’t slept in the same bed as him ever since he came back. I stay with the baby. My choice. Not his. But I’m not going to hide my body either.

Topless and only wearing my most boring panties ever, I jump into the water. It’s cold, and I should’ve waited to acclimate to the temperature. I’m fine a moment later when I start swimming away from the shore.

It’s been months since I’ve felt this elevated.

I lose track of sense and time. When I pull my head above the water to take a deep breath, I realize how far out I’ve swum.

“How did you do that?” Fuck. How did... Where did he come from? I twist and turn, spotting him behind me.

Aris is unbothered. He’s not even out of breath. Of course not. Kamila tells me he’s been working out a lot lately, trying to get back into shape sooner rather than later. He’s washing off the effects of the coma.

“I just like swimming,” I reveal.

“I can see that.” He adds, “I must be good at it, too. It felt natural doing it.”

“Okay, cool. Let’s just swim in silence now? We can make a competition out of it if you want. You used to love

competitions...” Who can cheat better? Who fucks the best 10s? Who lasts longer in bed? Who can fuck you better than me, Valentina, huh? Tell me, and I’ll cut off his dick. All the things he used to say to me swim back to the surface, and I want to scream.

I’ve been compartmentalizing lately. My father’s death. Aris’s uncertain future. Penelope Jade. Who am I? I’ve lost sense of it all, and I’m a walking time bomb, ready to explode. Uncle Jordan should have a closer look at me next time he sees me. I’m a threat to the palace with my tendencies.

“Why are you so distant?” he asks, catching up with me as I swim away from him. “We’ve got a child together. We’re married. You can hardly blame me for my accident. It’s been proven that it was an attempt to kill... me.”

I dip my head below the water, contemplating whether I should just stay down here forever. I don’t want to talk to Aris. He asks too many questions, and I’m too lazy to explain our previous life to the vanilla version of my husband.

“It was an assassination attempt like the one that got your grandfather killed. We were supposed to be in that car with you, Penelope Jade, and me. That night I craved strawberries, so I went with Kamila. Plus, I wanted to snoop on her relationship with Alex and Fylox.” I push back my dripping hair from my face. Fuck. We haven’t told him about his sister’s polyamorous relationship. I add, “I don’t even know where we stand anymore. You missed so much while you were away.”

“Yes, but that’s not my fault. I’m trying to make up for the missed time, but you keep pushing me away.” He sighs. “You don’t want to talk about what happened before. It must’ve been bad if you’re acting this way, and I don’t know what to do to change this trajectory. They tell me about you. They say we had plans. I don’t see any of that. You’re behaving as if I’m a curse.”

“You’re more than a curse,” I comment.

“What am I then? If you don’t want me to be your husband, we need to find a way to raise Penelope Jade.” I’ll

never get over the sound of our daughter's name coming out of his mouth. It's the greatest gift... Oh, fuck off. That's the cockroach talking. That's not the Valentina I became after he broke my heart the first time. Aris goes on, "There's an entire entourage out there, waiting for our next move. They have expectations. They are my family, but, somehow, they're putting you first. I don't mind that one bit. I wasn't here when I promised I'd be here every step of the way. I don't care about their expectations. I want to make whatever's wrong between us right."

"It's not that easy," I reply. He doesn't respond, watching me intently instead. We swim for a little while longer, in silence this time. He imitates my moves, and, sometimes, I imitate his. I haven't swum with him in years. Before the accident, everything became too hectic. We fought a lot. With the king becoming more of a bitch than he already was, we barely saw each other sometimes. Then Mandy came to Katantia, and she was the catalyst for everything that went wrong.

"I missed swimming with you," I tell him, and his face lights up. The smile he grants me makes me feel warm inside. I don't want to like it, but I do. A little too much.

"Is that something we used to do?" he asks. His curiosity is absurdly amusing. The new Aris asks genuine questions, seemingly interested in our relationship. It fucks with my heart.

"Occasionally," I reminisce. "Back when I was fifteen, we had this thing. You signed me up for this advanced swimmer class, and every other week, you tested my growth. I don't think you ever swam with the intent of mastering the art of it, but you always beat me to it out here. You were never a gentleman even back then. I don't know what I was thinking..."

I quit rambling because I, once again, revealed too much, and I notice that something in my speech gave him a case of cruel astonishment.

“I’m ten years older than you,” he states. I nod. His tone is weirding me out. “Did I touch you inappropriately when you were fifteen?”

The question catches me off-guard. He can’t see the devastation I feel. “No, you never touched me inappropriately when I was fifteen.”

“So we were friends?” He’s not buying what I told him.

I study him. He’s not at fault for what the old Aris did. The least I could do is be honest about some things. Not all of them, he’d freak out. The vanilla Aris would feel completely distraught. “When I was eleven, your sister tried to commit suicide.”

“Nobody told me,” Aris comments. His face falls, and I can’t look at him. For real? I can’t deal with a sentimental Aris. I won’t survive it. I hope he doesn’t ask me the reason behind her suicide attempt. It’s not my story to tell.

“You were devastated,” I tell him, reliving the feelings I’d had for him at the time. It was a silly crush that later turned into a full-blown obsession. But at eleven years old, I could only make starry eyes and nod at everything he said. “And I made a silly joke. I liked you a little too much, and I compared us to my parents. There were many things wrong with Felicita and Travis’s relationship, but they never fought in front of us kids. Mom always comforted Dad when he was sad and vice versa.”

I take a deep breath. I don’t know how he’s going to react to what I’m about to say next. “I asked you to marry me so that I could make you feel better.”

Aris doesn’t speak for a while. I can’t decode what his face is telling me. Is he ashamed? Embarrassed? Is he staring at my tits, or why are his eyes lowered?

I decide to continue our walk down memory lane. “You accepted.”

“I’m sorry.” Funny, that’s what my standard sentence was back then. I apologized for everything. Sometimes, I even apologized for my existence.

“You accepted, and for four years, I went on to be the happiest little teenage girl out there. Before you have a mental breakdown over it, back then, your family hated my guts,” I tell him. Tears threaten to spill out of my eyes, but I hold them back. Vanilla Aris or not, this man doesn’t deserve my tears. He can’t know how he ruined my childhood with his later revelations. “I had the biggest crush on you while you acted the big brother you craved to be for your sister. Apart from a few stolen kisses on my forehead, which I cherished, by the way, you never touched me inappropriately. We weren’t sexually involved until you returned from Cambridge. Don’t patronize yourself about it.”

“How could I accept a little girl’s proposal? That’s disgusting,” he inquires. I’m confusing him, and he’s more affected by this than by our baby being sick. I’m doing something to his psyche. I’m certain that he woke up from his coma feeling like a white knight, and I’m making it look like he’s the bad guy.

He is. That’s not my fault.

“Your family hated my family.” I can’t tell him about his mom and my dad. Not yet. I don’t think it’s my story to tell. Let his siblings carry that weight. “You decided to break my spirit by giving me everything I ever wanted and then turning it into my worst nightmare.”

I quickly add, “Don’t ask any questions you’re not ready to hear the answers for. You might not understand the dynamic of our relationship now. With the new developments, you might never fully grasp what went on between us. All I ask of you is to quit looking at me like you pity me. I can’t deal with that. We had a complicated relationship, but we both did fucked up things to end up where we did.”

“I don’t know what to say to that,” he admits, stunned.

“Nothing. Don’t say a thing. Just keep swimming. Maybe I’ll warm up to you, and I’ll let you take me to dinner.”

CHAPTER 8

VALENTINA



EIGHTEEN YEARS OLD

I CUT MY INTERNSHIP SHORT. I'VE BEEN HIDING IN MY ROOM for weeks now. I barely leave the house, only when my mom drags me out to go grocery shopping with her.

“Strawberry?” Dad’s gentle knocks on my door make me rise from underneath the sheets. The pain inside of me stopped a couple of days after Aris did what he did, but I’m still in a state of limbo. I can’t process what happened. I can’t move on.

“Come in,” I say, wiping my cheeks in hopes that he’ll let the lights stay off. The blinders are shut, and I can only see the shapes of things.

Dad enters my room like a ninja. It’s as if he senses that I want to stay in the darkness. He offers, “I brought you your favorite strawberry gums.”

“I grew out of them when I turned sixteen,” I pout. I feel like crying.

“You’ll always be a baby in my eyes. Just take them,” he insists, handing me the pack. “How are you feeling today?”

Dad has the most exhausting job on Katantia, following around the king and doing everything according to his demands. Every night, before bedtime, he still comes into my room to ask me about my day. I answer, “I managed to sketch a little.”

“Do you want me to send it to Carmelo?”

I shake my head instantaneously. “No!”

“Strawberry, why are you afraid of Carmelo? Did he do anything to you? You never talked about what happened that night. If somebody hurt you, I don’t care if he were my own brother. I’d end them for you. You know that, right? Dad’s here for you,” he says, pouring all of his heart into it. He’s crouched down beside my bed. I wish I could tell him, but I can’t. He’d hate himself. Then, he’d try and end the prince. There is no future in which that ends well.

“Carmelo hates me now, doesn’t he?” I ask, swallowing back a sob. That night, I went home, put on a spare change of clothes, and then rode back to the South Side with Carmelo and Michele. I packed my bags, and I asked Dad to pick me up. I never returned to Carmelo’s home. I keep asking Dad about the repercussions, but he’s not telling me anything.

“No, strawberry. He doesn’t.” Nicknames are usually short and sweet, but mine is long and dramatic. I like being my dad’s strawberry. I’m special. Everyone else calls me a cockroach, but to Dad, I’m a strawberry. “I promised him that he gets to dress the first bride of the new generation of Wraiths, and he softened. Carmelo’s worried about you like the rest of us. Will you ever tell us what happened?”

“I tripped, and I fell...” On Aris’s dick. And it hurt—a lot. “You know these high fashion gowns. The fabrics are sensitive.”

“I’m not stupid, strawberry. You better remember that. Somebody tore that dress in two,” my dad claims. I fear that he knows and that he’s only waiting for my confirmation. I’m never going to tell my dad that his girl... I refuse.

“I would like to go to sleep now,” I tell Dad in a croaking voice. Lying to the man that has given up his pride to provide for my mom and me crushes me.

I can’t tell him how much it hurts, how betrayed and stupid I feel. The actual impact of my first time having sex is gone, but I still feel a piercing pain inside. It’s not real. It’s in my head. Yet, I can’t do anything to get rid of it. Crying makes it worse.

“When did you start hiding things from me?” He exhales, and I feel the hurt in his voice. “If you ever want my help, come to me. I’m here for you, strawberry.”

Dad leaves my room as he entered it, like a ninja. Quiet. Calculating. Like he’s not even there.



I’M FINALLY EIGHTEEN YEARS OLD.

Scorpio season is here, and I feel like a renewed version of myself. Aris hasn’t shown his pretty face, and I feel stronger.

My parents got me a new sketchbook, paired with the most luxurious pencils. I think they have real diamonds on them. I can’t wait to perfect my skills with my birthday gift. My brother didn’t get me anything, but his mere presence at my small birthday party was enough. He didn’t moan around or ask to go play with his online buddies. We had a sweet dinner and the best birthday cake ever. It’s not strawberry season, but Dad had them imported from somewhere. My mom baked my cake, and I got eighteen candles to blow out.

I didn’t wish for anything because the new me is done wishing on fairytales.

After my long day, I’m upstairs in my bedroom, all the lights are on. My laptop is playing one of Carmelo’s Milan fashion shows. I draw inspiration from the models, drawing their long legs with their cold visages. I’m into pants right now, so I draw jeans. Low waist, the way the celebrities used to wear them back in the day. I’m inspired by Britney Spears and her outfits in the “Overprotected” music videos.

At some point, I notice my dry throat, and I realize that I’m out of water. It’s after three at night, and my brother must be the only one who’s still awake. Dad made sure that he doesn’t yell around at night or when he and Mom are home, so I can hear my brother murmur whatever curse words he feels like spitting at the screen.

As I strut down the stairs, I sing Britney's song to myself, shaking my body and flipping my hair back and forth. I was never invested in music while growing up, but in the past couple of weeks, I've found comfort in the songs Mandy and I used to listen to as kids. Mandy was obsessed with the Spice Girls, Destiny's Child, *Nsync, and Britney. She loved Britney and Justin together so much that I still remember her crying about their breakup. She also hated the Backstreet Boys while I loved them to death.

I wonder if I should ask Dad for Mandy's number. Perhaps some time away from this hellhole would do me good. Being back in the palace has me feeling muddled. Living in the house next to his has me jittery. It reminds me of his existence when I fight hard to forget him.

From the kitchen, I grab three chilled water bottles, and I turn to make my way back upstairs.

Only problem?

A man is blocking my way.

"Sweetheart." Where did he come from? Instead of feeling mushy about it, my body turns to fear. It seems like the songs and the drawing were nothing but a distraction from the trauma he's caused me.

"Get out of my house," I say in a hissy whisper. Dad would freak if he saw Aris here.

"Don't worry about Daddy. He's working overtime in the palace."

Fuck.

"What are you doing here?" I ask him, holding my three water bottles tight to my chest. He's seen me naked now, so hiding from him really doesn't do much. He stares at my pathetic arms in front of my chest, and I feel silly.

"I'm here to deliver on my promise."

I remember now what I should've wished for—a lifetime in solitude and away from this psycho.

"That was a joke," I remind him.

“It’s not very funny when you’re shaking that ass for everyone to see,” he comments. His gray eyes take in every inch of my body. I take a step back, crashing against the cold fridge. How long has he been in the house? I should tell Dad to install a security system. He’ll ask me why, and I’ll have to come up with a lie. I hate lying to Dad. He sees right through me.

“What do you want from me? You took... It’s done. Go fuck your fuckdoll,” I curse at him, refusing to look at him any longer. It physically pains me to see him. He destroyed all of my hopes and dreams, as childish as they were.

His snicker is malicious. “You’re coming with me, sweetheart. It’s time to become my bride.”

“I don’t want to.”

“You promised.”

“I was a preteen with a crush on a prince! I didn’t mean it!” I’m panting, on the verge of breaking down. I don’t want to cry in front of him, but he’s in for a show if he continues stepping closer to me. Deep inside, it stings. I’m reminded of the time he forced himself into my most private dreams.

He stole a priceless moment from me, and I’ll never take it back. My first time is forever tainted by him.

“Put the bottles down. You’re coming with me. You’re lucky I let you have your special day with your family,” he says. I swallow. Why did I never detect this cruelty inside of him?

“No.”

“You know that word means nothing to me.”

“Fuck you.” I throw a bottle at him, but he ducks. At the same time, he catches it so that it doesn’t make an alerting sound.

“I’m about to fuck you!” Anger spills from him, but then he calms down. “Come with me, and I promise that I’ll never touch you that way again. I’ll never take what you’re not willing to give me.”

“You think I’ll trust you again after what you did?” I’m holding on to the bottles like I’m holding on to the last bit of my sanity. What is wrong with him? He makes zero sense.

“You have to, or this will hurt.” It already hurts more than I can bear. He adds, “Forever.”

Something tells me that his words mean nothing. He’s untrustworthy. He doesn’t deserve my time or my tears. I think back to my music and all the joy I felt today. It was the first time I genuinely smiled in a long time. He thinks he can coerce me into marrying him after he took my virginity? After he... raped me? It was rape. I’ve been obsessed with him forever, but that didn’t give him permission to take and humiliate me like that.

I put the bottles away, and I finally meet his eyes. The tears that fall aren’t fake. They’re real, but they mean more than he can ever imagine. I beg, “Don’t hurt me again.”

“I won’t,” he promises, but we’re lying to each other. All the Wraiths do is hurt everyone in their vicinity.

“Will you let me dress up at least?” I ask in a whimper. Ugh, I hate how pathetic I sound.

“No, sweetheart. I’ve got it all covered. The documents are ready to be signed. Then we can go on our honeymoon,” he speaks to me in a gentle voice, as gentle as he did back when I was still head over heels for him. I’m tempted to buy into this charade, but I don’t. I play the part instead.

I nod like an obedient object, and I follow him into the night.

They say revenge is a dish best served cold. Lovely. Since my cooking skills are zero to nada, I’ll poison him.

I’ll make him hate the day that he attached my existence to his.



OUR WEDDING IS AS SIMPLE AS TWO SIGNATURES WHILE A government official is present. I can already sense that he'll be getting fired over this, but I stay mum.

The climax of my teenage dreams is underwhelming. I envisioned a massive wedding ceremony where the king scowled at everyone and anyone. Instead, I get to hold hands with Aris as he walks us back to his Ford Mustang GT.

I decide that it's for the best. If there's no big wedding, I can't stand here and act all heartbroken. I can pretend like it's all for show, which was the plan anyway.

"I always wanted to make you mine," Aris confesses once we reach the car, and I lose balance, gutted over his words. In a surprising turn of events, he opens the door for me. I slide into his car, and the familiar reek of weed creeps up my nostrils. I take frantic breaths while he jogs to the driver's door.

He takes his seat next to me, and the engine comes alive. I must admit that I feel good where I'm sitting, but I don't let it impress me. I'm in my pajamas. I'm Aris's object now. We're driving off into the sunset, but what we're really doing is running away from our parents, who will definitely kill us for what we just did. Cross and Wraith are now united, for better or for worse.

I should feel trapped now that I'm his, but I don't. Why? If he thinks he can be a monster, just wait until I unpack my claws. My dad is nice and sweet to my mom and me, but there was a time when he was the most ruthless man I knew. And I grew up best friends with Mandy Rawlins, daughter of the scariest monster of all, Spencer Rawlins.

Possessively, his hand grips my thigh as we ride to the gates of the palace.

"So you've always loved me?" he asks, and I ignore the vulnerability in his tone. He sounds so insecure that I almost pity him.

"Yes, definitely," I tell him, feeding his ego. I loved him for a long time until I realized how fragile my heart was for

him. Carmelo and Michele made me accept that I'm more than my fantasies of marrying the prince.

"Did you know the first time you saw me?" he inquires.

I don't want to tell him the truth, but I fear that he already knows it. "Yes."

"I felt something for you, too. I just couldn't name it. I'm not into kids, and you were the most delicate girl I'd ever laid eyes on. I couldn't stand the verbal abuse you suffered from everybody behind Travis's back. My sister truly disappointed me when she called you a cockroach." Synonym for the pitiful victim, but I let it slide. "I didn't know what it meant in the long run, but I wanted to protect you."

"That's what they all say, isn't it?" I respond, sounding more bitter than I had planned to. He sounds like the man I fell in love with, so I attempt to steer the conversation away from his bragging. Yes, I wanted a protector back then, and I still do now. My dad is the perfect example. But Aris phrases his thoughts like a spoiled prick. He doesn't have an inch of my dad's fatherly instincts.

"You think I'm into kids? Are you crazy?" He removes his hand from my thigh, gripping the steering wheel instead of my flesh. I take note of his disgusted reaction. I know it's below the belt to accuse somebody of child abuse, but I have to keep my options open.

"I think we're both crazy," I say to soften the sneer comment. "Crazy for each other, isn't that right?"

"If you think... Fuck. That's disgusting." He sounds positively appalled, but I don't let it affect me. I'm a scorned woman on a mission. My dad's blood runs in my veins. I won't let no Wraith fuck me over. He did it once, catching me off-guard.

But I'm determined to keep it from happening again.

"What's disgusting is that you ruined my first time, but you don't see me complaining, do you? I married you, although I..." I'm interrupted by blaring sirens. We reach the gates of the palace, but they're blocked.

“Step out of the vehicle.”

“Get out now!”

We’ve riled up the palace guards around us. They’re not carrying guns, but they don’t have to. There’s only one weapon they need.

The king.

Speak of the devil... “You thought I’d let you get away with this?” His voice comes to us through the speakers at the gates. “You’re not going anywhere. What a fucking disgrace! I’ve annulled your passports. The jet’s off the land. You’re staying here, and you’ll play my fucking game now. You messed up, Aris. This time, I won’t let it go.”

Being a Cross and all, I should fear the king, but the only emotion he awakens in me is frustration. I hate him for overworking my parents. He and his dead wife brought my nightmare to life—a gray-eyed monster with dirty blonde hair that I want to sniff. Even now that I hate him, I want to dive my nose into his hair and breathe him in. Fuck, I’m insane. Dad will lock me up somewhere and throw away the key. I’ve finally done it.

“Sweetheart, I’m sorry.” His apology is needed but for something else. He needs to apologize for being drunk and mean as fuck while he took my virginity against my will. “I think our honeymoon’s canceled.”

CHAPTER 9

ARIS



PRESENT

I STAND IN FRONT OF OUR HOME, WAITING FOR MY WIFE TO come out.

Weston practiced driving with me in the parking lot of a Hole Store. I barely managed. He gave me the keys to an automatic car with an autopilot option. It bruises my ego that I need back up while driving, but I can't risk a car accident.

After hours of driving practice, Weston offered me a tour of the Hole Store, I turned him down, and he almost died laughing. I can still hear his amusement as I lean back on the car. He still hasn't explained what a Hole Store is.

My wife and I don't share the same bedroom, so I couldn't ask her for her opinion on what to wear. Aris... I have a lot to wear. My closet is bursting with choices, but I went with less flashy. I didn't put on a suit because I didn't want to scare the woman away. It's already a miracle that she agreed to go out to dinner with me. I'm taking her to a place Weston suggested. Italian. My brother and I called ahead. They've cleared the restaurant for our arrival.

I've got my credit card on me, although Weston assured me that I can send the bill to the palace. My card's code is on my phone, just in case that I forget it.

A million things are running through my mind. I consider asking Felicita to let us bring the baby. Penelope Jade is our daughter, after all. She goes where we go. But then again... I'm just trying to fix our relationship.

While Pen is an excellent buffer, she deserves to be the center of attention. So we'll just take her out next time, and we'll go out like a united family, not just two people with their baby.

My wife's mom steps out of the house first. Penelope Jade is with her, fumbling with the flower designs of the shirt her grandmother wears. When Jordan walks past the women, he directs a stare at me. It's intimidating because I've not regained all of my strength just yet, and I know that he's very familiar with guns. He's got an arsenal in the palace. Jordan could end me without a blink of an eye.

"Aris," he says when he reaches me. It sounds like I'm about to be put on a test. I feel like a teenager about to take his girlfriend out to prom. Did I ever go to prom? I need to ask my brother about it. We went to school together. "I don't need to remind you of the repercussions."

"You don't," I respond, sounding more secure than I feel.

"My men will be trailing the car. You won't even notice them." He steps closer, leaning into my personal space. "Felicita told me some things that I wasn't thrilled to hear. While I understand that Travis couldn't avenge his baby girl's honor the way he wanted to because of your father, I assure you that I won't hold back. The queen's on my side. She's my daughter-in-law."

How is that possible? Fylox isn't his son. I need to make a list of questions, grab Felicita, and have her answer every single one of them.

"I don't intend to disrespect my wife, sir," I say.

"You better not." Then he steps aside, just in time for my wife to appear at our house entrance. She cuddles our baby, saying something that I don't register. I watch as her red lips move, and I struggle to keep it together. She's a walking wet dream, but I don't want to give in to these urges. Not when her uncle is threatening my life if I hurt her. I especially don't plan to disrespect her in the presence of her mom or our baby.

Valentina's black heels make her legs look endless, giving her more height. She's decided to put on a slick short black dress that definitely exceeds whatever I'm wearing. Her raven hair falls over her shoulders in waves. She looks like the most radiant star I've ever encountered. Suddenly, I feel underdressed. "Fuck. I should change..."

"I've been told she likes to steal the show. Let her," Jordan advises me. I don't know if he's on my team or not. I don't want to fuck it up with my wife before I even had a chance. I take a deep breath, and I adjust myself as casually as possible.

Valentina walks towards me like a cougar, elegance in her stroll and seduction in her gorgeous eyes. She's dressed up as if I'm taking her to a royal event. And. I. Don't. Mind. One. Bit. Fuck, she's hot.

When my wife reaches us, she hugs her uncle. He says something to her that I don't register. I'm too distracted by her body to pay attention. I fight against the urge to stare at her some more.

Jordan leaves us, rejoining Felicita and the baby.

We're finally alone.

"Hi," she greets me with a shy smile.

"You're beautiful," I blurt out. Fuck. What else was I supposed to say? She's my wife. I apparently own this woman, but I can't wrap my head around the fact. I feel like a selfish bastard. It feels wrong to have her to myself.

"Thank you."

A moment passes, and then I remember our plans. We walk around the car, and I open the door for her. I feel the eyes that are watching us, physically and digitally. Weston made sure to remind me that big sister is upon us.

I sit down at the driver's seat, but I'm momentarily baffled.

"Don't be so nervous, Aris," she comments as she clicks in her seatbelt. "We've done crazier things than have dinner together. This should be easy."

"I feel like I'm going to mess this up," I confess.

Her light chuckle soothes me. “You’ve never been this nervous around me. You always led the way. I’m tempted to like this new you.”

Something tells me that this isn’t the first time I’ve been nervous in her presence, but I don’t argue with her. Instead, we hit the road. As expected, Jordan’s men follow us in their car. Once we’re on the highway, I speed, and it feels good.

I park in the underground facility that my brother showed me. It’s empty with the exception of five cars hurdled in the corner. I’m guessing that’s the staff.

Before I can open my wife’s door, she’s already outside of the car, waiting for me.

“Can I hold your hand?” I ask her, and I feel like the worst husband ever.

“Yes, you can.” The comment’s right there on her tongue, but she keeps it in. Valentina makes a lot of sexual commentary that’s sarcastic or serious. I can never differentiate between the two.

I can’t shake the feeling that holding her hand feels like a hard-earned privilege.

Once we reach the top of the building, the restaurant owner is already waiting for us outside of the elevator. He greets us like old friends, but Weston told me that anyone on Katantia will behave like that in front of the royals.

He shows us to our table while I hold my wife’s hand. I notice that he watches her a little too closely, and it stirs a profound sentiment of jealousy inside of me.

Our table has a splendid view of the Katantian city, and I waste a moment to observe it. Then I turn my attention back to the highlight of my new life. Our drinks have been poured. The best champagne that there is on Katantia, imported as always.

“There’s a famous whorehouse that you used to frequent a block away from here,” my wife says.

“Okay?” What am I supposed to do with that information? “I don’t recall this neighborhood. Weston had to show me around.”

Valentina nods. She’s wearing diamond earrings that sparkle at me. I can’t stop looking at her.

“You know, you’ve never asked me if you could hold my hand,” she tells me, playing with her glass. She bites her lip that’s coated in red lipstick. I can envision those lips around my cock, but I try hard not to. I’m already worked up enough. I feel like pouncing on my wife in the middle of this restaurant without any respect for boundaries.

But I don’t. It doesn’t feel right.

“There’s always a first time,” I say. Weston told me to lay off the alcohol. He offered to pick us up if we both wanted to get drunk, but I declined. I’m a little bit lost, but that doesn’t mean that I need my younger brother to chauffeur us around Katantia.

“It feels like we’re dating,” she claims. Her dark eyes watch me curiously. “We never dated before.”

“Like I said. There’s always a first time.” After we order our food, I feel more at ease. I don’t like the stress I feel, so I take control of myself. “Tell me, what do you like to do outside of swimming?”

She doesn’t respond right away, taking her time. “I like fucking, drawing, and messing with you.”

I’m taken aback by her blunt answer. “That’s... intense.”

“Intense is my middle name,” she responds, smirking at me.

“I’m starting to get that.” I add, “What do you draw?”

Valentina starts talking to me about fashion, Italy, models, and the internship that changed her life. I study her as she opens up, and I notice that she looks happy. It’s a rare occasion that my wife gleams while in my presence, so I let her speak about her passion for as long as she wants to.

She doesn’t bore me one bit.

We eat while she shares anecdotes about a crazy Italian fashion designer that she worked for when she was younger. He was obsessed with Italian coffee, and he fed my wife authentic Italian pizza. At some point, she mentions a birthday, making me realize that she wasn't yet eighteen when she was interning with that man.

I pay our bill with my credit card. It's the first time I've paid for something since I've woken up, and it feels freeing. We depart from the restaurant holding hands again. I refrain from kissing her in front of the staff just to show them who owns this woman. They don't get to eyefuck her in my presence.

We reach the car, and I take us back home. The guards fall in line behind the vehicle.

"My mom took Jordan and the baby to her house," Valentina reveals once we reach the palace's gates. We're thoroughly searched, and it takes us some time to pass security.

I process the information she's given me. "We have the house to ourselves."

She nods.

CHAPTER 10

VALENTINA



I'M MADE OUT OF BUTTER, AND HE'S MAKING ME MELT.

All night long, he's been the prince that my teenage self so urgently dreamed of. He's been watching me like he can't get enough of me. I chose my clothes with the intention to tease him, and it worked.

Aris has never heard me speak about my fashion experience. I hid my passion for so long. I haven't even discussed it with Mandy, and she's reinstated her best friend status in my life.

Tonight, Aris has been the perfect gentleman. I don't know whether I should indulge or keep my distance. He makes me want to drop to my knees and mess up my lipstick all over his cock. But I don't. I know that he's restraining himself because he thinks that's what I want.

In reality, I want him to pin me against the shiny new car and fuck the life out of me like he used to when we still had the Ford Mustang GT.

Aris parks the car in front of Kamila's former house. I hope that our family isn't glued to their windows watching us. That would be embarrassing. Aris is already nervous enough around me.

He takes my hand as we walk back to our house, and I steal a glimpse at my old home. The girl that lived in there stayed up all night, envisioning this moment. Holding hands with her prince and looking pretty while she goes home with him.

“Will you stay in our room tonight?” he asks.

“If you want me to.”

“Of course, I do.”

I swallow at his eagerness. We’re past the age of teenage horniness, and I have to admit that I haven’t felt a sexual urge since his accident. Now, as I watch him kick off his shoes, I feel a sudden spark. I want to jump his bones while he’s still like this.

He takes me upstairs like I’m not a permanent resident of the house.

“I feel like a hooker,” I tell him, and he immediately freaks out, ready to apologize. “We played out a lot of scenarios when you were kinky.”

“I’m not kinky anymore?” he asks, his eyes wide.

“I call you Vanilla Aris, like Vanilla Ice, but less scandalous,” I confess.

“Is that an insult?”

The old Aris would think so. “I’m just messing with you.”

“We can do kinky if that’s what you want.”

I clear my throat. “I don’t feel like you’re comfortable with our old levels of kinkiness. It’s fine, though. I’m good at reinventing myself.”

We reach our bedroom, and I immediately storm the walk-in closet for my silk robe. He stands in the doorframe, watching me. I don’t feel ashamed of my body anymore. I grew out of it the moment he... Yeah. That was what I wanted to forget for the night. I shake the thought of my first time having sex away.

My body has changed after the pregnancy. I suppose it’s good that he doesn’t remember the old me. This is my body now, with scars and all. I’m broken, but my baby makes me feel whole. I have changed, but Penelope Jade makes it all worth it.

I slip out of my dress, and Aris can't take his eyes off of me. I put on my robe, and then I remove my panties.

"You don't play fair," he claims.

I tilt my head. "You haven't seen nothing yet."



VANILLA ARIS IS LESS AGGRESSIVE THAN KINKY ARIS. HIS kiss makes me feel like I'm floating in candy land. It reinstates all of my teenage dreams. I let him feast on me the way he wants to. We just ate a delicious meal, but Aris has a go at me like a man starved.

It's exciting to be with him again. I must admit that I missed him even if he's not really himself.

In the past, Aris gave head the way I gave it to him, blowing his brains out. When he dips in between my spread thighs, he's tentative, like he's exploring me for the first time. It feels like he's never fucked me before. It's a curious sensation.

"Your pussy tastes divine."

"Well, thanks," I respond. He's never complimented my pussy like that. The only thing he told us in the past was how he owned my mind, my pussy, and my soul.

"How many women have I slept with?" The question comes out of left field, and I find myself frowning.

"I can't give you a concrete answer. You spent most of our marriage fucking other women. Before that, you were the most eligible bachelor of Katantia..." We had a tumultuous time. We loved annoying each other. It started out as my revenge plan. Then it turned into a tradition. Until Mandy visited Katantia. It all stopped when Mom was hospitalized because of his fucking father...

"I cheated on you?" He removes himself from my pussy, and I feel cold.

"It's not exactly what it sounds like," I add quickly.

“You still want me? Do you trust me after I cheated on you with half of the population?” He sounds serious, and I’m worried. I’m naked in front of him, and he wants to discuss our past? What have I done wrong?

“Aris, please. Don’t do this.” I feel like crying. I haven’t felt like this in years. Sex was our happy place. He made sure that I felt that way after he robbed me of my first time.

“Don’t do what? Hold myself accountable?”

I shut my legs close, pulling my knees to my chest. I don’t say a word. I should’ve fucked him in the car while he wasn’t asking any questions. Now, the old Aris is back at it, ruining things.

“What was in it for you?”

I respond, “What do you mean? I’m your wife...”

“You wanted me for my status? You’re a gold digger, aren’t you?”

I’m officially stunned. I sob. “What you just said hurt me more than any of your cheating ever did.”

I stand up, refusing to glance at him. I’m glaring. This night turned out to be a disappointment. Fucking Aris. He can’t even keep his mouth shut for once. I put on my healed slippers. The ones I used to wear before I got pregnant, and I strut out of the room. Why did I even entertain this? He’ll never change, Vanilla Aris or not.

He lives to hurt me.

“Where are you going?” I hear him yelling from our bedroom.

“I’m taking my baby, and we’re going to the palace. I need some time... away from you. Don’t come looking for us. I’ll tell Kamila to ban you,” I respond, raising my voice.

“But I’m the prince.”

I reply, “And she’s my baby’s aunt. And the Queen of fucking Katantia.”

CHAPTER II

EIGHTEEN YEARS OLD



EIGHTEEN YEARS OLD

IT'S CHRISTMAS, AND I'M EXHAUSTED.

Of course, on Katantia, the royals don't celebrate. They don't believe in God or Santa. I'm in a hotel suite with Aris Wraith after a long day of meetings and socializing. In the past two months, the king has attempted to humiliate us by parading us around the country like we're his cattle.

What the king doesn't know is that his plan of humiliation works fine for me.

By the end of each day, we're both so out of it that we can't even look at each other. He's on the one end of the suite while I sleep in my own room. I never see him unless we're fake kissing for pictures or making up an elaborate story about how we met in front of gossip journalists.

My revenge plan is coming along slowly. He doesn't hate me yet, but he will once I've unleashed the beast.

I suck and bite on the strawberries that I had room service bring me. It never snows on Katantia, and I'd love to have a little bit of snow in the wintertime like I did in my childhood. I'd even weather a storm. Hell, I'd walk out in a bikini in the middle of December. I'd do just about anything to feel an honest change of weather.

The good thing about being on the road is that I get to have my privacy. The king has banned us from the palace until we finish our tour of the country. Not that the country is that big; the king's just a mean fuck as per usual.

In my downtime, I listen to music, and I sketch. I've been getting better, and my birthday gift is certainly helping me. During the day, I hide my sketches in the same cupboard where I keep my female hygiene products. Aris will never touch that area, so it's a foolproof plan.

I'm in the middle of drawing my childhood heroes, aka Kevin from the Backstreet Boys, wearing one of my designs when the suite phone rings. It's past midnight, and I don't know who'd even bother to contact me at this time. Rolling my eyes, I pick up. "Hello?"

"Valentina?" I don't recognize that voice. People call me by my first name now that I'm Aris's object. It's better than being called a cockroach.

"Yes?"

"Your father's here. He wants to take you home for Christmas," the receptionist claims. I sigh. Isn't it a little too late for a Christmas party now?

"Hand me the phone!" my dad orders loudly. Scratchy noises fill the line until I hear Dad's uncontrolled breathing as clear as day. He's an athletic man, so I can rest assured that he's out of it because he's upset. "Come down here. Don't make me drag you home, Valentina."

"I don't think I'm supposed to be home until the end of January," I tell Dad. He's been trying to reach me for so long, but the king and his separation tactics have worked brilliantly. I haven't had a sit down with my family in weeks.

"Do I look like I give a damn? Come down here, or I'm meeting you in your suite. I don't care if I have to rip his head off to get to you," Dad threatens, and the old version of him shines through. His ruthless attitude isn't playful. Dad has a murderous streak, even if we all pretend that he doesn't. He means what he says. As much as I hate Aris, I want to be the one to rip his head off. Preferably while we're fucking. I don't want my dad to hurt Aris.

"Okay. Please, calm down," I urge him.

Swiftly, I collect my sketches, my music player, some spare clothes, and I put them in a tote bag. I make my way to the private elevator, hoping that I remain undetected. Aris is snoring away in his room, and I thank the Christmas Gods for that.

As soon as the doors open downstairs, I'm greeted by my dad, and a receptionist that I'm sure has pissed his pants. Dad looks like a beast, worried, unkempt, and furious. However, once I step out of the elevator, he rushes towards me. He pulls me into a hug that I didn't know I needed.

"Strawberry," he says, and I feel the hurt in his voice. It breaks my heart that I did this to him. "I've missed you so much. I don't know what's happening anymore."

He lets me go, and we leave the hotel.

The road to the palace is short and empty. We don't talk, although I sense that he has a million questions.

Once we arrive at home, I'm surprised that I'm even allowed entry. Dad's scowl has us passing security with flying colors. He parks the car in front of our home, and he leads me inside. To my surprise, my mom is waiting for us, wide awake. The dining table is set with dishes that have gone cold. Mom sits at the table next to Dad's seat at the top.

"There you are," she exclaims with tears in her eyes. She rushes towards me, hugging me just like my dad did. I can feel her sobs, but I don't let them move me into sentimentality. I'm stronger now. I've got a plan. Aris will pay.

"What happened, sweetheart?" she asks.

"Don't call me that!" I cry out, too emotional and too defensive.

Dad steps forward. "Lower your voice. You're under my roof now, and you'll respect your parents like we taught you to. Answer your mother."

I frown. "Nothing happened."

Dad runs a hand through his short hair. "Don't ever lie to us again. It's taken me every ounce of self-preservation not to

hunt you down and drag you back home where you belong. What business did you have marrying Aris Wraith? Where did that come from? You're just a little girl. You've never... You never showed any interest in boys."

Crossing my arms in front of my chest, I chuckle.

"What's so funny?" Dad asks, and I feel a shiver run down my spine. He's never raised his voice at me like that before. Then again, I've never fucked up this way before either.

"I've been in love with Aris for years," I confess, and my mom gasps. I have to give them the story we're officially sharing with everyone else. They can't know the truth. "We started being intimate after I turned sixteen." It's important to mention the age of consent in our country. The royals don't stand for pedophilia. "We never came forward with our relationship because we knew our families would never accept it. Aris had proposed very early on. We knew we're each other's one and only. We waited until I turned eighteen to get married. Now, I'm his object, and I'm happier than ever."

"That's what you tell the press," Dad hisses. "I want the truth."

"It's the truth. I've loved him forever." That's not even a lie. I sigh. "I'm sorry for lying to you. I didn't think Aris would just come and sweep me away. I had expected a wedding, a ceremony at least. He surprised me as he did the rest of the world."

Dad is fuming, but Mom whispers something to him that calms him down. Briefly.

"Go to your bedroom. Tomorrow, we have our annual Christmas dinner. You'll help your mom in the kitchen," Dad orders. I nod like a good little soldier. I want to be his strawberry again, but I know that I've broken the bond of trust between us.

Mom and Dad remain downstairs while I head to my old bedroom with my tote bag in hand. I turn the lights on in my room, and I find my brother sitting at the edge of my bed.

“Look who’s back,” he scoffs. He’s four years older than me, in his early twenties, yet he’s accomplished less in his life than I have. And I’m a girl, destined to become an object that Aris gets to fuck whenever he pleases.

All Ryan does is sit around in his room all day, gaming on the internet. His face is nasty like he’s still in puberty, and he never really became tall like Dad. He’s the bleakest in our entire family, and I wonder if Dad gave him the same lecture as he did with me downstairs. Suddenly, I’m fuming. How dare Dad speak to me in that tone when he has a useless son like Ryan?

Other dads would kill to have Aris as their son-in-law.

“I want to go to sleep,” I inform my brother, gesturing for him to leave my room.

“Why? Did Aris wear you out? Have you been getting fucked down good this winter? Do you need to feel like Daddy’s little girl again?” Ryan asks, and I involuntarily shrink. He had such promise when we lived in Chicago. The girls in his high school loved his quirky nature. He was the intelligent nerd that everybody got along with for some strange reason. Now, he’s just a dirtbag.

“Leave,” I demand.

“I don’t take orders from Wraith whores,” Ryan spits at me, getting up from my bed. He’s not that much taller than me, but now that he’s standing, I feel him tower over me. “I thought you were different, but it turns out you’re just like Mom. A fucking whore. You spread your legs for the royals. They own your pathetic little body. You’re that cockroach everyone always said you were. You’ll never be the princess of this shithole.”

“Don’t talk about Mom like that! What did she do to you?” I ask. His words upset me. I put down my tote bag, ready to go to war with my brother. It’s been a while since I’ve been called a cockroach to my face, and I must admit that I like the thrill of it now. I’m not a cockroach anymore. I’m a woman. I’m married to the palace, and my big brother is just a fucking jealous dirtbag.

“Your mother fucks the king, whore,” he curses, and I’m positive that my heart has stopped beating.

“What did you just say?” I croak.

“Felicita Cross is the king’s whore. His cumdump. He fucks her all day, every day. That’s why she’s always so drained when she comes home!” Ryan reveals with excitement flickering in his devilish eyes. I can’t process what he’s told me. My mind is spinning. Christmas is ruined now, for sure. I should tell my parents he said those nasty things to me. Dad will punish him. He’ll take away his internet access. He’ll... God, I hope he beats some sense into him. Ryan hasn’t learned anything. People have been calling my mom names all my life. They’re just names. I refuse to believe in rumors.

“You’re lying!” I cry out.

“Every woman in my family has become a cumdump for the royals! I’m sick and tired of this shit! You were supposed to be better than that. I warned you, you fucking whore! I told you to stay away from him!” Ryan yells at me. I shrink in my place, unable to bring my newfound strength to the surface. My brother’s rattling me, shaking my body back and forth with his hands. I’m positive that he’ll leave marks on my upper arms. He’s digging his nails in, and I hope that he doesn’t draw blood. “You’re more than a cumdump for Aris! Do you hear me?”

“Shut up!”

He slaps my cheek with a force that I hadn’t expected from him. It hurts more than the entire catalog of Aris’s mistakes. At least Aris and I have an unspoken understanding. It’s sick and twisted, but... Not even Dad ever raised his hand on me. Where did Ryan learn this sort of thing?

My parents storm my room, pacing around like the four walls are on fire.

“WHAT DID YOU DO?”

I hear my family argue around me, but I’m nothing but a mess on the floor. I’m not even crying. Ryan’s outburst has catapulted me into a state of shock. If what he said is true,

every puzzle piece comes together. Mom and Dad are yelling at Ryan, trying to teach him a lesson, but he's not listening. He screams at them, throwing ugly words at them. Mom cries, and I can't even look at her.

While they're in the middle of their argument, I crawl outside of my bedroom, and they don't even notice. My face hurts from what Ryan said and from his hurtful actions.

I don't know where to go. I can't stay in my home anymore because it's officially not my home anymore. I contemplate whether I should walk back to the hotel, but it'll take me over an hour to get there on foot. Plus, I can't walk around without my owner like that. People are mean out there. They're not warmed up to our marriage yet.

Kamila's house isn't even an option. She's called me a cockroach in the past, and I don't want to ruin my mood even further. I decide to go to my new home. I haven't officially moved in yet, but it's my husband's home, so I stay here, too.

I knock on the door, and after a bunch of endless minutes, Weston appears. He's been mean to me as far back as I can remember, but he doesn't say a thing when he spots me at the door. It's the middle of the night. I'm not supposed to be here.

He doesn't ask a single question. He leaves me in peace. I decide to hate him less at that moment.

I find myself on the floor of their kitchen, near the fridge. I've grabbed a towel and ice cubes, pressing them against my face. I don't cry. I'm motionless and empty. Ryan broke my heart today. He broke my face, too. I'm not bleeding, but I might as well be.

"Sweetheart." I don't even bother looking up or wonder where he came from. I feel dead inside. Where did it all go wrong? Everything was fun and games not so long ago.

Aris crouches down beside me, but he doesn't touch me. I'm grateful for that. "Who put his hands on you?"

I don't answer.

"Tell me. I'll kill him."

“Like you killed Taylor, the Paris Hilton lookalike?” I snap. “I know you paid her to hit me.”

She told me so when I met her this past November during a promotional event of a famous collar brand. She’s married, too. Her husband’s low-level, compared to mine, but so is every other man on this land. She asked how my eye was doing and whether Aris makes it a habit to hit his girlfriends.

“I never paid her to hit you,” he responds, and I roll my eyes. Fuck him. Fuck him. FUCK HIM. I hate him so much. “I paid her to bully you. There’s a difference. When she hit you, I had her punished. She was supposed to marry this big Wall Street guy, but I’ve made sure she never lives in luxury ever again. She can never leave the country, and she’s married to a drug-dealing criminal now.”

“Why did she have to get paid to bully me?” I ask, pressing the cold ice harder against my face. I’m frustrated, and I want to let it out on someone. I’m hurting myself. “Nobody else needed money to bully me. I was the cockroach, remember?”

He sits down next to me, and I slide away. I don’t want to be close to anyone right now.

“I’m an insecure bastard,” he confesses. I chew on his words, staring ahead at the kitchen island in front of me. “I wanted her to bully you so that I could prep you up. I wanted to be your hero.”

“You didn’t need cheap antics to be my hero,” I respond. The cold ice is giving me a headache. My own brother hit me. I can’t process it. “You were my hero already.”

“I didn’t want to believe that,” Aris admits. “Can I?”

“What?” I hiss, turning to face him.

He gestures at my face. “Don’t put so much pressure on it. You’re wet. How long have you been sitting here like this?”

“I don’t know,” I reveal. My shirt is ruined by the ice cubes, but I couldn’t care a fuck less. I hear my heartbeat, hollow and joyless.

“When Weston called me, I was upset that you left me. I didn’t know that you had left to get beat up. I disapprove,” he says, a slight amusement to his tone. I don’t find it funny. “You don’t get hurt like this. We’re in the public eye. You’re my object. Royals don’t stand for violence.”

“Oh, but you stand for rape?”

He shuts up.

“My brother told me that I’m your cumdump,” I state. He doesn’t comment, but I hear his breathing. It does something to me, but I refuse to soften up for him. “He also said that my mother’s the king’s cumdump. Is that true?”

There’s no reply.

“Answer me. Now,” I demand, running out of patience.

“They’ve been fucking for some years now. I never mentioned it because I don’t believe you want to discuss your mother’s sex life. I thought you knew or suspected it,” Aris finally responds. The amusement has faded from his voice. He doesn’t talk down on me. We’re on the same level. I guess I better enjoy it while it lasts.

“And my father knows?”

“Yes.”

“How? Why is this happening?” My eyes remain dry.

Aris bows his head. “I have no idea. My dad likes to fuck with people, I guess.”

That answer doesn’t satisfy me. At all.

Aris reaches for my thigh, and I flinch. He instantly removes his hand. “One day, you’ll understand. I’m not ready for that day, though. You should know that I’m never going to do what I did at my graduation party again. I was drunk, and I didn’t know what I was doing. You’re my object now, and I’ll take care of you. I’m honored that you’ve chosen to become my responsibility.”

“Stop,” I urge him. He’s talking and whining, giving me more headaches. I need silence. I want to be alone. My plans

have gone to shit. I need to strategize.

“Sweetheart. Whatever you need...”

CHAPTER 12

ARIS



PRESENT

WESTON AND MANDY STARE AT ME LIKE I'M A NUTCASE. We're on the front porch of Kamila's home. They're sitting on the stairs while I pace in front of them.

"I fucked up," I state.

They nod in unison. Mandy's leaning against Weston's body while he's got his arm around her waist.

"I didn't mean to say what I said. We had a great night. I don't know what came over me," I blurt out. Valentina left the house, picked up our baby from her mom's, and went to the palace where she's under the protection of my sister now. I can't enter without their permission. "It just felt wrong, touching her. I was looking forward to it all night, and then I said those horrible things. It was a moment that came out of the blue. I don't know what's happening to me. Penelope Jade awakens this sadness inside of me. I have no fucking clue what to do with it."

"Sadness?" Mandy inquires.

I nod. I address my brother. "Did I have any other kids?"

Weston shakes his head, but he's lost in his thoughts for a moment. "To my knowledge, Penelope Jade's your first child."

"I feel like I've had another kid, though," I insist.

"We lived in one house for years. I would've noticed," Weston states, unable to see past his stubbornness.

“A married couple can keep secrets,” I say, running my hand through my hair. I didn’t shower when she left. I still taste her on my lips, and I don’t want to lose that.

“You guys didn’t...”

Mandy speaks up. “Stop, the both of you. Weston, you’re his brother, but he had a wife. They might’ve gone through something that you had no idea about.”

“What are you hinting at?” I ask.

“You’re sad when you look at Penelope Jade?” Mandy asks. I nod. “Maybe you guys had an abortion.”

“An abortion?” Speechless, my brother stares into the abyss. “That’s impossible.”

“Nobody accepted them as a couple. Maybe it wasn’t the right time to have a child at the time,” Mandy suggests. She untangles herself from Weston, glancing into his eyes. “Is there anything you can remember?”

Weston hesitates. Then he exhales. “After you came back from your wedding promo tour, you changed.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Aram exiled you from the palace after he found out you two got married behind everyone’s backs. You went on an exhaustive tour of the country, parading around various events to showcase your union. From afar, it looked perfect. Valentina seemed madly in love with you. You were positively infatuated with her. The Cross family celebrated Christmas back then, and they brought back Valentina for the night. They had a big fight, and she came out battered. She was sobbing on our kitchen floor for hours until you picked her up to take her to bed.”

Weston goes on, “I didn’t see you the next morning because you had already left. I heard noises in the night, but I didn’t want to check on you because you were newlyweds... I didn’t want to see you two fucking. After that, another month passed until you came back to the palace for good. At first, you seemed like your usual self. I made this big fuss about living with Valentina. Kamila did, too. I have to admit that we

hurt her in those first weeks. Actually, we trash-talked each other for years, not just those few weeks.”

Mandy doesn't look happy with what Weston's saying. She's a good friend to my wife, and she's seemingly hurt by what my family did to her friend.

“I had my phase of depression after Mom died, but you had yours after you got married,” my brother reveals. “A month or two after Valentina officially moved in with us, you started staying in your room for hours. You barely left the house the entire spring of that year. Valentina came and went. She seemed ecstatic, but I had no idea what went on with you. Honestly, we never talked about that time in your life. I didn't think much of it.”

“I can't shake the feeling that I've hurt Valentina,” I confess.

“Obviously,” Mandy mutters.

“I think I've done more than call her a gold digger.”

Weston stands up, matching my gaze. “You want to stay here for the night? You can try and talk to Valentina tomorrow.”

I nod, accepting the invitation. I've been doing great physically. I'm walking without a cane in record time. Yet, I can't say I'm fine mentally. I don't remember exact events. I remember what I felt at certain times, and it overwhelms me. There's something in me that I'm avoiding.

CHAPTER 13

VALENTINA



EIGHTEEN YEARS OLD

I'M LYING IN A COLD HOSPITAL BED, AND ARIS HOLDS MY hand like I'm about to fade away. He doesn't provide heat for me anymore. Now, everything he touches leaves me cold. Unbothered. He seems hurt by the revelations of the day, but I'm not buying it.

"Are you sure it's a miscarriage and not an abortion that you planned?" I snap at him. The male doctor standing at the corner of my bed audibly gasps. I don't like him. His sleazy hair can fuck right off.

"I would never..."

"I wouldn't be surprised if you did this. I don't know what you're capable of!" I cry out.

"Valentina, I would advise you to remain calm," the doctor comments. I sneer at him.

"You took my first time. Now, you've taken my first baby!" I try to free my hand from his hold. He's gripping my wrist with just enough pressure. He's not bruising my skin, but he's not letting me go either.

"You can leave," Aris dismisses the doctor.

"She needs rest," the doctor informs my owner.

"I'm aware of that. Prepare a false report for the palace. This won't be getting out. If the information leaks, you'll pay. The entire hospital will pay. If her dad finds out, you're dead," Aris threatens the doctor. I don't even bother to look his way.

He's probably pissing his pants. The Wraiths don't have to do much. Just a wave of a finger, and it's over for you. Hospital or not, if you hurt the Wraith family, you get fucked ruthlessly. "Get the fuck out."

I hear Aris's deep breathing. It doesn't soothe me anymore. I'm agitated at his mere presence.

"Look at me."

"Fuck you."

"I'm not a murderer."

"I don't believe a word you say." I rise from the bed in an attempt to get away from Aris, but the staggering pain won't let me. Everything goes blurry, and bile rises in my throat, scarring me.

Aris doesn't say a word. He waits for me to realize my doom. Whatever his plan is, I won't let him execute it. We were just fine a couple of hours ago. Hand in hand, we strolled through the farmer's market in the city center. It was a classic photo-op. Our outfits and make-up had been carefully chosen. We made out in front of the cameras. I enjoyed it a little too much, considering what I have in store for Aris once we return to the palace. He looked at me like I was his everything. In fact, he's been centering everything around me on this tour, and it freaks the fuck out of me. He can shove his guilt trip up his untouched ass.

We're almost at the end of the tour, and I'm waiting for him to slide into my bed with his sexual needs, but he doesn't. He stays away.

On our way back to the hotel from a grueling day of interviews and meet-and-greets, I started having abdominal cramps. I weathered through it, blaming it on my period. Then I realized that I haven't had a period in more than two months.

Ever since he took my virginity. By force.

I asked Aris to take me to the hospital, and he did. A doctor scanned my abdomen. We found out that I had been pregnant and that I had miscarried.

“We’re going home,” Aris announces. “I’m going to call up my father, and I’m going to tell him that we’re coming home. We’re taking a month off to deal with this.”

“I don’t want my father to find out about this,” I tell him. “If the king knows, my father will be next.”

“I don’t care who knows. We need time off, and they won’t grant it to us unless we give them a reason.”

“Where are your balls, Aris?” I mock him. “Did they fall off when you raped me? I hope they did.”

“Can you stop that?”

“No,” I state. I’ve just lost a baby I never knew I had, but in hindsight, she’s better off wherever she is now. She wouldn’t have had a happy childhood with us. We’re a mess. We live in hell. I should get on the shot to avoid this from ever happening again. “Did you know I was pregnant?”

“How would I know? We haven’t been tested in months,” Aris explains. I gobble down his words. He’s right about that. When we’re at the palace, we get tested every other week. They check blood and urine. The palace always knows about any sexual diseases we might have caught before we do. Out here in Katantia, we’ve been removed from the palace’s medical attention. Being in the hospital right now is the first time I’ve contacted doctors in months.

I refuse to let Aris know that I believe him. He takes my silence as a sign of disbelief when he adds, “I swear on my mother’s grave. I would never harm our child. I would never intentionally mess with your pregnancy.”

Aris doesn’t talk about his mother, but everyone on Katantia knows about her fate. She committed suicide in the early 2000s. It’s a sore subject for the royal offspring. Kamila is a druggie, Weston is a nerd, and Aris incorporates his country’s values the best. He got married, and he’s playing along with his daddy’s charades. But I know that Aris doesn’t want any part in that.

He loves his siblings more than he loves his father.

“I’m sorry that this happened to us,” Aris says. The temptation is right there. A lively, beating heart, and it’s ready for the taking. I can buy into his story, and the pain will go away. We can live happily ever after in the palace.

Or I can sour away.

I choose option number two.



ARIS MAKES IT SEEM LIKE I’VE CAUGHT THE FLU FROM ONE OF the international journalists that interviewed us after the new year. His siblings believe our story, but they’re not happy that I moved into Aris’s home. I know his father will dig around since we canceled the rest of the wedding promo tour. We had only two weeks to go, but Aram’s making it about the principle.

Three weeks pass, and Aris takes care of me like he did back when I wasn’t his wife, before my Carmelo internship.

He takes pleasure in feeding me. He watches me sleep. He gives me medication when the pain stuns me. For three weeks, I let myself feel like a cherished princess. I’m even giving him the goofy eyes that he was used to from when I was younger.

I become his object, through and through.

They say cockroaches can withstand anything. This cockroach hasn’t. She died before she turned eighteen. In her place, a vicious little monster is ready to soar.

There is no time for me to mourn the lost baby. Between being pampered by the prince and questioned by my family, I deflect dealing with it.

Soon, the doctors announce that I’m as healthy as can be.

Aris goes back to work. Since I’m his object, I don’t have to work. Instead of sketching and listening to music, I scheme.

My blood is boiling. I can’t trust my mother. My brother is a major dickhead who cares about no one but himself. My father tries, but his little strawberry has decayed.

It's almost Valentine's Day. That's the one Western tradition Katantians follow by heart. The airport gets busy in February. Hotels are booked out. The sex workers earn tons of cash.

The entire family works their asses off in February.

Kamila is so booked out that she isn't even available to be the king's whore.

I take advantage of my mom's period. I've researched the king's sexual habits well enough to know that he doesn't fuck my mom when she's on her period. He does so with Kamila because he's awful, but he spares my mom.

The princes aren't home. The staff is here, cooking and cleaning for us. I let them see me dressed up with my expensive red lipstick and tight fuck-me dress, all pretty and slutty. My lingerie lies safely tucked away in our closet. I'm bare. In my heels, I can reach the sky. Okay, that's an exaggeration.

I strut towards the palace with only one mission.

After today, payback will have been served. I don't care about sex. It only means something when Aris is the one fucking me. Anybody else leaves me unimpressed.

I've checked my dad's calendar, and I know that he's on airport duty, picking up famous people who come here to enjoy and promote Katantia to the wide world.

My wedding with Aris has solidified my status as a part of the palace, so nobody dares to question me when I enter the palace's elevators. I press number five, and I take a deep breath. I can smell my own perfume. I've poured it all over me. I'll make a lasting impression.

On both men...

I reach the fifth floor, and the receptionist greets me. I ignore her, heading to the king's quarters. As expected, he's in his office.

"What are you doing here?" he asks. There are no pleasantries exchanged. He notices my attire, and his eyes

alter. He puts aside the tablet in his hands.

“You want your son to pay for marrying me?” I respond.

Without hesitation, he replies, “Of course.”

His face reminds me of Aris. No other child of his has the king’s features but Aris. I hate Aris for taking after his father. I’m standing in front of the king, ready to cause a commotion, but all I can think about is Aris.

They’re not pretty in a royal sense. The king and Aris look wild, but they’re tamed by the palace’s confines. Kamila and Weston take after Queen Penelope, charming and regal on the outside. Aram and Aris are Katantian owners through and through.

“I want to negotiate a deal,” I reveal, taking a seat at his desk. He stares at me, dumbfounded at my relaxed attitude in his presence. I don’t owe him any respect. He’s fucking my mother, for fuck’s sake. He’s already doing the unspeakable. What else can he do to ruin me?

“I’m listening.”

“This deal benefits you,” I say. My voice has dropped, seductively dancing around the room in circles.

“I haven’t heard your terms yet.”

“You get to punish your son. You hurt him where it hurts most,” I add.

“I can hardly cut off his dick. That’s the Katantian prince. He’s of no use to me if he has no dick,” Aram claims. He’s so fucking stupid.

“Your son’s obsessed with my cunt.” The adrenaline that runs through me almost paralyzes me. It’s so potent—everyone in my family bows to this man. Yet, here I am, speaking to him as if we’re even. Ryan would freak if he saw me here. He’d probably beat me up some more.

“Is he now?” Aram is slowly catching my drift.

“I’m of no value to you. Kamila and Felicita are enough of a hassle. I won’t be added to your permanent fucktoy

rotation,” I state.

“That’s not up to you to decide,” he comments, smirking at me.

“Oh, it is. I have Aris wrapped around my little finger.” I’m exaggerating. He doesn’t notice, though. He’s too busy staring at my tits. They’ve grown even more in the past couple of months. “He’ll do as I say. Weston and Kamila don’t want what’s best for the country. You need a successor that will hold up your values.”

“Do you think I’ll sit here and discuss the future of Katantia with you? Who do you think you are?” Aram sits back on his majestic seat.

“I’m going to give you three gifts.” I take a deep breath. “The first gift is a one-time ride of any hole on my body. The benefits of such a gift? You get to brag in front of your son. You get to break his pitiful heart.”

As I say the words, I feel guilty. I power through it. I remind myself of the innocent love I felt for Aris and how he broke my heart by parading his fuckdolls all around Europe. I briefly allow myself to feel how he tore up my body when he took my virginity.

“My second gift is a second chance. I know you prefer Aris over Weston. That’s why you’re upset that he married me and not some other Katantian bimbo. Aris will start working harder for the throne with me by his side. I’ll make it happen. Thirdly, I’m going to give you our first child. Whenever you deem it fit, Aris and I will start trying for a baby. We won’t have children before you say so.”

“What’s in it for you? That’s a lot of gift-bearing.” He’s suspicious. Good.

“I get to hurt and manipulate Aris the way he’s hurt and manipulated me.” I grin at him. “Then, I get to take it all back and live as his object forever.”

“Is that all?”

I nod.

“Undress.” He rises from his seat. “We’ve got ourselves a deal.”

CHAPTER 14

ARIS



TWENTY-ONE YEARS OLD

“WOW, ARIS. I CAN’T BELIEVE YOUR DAD DID THAT! SHAME ON YOU!”

“YOUR FAMILY IS UNBELIEVABLE. SERIOUSLY. I NEVER WANT TO SEE YOUR FACE AGAIN!”

“BABE, CALL ME WHEN YOU’RE BACK IN BERLIN. LET’S HAVE A PARTY!”

“GIVE KAMILA A KISS FROM ME. IF SHE’S EVER TIRED OF OLD MAN DICK, SHE CAN HOP ON MINE ANYTIME, WRAITH.”

“I’M SO SORRY ABOUT KAMILA, BABY! I’M SO GLAD SHE DIDN’T DIE. I’M HERE FOR YOU. BISOUS.”

MY PHONE TELLS ME I’VE GOT THREE-HUNDRED UNREAD messages. After going through ten or so, I give up. It’s been three days since my sister’s suicide attempt, and the news cycle is still on her. She’s still under observation in the hospital. Weston is by her side. He’s the one who found her, and he’s taken it upon himself to be by our sister’s side.

I only found out yesterday that my sister was in the hospital. I spent my weekend partying at a friend’s house. Snorting coke and getting my dick sucked, that’s the way I pass the time. I’m supposed to be studying, but I’m more into wasting my father’s money on my college tuition.

There’s a knock on my bedroom door.

“Breakfast is ready,” one of the staff informs me. I don’t remember her name. The king makes sure to swap his spies in our house frequently. “Will you have your black coffee iced today?”

“I’m not hungry. Go back to the palace for the day. Tell the others,” I instruct her. It takes her a while to move away from my bedroom. I hear her steps fade in the background.

I haven’t opened the blinds.

Going through my phone again, I realize that it does nothing but depress me. All the ‘friends’ that are messaging me don’t care about my sister or me. They want publicity, a free stay at a luxurious hotel on Katantia where they can fuck their brains out on ecstasy.

I’m very well aware of that. I use these ‘friends’ as well. They’re bodies that I can fuck. Occasionally, they’re famous, and with a post on their social media, I can keep my country in the West’s discussions. Publicity stunts go both ways. My country might be secluded, but they still get pop culture.

I don’t know what I’m looking for on my phone.

The messages are meaningless, even the hateful ones. I know that my country will never live up to the West’s standards, and that’s okay. They don’t understand our culture. Up until the king started fucking Kamila, I was proud of my country. Now, I don’t care about it anymore.

Kamila is my big sister. She’s supposed to be the one who sets an example. She’s always been this badass princess that insists on doing things her way. I don’t know what went wrong and why father decided to spend time on Kamila and the Cross filth.

Perhaps I’ve started partying more to avoid dealing with my father’s actions and their aftermath.

My brother has been holed up in his room, studying his ass off, while I drank and fucked my way through Katantia. We both did whatever we could to avoid the storm that was brewing.

Now, we pay the price.

Weston and I have become the failures my father always claimed we were.

Reluctantly, I get out of bed. I can't leave the house looking like the mess I feel, so I shave my face, and I wash it well. I put on one of the casual suits that designers from Europe keep sending me.

Once outside, my gaze fixates on Kamila's house.

I don't know what I would've done if she had actually died. She tried to kill herself in the bathtub like Mom. She can't do this to our family. We're already walking on broken glass. She's just picked up a piece, slicing it through our hearts.

I take a deep breath. I'm not in the mood to drive. I stand on my porch like a fucking idiot. Running a hand through my hair, I inhale sharply. There are no orders from the palace. We're to stand back. Let the storm pass.

Shaking myself out of whatever's going on with me, I walk away from the houses and towards the palace. Then I take a left.

In a quiet space behind the palace, there is a small graveyard. The large trees provide privacy from prying eyes. I swipe my palace ID card, and I enter. I should've brought flowers. I never come here... My grandparents and great-grandparents have the most majestic graves. Engraved in gold, their names are flashing at me. The couples share a grave while next to them, my dead uncle's grave looks minuscule. He committed suicide after leaving Katantia, they say. We don't even know his name; Father never talks of him.

My mom's grave is the farthest away from the rest of my family. It's disrespectful how she's buried. While the other graves have fresh flowers and look polished, my mom's gravestone looks unattended. I curse at myself. I live two minutes away from her resting place, and I've only come here three times in over five years.

Katantians are many things, but they don't invade a person's privacy at their mother's resting place. So after I've

scooped up the dead leaves and the dirt, I sit down by my mother's grave, studying it. Beloved object and mother, it reads.

“Mr. Wraith?”

I flinch at the sound of my name. In my country, I'm either referred to by Your Highness or my first name. I tilt my head in the direction of where the words came from, and I see the youngest Cross girl. I try to be appalled by her. It's relatively easy to hate on her stupid brother. He annoys the fuck out of me with his video games and math skills. Her dad's a monster, and I wonder why my father's willing to work with him and fuck his wife. I guess Dad's an adrenaline junkie.

But the girl by the entrance is just another innocent. Her family has dragged her to Katantia. She doesn't know what will happen to her once she's eighteen. She has no idea about the concept of ownership.

I choose to ignore her. I return my attention to my mother. I came here for her. I sit in front of her grave because I seek guidance. My sister's never been one to play by the rules of the palace. She went out, she drank, she did drugs, and she meddled with the commoners. She has friends all over the country, while Weston and I can barely remember a face after we've fucked the hole. Then Mom died, and my sister got worse. She's been getting worse for years, and when the Cross family arrived, it escalated.

“Mr. Wraith, I'm sorry about your sister. My mom said that she had an accident. I hope she's doing okay. She's the most beautiful girl I've ever seen in my entire life.” The little girl has stepped closer, but I didn't hear her move. Her father must've taught her how to move in silence. He always creeps into spaces like that.

She's definitely getting on my nerves. Doesn't she understand the concept of a graveyard? She's disrespecting my family with her chatter. The Cross girl goes on, “And I've seen Amalia Rawlins, the most beautiful woman of the United States of America!”

I don't know who the bitch is that this thoughtless girl is comparing my sister to, and I'm not interested in finding out.

Without paying the girl behind me any mind, I stare at my mother's name on her gravestone.

"I like it when your sister takes care of her garden. She looks the happiest then," the girl continues talking. Her high-pitched and sing-song voice aggravates me. I don't feel happy right now. I'm sitting at my mother's grave. What's so difficult to comprehend? Does she want me to yell at her? "I also enjoy watching her when she comes back after driving around in her car! I can hear the music that she's always blasting. She has a nice singing voice. I wish I could sing, but I'm not that good at it. I'm better at sketching. I drew her house the other day, and my dad got me the new Hannah Montana CD."

Who the fuck is Hannah Montana? I roll my eyes, and I silently beg whoever's in charge to come and get that child. She's a threat to society. If I don't address her, she'll keep talking. "Get the fuck out of here."

That should do it. I've seen how the Cross family treats their kids. They never curse around them. As the prince, I'm not supposed to curse either. After a long moment of silence, I feel relieved. I've chased her off. I smile to myself, and I get comfortable in my solitude.

A loud thud and an uncomfortable outcry snap me out of my momentary peace. I snap in the direction of the sounds, and I realize that the Cross girl stumbled on her way out. By the gates, she's panting on the floor, visibly in pain.

I make my way over there. She's disturbing my peace, but I'm not enough of a jerk to leave her on the dirty floor like that. My family is right there. They'll make sure to make me pay for neglecting this poor girl.

By the time I've arrived, she's risen from the floor. She sways on the spot, shifting on her feet. Her dark hair is disheveled, half of it in her face. Her knees are bruised from the fall, and, suddenly, I feel like a dickhead. The girl's not from around here. I could've been nicer to her.

“Do you want to see a doctor?” I ask carefully. She looks at me, and the wilderness around us has got nothing on her. Her fierce eyes render me speechless. She doesn’t seem as playful and childish as she sounded earlier.

“Please. Doctors are for babies. I can take care of these sorts of wounds on my own. Dad taught me,” the girl responds. I’m ashamed to admit that I don’t remember her name.

“I snapped at you. I shouldn’t have. I was visiting my mother. This is usually a quiet place, and you caught me off guard,” I tell her, and she takes a step back.

Her eyes widen. They’re black as the night. “I apologize. I’m sorry for your loss! I better get going. I didn’t mean to... I was just checking on you. When you walked by our house earlier, you seemed sad. Anyway, I’m glad Kamila’s doing fine. She’s a tough girl. She can make it through anything, I’m sure!”

They haven’t told the girl that my sister attempted suicide. If they had, she wouldn’t be standing here like this. I don’t want to break the girl’s heart. She has an innocent livelihood about her that I haven’t seen in a while. “Yeah, my sister will be all right.”

“You don’t say it like you mean it,” she counters. I’ve never been caught on a lie before. People buy whatever I tell them. I’m impressed by the girl’s noisiness. Her father must’ve taught her to detect true intentions.

“Do you mean everything you say?” I ask.

She nods promptly. Shaking the hair out of her face, she offers me her hand for a handshake. “I’m Valentina Cross. I moved next door a couple of months ago. I don’t think I’ve been introduced to you just yet.”

No, we haven’t. Her dad keeps his children away from the royals. As he should.

“Instead of shaking hands, we should get you back home. You’re injured,” I point out the obvious.

“Are you going to stay here and be sad?”

I don't know how to answer that.

"I can stay with you. Will you introduce me to your mom? We can visit her together. I bet she was a pretty woman..." she mumbles away. Yes, my mom was a beautiful woman. My horny friends describe her as the most gorgeous creature to have ever walked on Katantia. Weston and Kamila take after her. I look like my father.

"I don't introduce strange girls to my mom. You have to be my..." She doesn't know about objects yet. I doubt Travis Cross had that talk with this girl. She seems too lighthearted. "Wife. I'd only introduce my wife to my mom."

"Oh well!" The girl's been knocked down. She possibly hit her head. All of that has her smiling at me, brighter than before. Her eyes are black as the night, and her hair matches that color, but she emanates a bright energy about her. She keeps staring at me, and it makes me uncomfortable. She's not staring at me like other people do. She seems to glance beyond the surface, and that's disturbing. She's only a kid. "I can be your wife. That's easy! Marry me?"

"In your dreams, sweetheart. Go back to your house. You're not supposed to be here." I already have obsessed fans. I don't need more of them.

Valentina beams at me with blushed cheeks. She turns away, leaving me in peace at my family's graves.



ARIS

TWENTY-FOUR YEARS OLD

I'M GETTING A BOAT FOR MY NEXT BIRTHDAY. SITTING BY THE beach, I feel the sand slip between my fingers. The beach calms me. One hand holds the spliff. I puff out the smoke. What the fuck am I still doing here?

The King of Katantia gave me an ultimatum. I've wasted half a million British pounds, which translates to one two-bedroom house on the South Side of Katantia, on tuition

money for distance learning. It's safe to say that I don't want to be like my brother. I don't give a shit if I graduate from Cambridge. Dad keeps pulling strings for me to finally graduate, but I never stop disappointing him. So he's giving me two options. Either I go to Cambridge and finish my studies, or I get kicked out of the palace and have all my funds taken from me.

Naturally, I chose to move to Cambridge to focus on my studies. It can't be that bad. London's two hours away. The nerds can't force me to stay on campus, can they? Weston lived in Cambridge for his final semester, and he told me horror stories of staying inside for an entire month. I could never do that. Fuck. I'll take cash with me, and I'll pay off some people to let me out. I got contacts on my phone for pussy; I'm sure I can find some local ones that fit the bill, too. I'll just have to keep the Katantia aspect quiet. The intelligent girls don't like fucking with us.

This birthday, I got a flight to Cambridge, and a fuck you for being so dumb. Be more like your brother, Aris. Be serious like Weston, Aris. Next birthday, I'm getting a boat, and I'll smoke spliffs out in the open, underneath the stars and shit.

"Happy birthday, Aris." I flinch. I never heard her coming.

She steps into my vision, all grown up. Her legs and arms are toned from all the swimming. The smile she's gracing me with does something to me. She's been flashing me that wide smile ever since I signed her up for the swimming class. She enjoys it way more than dancing with the daughter brats of the 1%ers of Katantia.

I've got another spliff in my pocket, but I decide not to get that high with Valentina present. I inhale what's left of my spliff, and I say goodbye to my dreams of welcoming my twenty-fifth birthday high as a kite.

"How did you know I was here?" I ask. I shouldn't. She's like her dad, sneaky and resourceful. Only when Valentina knows shit, I respect her. When her father acts like he runs the town, I'm annoyed.

“I followed your footsteps.” That’s some creepy shit that Travis taught her. I’m sure of it. “Plus, you always get high by the beach on your birthdays.”

I glance at the watch on my wrist. It’s one minute past midnight. “You can’t be here right now.”

“I am, though. You don’t have to be alone,” she says. Her black eyes are like sirens, so I avoid meeting them. She’s sucking my energy into her orbit, and I can’t have that. At some point in our acquaintance, things turned weird. On most days, I try not to acknowledge that she asked me to marry her when she was eleven. On days where everything’s gone to shit, marrying this little devil doesn’t sound so bad. For all I know, she hasn’t been touched by anyone. How do I know? I have my sources. Travis Cross isn’t the only stalker on Katantia. Valentina Cross could become the one thing I have to myself.

But she’s fifteen, and I’m officially twenty-five. It’ll never work. I don’t jerk off to images of her. I don’t let myself think about Valentina as a young woman. I’ve got too much legal pussy available to think about the one girl I shouldn’t even waste a thought on.

“I’ve got a present for you,” Valentina exclaims. She’s more tan than usual this year. The swimming out in the open did that to her. Being closed off in a dance studio or her tiny bedroom, she never saw the sun.

“What’s that?” She watches me cautiously as I take care of the spliff’s end. She’s been bugging me about keeping the beaches clean for months now.

“You get the chance to win a night race against me.” Valentina holds her head high. She stands in front of me like she doesn’t know my status, but I know she does. Everyone does. I can’t escape being the prince. Going to Cambridge, I’ll get a fresh start. I hope it’ll do me good.

I hope that I’ll forget about Katantia for a while.

Perhaps I’ll even stop obsessing over Valentina and her whereabouts. I can stop meddling with her life. She doesn’t

need a big brother. She already has one, although he doesn't give her the attention she deserves.

"I win races against you every day," I reply casually. "I don't need my birthday for that."

"You can't deny my birthday gift!" She gasps dramatically, reminding me of my sister. They have a lot of things in common. They should get along, but I guess Kamila showed what she thought of Valentina when she called her a cockroach like the rest of Katantia.

"Look, we have to talk after the swim," I say. We always have our talks where I remind her that she shouldn't broadcast her obsession with me. I don't tell her, but I'm obsessed with her, too. Not in the way she is; she looks at me like she's crushing on me. I just want her safe and tucked away in her room after a good day of swimming and drawing those strange clothes she likes drawing.

For two people living next to the beach with a love of the water, we always forget our swimwear. As always, she respects my privacy, looking in the other direction as I kick off whatever could hold me back while I kick her ass on this race. I dive into the water, headfirst. My body acclimates to the temperature promptly.

I stare at the broad horizon ahead of me while I hear her unzip her jeans shorts. Patiently, I wait for her to join me in the water. She never takes off her sports bra, and it's the only thing I can see through the dark water.

We do a couple of laps, and I pay attention not to lose sight of her. She's an experienced swimmer, but it's the middle of the night, and Katantian waters can be dangerous. After a couple of rounds, she declares that she's ready to win against me. I tell her to keep dreaming.

So we swim.

I give my all, and I don't even lose my breath. I feel comfortable in the water. So does she, but I'm older and more athletic than her. My endurance is top-notch, while Valentina distracts herself with enthusiasm. We've had races where she

just stops swimming in the middle of nowhere to gaze at the stars. Tonight, she swims, and she doesn't stop at any distractions.

On my twenty-fifth birthday, she gives me the gift of her winning against me. I ask her, "How did you do that?"

"I practiced all week, and I learned a new technique on how to breathe correctly," she explains. Can she tell how proud I am of her? Is it right to harbor those types of feelings for a friend? I want her to win. I want her to prove everyone who's ever called her a cockroach wrong. "There's this new boy my age from Australia. He's as fast as you, and I made him swim with me all week. When I started winning against him, I knew that I could finally beat you."

She never talks about boys. Momentarily, I lose my train of thought. There are so many things I want to tell her, but I refrain from doing so. Valentina has a family, a loving one at that. Minus the dipshit brother, of course. Her support system will provide her with the information she needs regarding boys. All I can do is swim with her and hope that she stops looking at me like she sees the real me. "I should hand that boy a medal. This is the best gift ever."

She nods. I swear she gleams at me.

After our swim, we dry off by the beach. We've put our clothes back on, and we're just waiting it out. I begin, "Look, I have something to tell you."

Valentina's black hair is wet and slicked back. She looks like a witch, and the night is her temple. She inquires, "Is something wrong?"

There's no easier way to state this. "I'm moving to Cambridge for a while. I have to finish my degree."

Her face pales.

"Sweetheart. Don't."

"Please, stay?" I can't deal with her begging. She sounds like she needs me here more than she needs air to breathe. That's not healthy. That's not what we are.

“I have to do this, or else I’m poor tomorrow. The king will take away my house and the money.” Surely, she understands that. Who would want me if I were poor? I’m nothing without my name and the cash I’ve lined up in the bank.

Valentina doesn’t respond, and I have no fucking clue how to deal with it. Her face drops, and she seems devastated. I guess she doesn’t want me to be poor. Well, I don’t want to be poor either, so I’ll do what I have to do. Others have done worse for money.

“You can’t leave!” she blurts out. Her black eyes water and I look away.

“I have to. It’s no joke.”

“But, what about me?” she asks. She transforms into the devastated and doubtful little cockroach she once was. I fucking hate it. I’ve told her to cut that shit.

“What about you?”

Valentina looks at me as if I’ve just torn her heart in two. “You don’t mean that. I can... It’s just the two of us here. I need you in Katantia. You can’t move to England! What am I going to do?”

“Deal with it. Stop complaining.”

When she starts sobbing, I step back. She wipes her tears with the back of her hand. I can see her heave. I bite my tongue, and I make a choice to leave her. I can’t deal with her show of emotions. They’re not real anyway. She just wants me home so that I can drive her around in the Mustang. She likes hanging with the prince too much.

Deal with it, sweetheart. I break hearts. I don’t mend them.



ARIS

TWENTY-EIGHT YEARS OLD

THIS ISN'T HAPPENING.

I can't believe that this is happening. I refuse. What the fuck is this?

With my arm around the lower waist of Nicole Petrova, we follow my father to the center of attention. The last-minute caterers have set up the most poignant table for us, golden touches everywhere from the glasses to the cutlery. The Katantian emblem shines in gold, displaying my father's pride. Is he really proud of my achievements, though? He isn't. He doesn't give a shit about my grade at Cambridge. He's been eyeing Nicole Petrova ever since we passed the gates of the palace a couple of weeks ago.

Nicole comes to bed every night, petrified that the king will pounce on her. She's a bisexual Russian supermodel who grew up in London but now spends her days jet-setting worldwide. We've been fucking on and off for a couple of months. It's not serious between us. She's generating bad girl press, and I'm keeping my name out there, attached to models, actresses, and influencers. I invited a bunch of girls to Katantia as my arm candy, but Nicole Petrova was the first that responded. Utilizing the first-come-first-serve principle, I gave her the spot. I haven't taken her back to my house. We sleep in the guestrooms of the palace to keep up appearances.

We've been having fun until now.

Valentina Cross sits at the far end of the hall, next to designer Carmelo Ciccone, owner of the up-and-coming Ciccone brand that Nicole Petrova is a fan of. I roll my eyes at this shit. Carmelo's son, Michele, has a huge social media following due to his disinterested and laidback nature coupled with a tall frame and a sculptured face. I want to break his face because he sits next to Valentina Cross.

She takes my breath away, sitting there like a sinner in her golden gown. She shimmers in the light, but her dark hair is as black as ever, contrasting her ghostly skin and elegant gown. Who did this to her? Who's doing this to me? Why the fuck is she sitting there like the Queen of the fucking palace?

“Aris? They’re ready for you,” Nicole whispers to me, leaning close to me. Suddenly, I’m repulsed by her touch.

There’s only one woman in this hall that I want next to me.

I spent my entire palace graduation party getting wasted. Not even my sister can keep up. She and Weston are chatting at the end of the table, looking cozy. I’ve grown apart from my siblings in my time away. I don’t like staying in contact with my family when I’m overseas alone.

Nicole has left me at the table while she freshens up. I can’t eat. I keep drinking. I don’t want to stare at Valentina, but I do.

“Can you stop staring at the cockroach?” Kamila comments. “It’s disgusting.”

“She looks like a whore. Where’s her family?” Weston adds. He hasn’t touched one drop of alcohol tonight. He’s the good brother. He takes care of his family while I get wasted and waste money. “I’d love to see what Mr. Travis Cross thinks about how his daughter has turned out.”

I keep my comments to myself. My gawking at her can be excused as curiosity. If I defend Valentina, my family will notice that something’s wrong. They’ll tear Valentina away from me.

I can’t have that.

Not now. Fuck. Valentina has caused me headaches in the past, but she never made my dick react to her presence. Not even the alcohol can kill what’s going on with me.

“Aris! I’m talking to you. Will you return to your job at the palace now?” Kamila asks. Look at us, talking to each other like we’re strangers. I blame Cambridge, but, honestly, college only made me see things clearer. I’m the black sheep of the family. My brother and my sister have their respective roles. What the fuck am I doing?

Nothing.

I’m sitting here, hard for a girl that I’ve watched grow-up. If there’s one disappointment in the family, that’s me. I’ve got

the most expensive arm candy of the night. Nicole Petrova wanted me to empty an entire Dior boutique in her honor before she stepped on the jet to Katantia with me. I spent money on my investment, yet I gawk at the Cross offspring.

As soon as my father starts doing the rounds of the most important tables, I excuse myself. Nicole has returned from the ladies' room, and she remains at the table. She's a talkative girl. She'll manage.

I leave the palace, and I find the gardens. I light up my joint in the cold of the night. I can hear the city and the traffic's highway from here, anxious and electrifying. I don't want to admit it, but I feel good being back on Katantia. I don't have to work hard for people to love me here. They just do. My title is enough of a reason.

Smoking while shitfaced isn't my greatest feat. My body doesn't react well when I do both, but I always do anyway. I smoke alone like I'm used to. Guards pass me by as they do their job keeping the palace safe.

I say I'm alone, but in reality, Valentina is in my thoughts. She doesn't want to leave. I've got an endless list of women in my memories. They don't suffice. One look and Valentina has erased their existence. The little Cross girl has changed. She's killed off the cockroach, and now, she's a tempting sinner that I want to taste.

This can't be happening. I decide that I'll hide out here until the festivities are over. I don't want to face Valentina tonight. I know she'll be excited to see me. She'll flash me one of her unconditional smiles, and my defenses will shatter.

An hour or so later, I'm riding on the high of my weed. My shirt's unbuttoned, and I've memorized the shape of each plant in the palace's gardens. I've been pacing around out here, distracting myself from the insanity that's eating at me.

I'm better than this.

Who needs Valentina? I'll call Kylie. Monica. Gigi. Anyone will do.

I hear cars close by. The guests have started leaving. I wait half an hour, then I make my way back inside. I avoid eye contact with anyone I cross paths with. Fucking hell, I'm a sweaty mess with an erection that I'm doing my best to hide, and I probably reek.

Once inside the hall, I spot Nicole. My tall blonde arm candy is chatting with Carmelo Ciccone. I told her to stay away from him, but I guess she couldn't resist. Nicole shakes Valentina's hand, and I can sense that my sweetheart isn't at all impressed by Nicole. Valentina's got murderous intentions, shooting daggers at Nicole.

My tall blonde arm candy doesn't notice. Let's rephrase that. She notices, but she does what every self-respecting cool girl does. She ignores it. She knows she's better off not engaging in pettiness.

I observe the scene until I can't stand it anymore. The Ciccone family is protecting Valentina like she's their fucking responsibility. She's not. She has a family. She has... me. They're nothing to V. I don't even know why Travis would ever let V out of his sight. Why the fuck does she need an internship? She's never going to work anywhere.

I calm my breathing before I stomp over there.

"Here you are." I work hard to sound unimpressed. I ignore V, and I feel her anger. I don't even need to look at her.

Then she has a coughing fit, and I fight every demon that wants me to chase after her. V disappears. For a moment, I stay with Nicole and Carmelo, acting my part. Prince. Graduate. Fuckboy.

I wouldn't be able to live with myself if she were hurt.

Nicole doesn't notice when I leave. She's entranced by Carmelo and his talks of Milan fashion shows. In the far distance, I witness Valentina pressing the code to the elevator that the staff uses. She's headed for the food storage downstairs.

I'm downstairs before her, and I hide in the shadows, ready to stalk her wherever she's headed. I fall behind as she picks

up a box of strawberries, her favorite. She struts further into the storage spaces of the palace. I let her have a couple of strawberries in peace. I love watching her eat. What the fuck is wrong with me?

“Sweetheart.”

She twitches, murmuring something inaudible to herself. Louder, she addresses me, “Go back to your fuckdoll. I’m busy here.”

I enjoy the sight of her emptying the box of strawberries. Her lips are so full. I never noticed before. I never had to. “That’s no way to talk to your husband.”

The one second of hesitation is the confirmation I need. Then she rolls her eyes. “You’re not my husband.”

“Put the food away, sweetheart. We need to talk.” I move forward, revealing myself. Owning this one doesn’t seem that much of a pact when all she does is be cute and pretty. Fuck, I would kiss her if I wasn’t drunk off my ass.

She spits back at me. “I don’t have anything to say to you.”

“You look stunning today.” I add, “Are you enjoying yourself at your internship?”

She nods, and I can’t explain why I feel so gutted. I’m her source of happiness. Where’s the smile I deserve? She must have missed me. Where’s my warm welcome? My index finger traces a line across her jaw. I lift her chin. She can’t avoid eye contact now. “Are they taking turns with you?”

“Yes, indeed, they do. They take turns fucking my ass. Are you happy now? I’m not your responsibility anymore.”

Something in me snaps, and I unleash all of my frustrations on her. I say things that hurt her. I do things that make her cry. I can’t take them back. At the moment, they feel justified. I do what I would never tolerate from anyone else. I hurt her in the worst way. I destroy her innocence.

She’s crying her eyes out below me, but I ignore it. I’m good at that; royal PR training makes you focus on the one

thing you want to accomplish. For me, right now, it means that I want to mark her. I want to come inside of her, and it doesn't matter that I don't have her permission.

I'm the spoiled son of a king. My mother wasn't a bitch. She'd hate me. I bet she's ready to forsake me from wherever she is.

My sweetheart gave herself to other men when I left her. I thought that she was a sure thing. Mine. I guess I was wrong. She tries to get to me, throwing insignificant statements at my head. She's bleeding words of pain, yet I don't pay any attention. I reclaim my sweetheart, and in the process, I ruin everything I built with her since that unfortunate fall in the graveyard.

When I wake up the next morning, I feel like death.

I didn't wash Valentina's blood off of me last night. Nicole lays next to me, unassuming and naive.

They say I look like my father. After last night, I'm one step closer to my spotless King of Katantia imitation.



ARIS

TWENTY-EIGHT YEARS OLD

MY BROTHER'S DRIVING US BACK TO THE PALACE. I'M exhausted, but my dick is eager to see my object. I can't stop thinking about Valentina. That's nothing new; I've been plagued by thoughts of that girl for years. Now, I get to call that girl my object.

My cock stirs just thinking about her, sitting at her desk, and doing whatever she's doing. I know she likes to draw, but I'm more interested in her cocksucking skills that she hasn't demonstrated just yet. I want to ask her if I'm the first man she'll ever suck off. Yet, I don't. I've hurt her enough in the past couple of months.

Losing the baby that was supposed to be our first child put things in perspective. Something broke in me that day. I've been around Valentina's most defining moments, but that one right there was crucial. It gave me the confidence I needed as an owner of an object. I want her to be mine, and I want to start a family with her. One day, when Weston becomes king, I'll move us out of here. I'll take us to Italy, where Valentina can live out her dream of working in the fashion industry. She has never mentioned that dream, but I read about it in her sketchbook that she hides next to her tampons.

We'll daytrip to Verona and Lake Garda. I'll feed her pizza with authentic Italian salami and big chunks of buffalo mozzarella.

"You've been spacing out quite a lot lately," Weston comments. "I never thought you'd be the first one to get married out of the three of us."

"You can't marry a book now, can you brother?" I reply, teasing him. He loves education, and he works hard on his intelligence. Deep down, he doesn't want to be just a son of the king. Weston wants to be his own entity. He wants to earn what he gets. Meanwhile, I'm fully satisfied, being the king's son. I don't particularly like the man, but his name gets me the benefits I'd never have if I were a random guy on the street.

Valentina would've never turned to look at me if I were anybody else.

"I can't wait for the summer," I reveal as we get ready to pass security. Sometimes, they let us in without even checking the car. We're royals. We can do whatever the fuck we want to do. "I'm going to book a last-minute trip to the Maldives. Valentina's never been there, and it'll be the perfect destination for a honeymoon."

"Are you sure you don't want to book a suite in the city center? That'd be more fun than the boring Maldives. You just want to fuck her for two weeks straight. You can do that here and simultaneously strengthen our economy," Weston suggests. Security waves us through, and I'm relieved. My brother takes a left, pulling into our street.

“Maybe I’ll do that. You’re right,” I tell Weston, but I’m lying. I’ve had the Maldives plan ever since Valentina and I swam together for the first time. Back then, the plan was more innocent in regards to V. I was envisioning a villa by the beach where V got her own room at the other end of the property while I fucked the staff, or whatever was available, in my private space.

Now, that’s changed. I don’t feel the need to fuck other girls. I’m going to take her out to the Maldives, and I’ll fuck her, obviously. But we’ll be surrounded by water where she’ll swim her heart out, and I’ll get to see her happy for once. She deserves some time off, too. When she found out that her mother was fucking my father, she blacked out. Our young marriage isn’t off to a good start, but I’ll make sure to turn it around.

After my brother parks his car, I rush to my room. I can smell Valentina’s perfume from the hallway. Are we finally moving in the right direction? I’m tired, but I’m never too tired for V. She’s my lifeline after a sleepless night.

I enter my bedroom, and she’s splayed across our bed.

Naked.

She hasn’t done that before, so my mind goes places. We can finally fuck for real. I want to show her that I made the worst mistake of my life when I took from her the first time.

Is she drunk? Her eyes are glossy, but she’s not crying. She’s ecstatic. Her perfume dominates the room, but I can’t shake the mixture with an unfamiliar scent in the air.

“Here you are,” she says, smiling at me. It’s a bad imitation of the smiles I used to get from her. Those smiles were real and heartfelt. The smile I receive tonight is eerie. “My beloved husband.”

“Are you okay?” I ask, suddenly worried.

“Never been better!” Then she shifts on the bed, and I see the bruises on her skin. Who hurt her? I mentally prepare myself to get that information out of her. In addition to the bruises, I see something that I don’t want to see.

“What happened?” The question makes Valentina grin.

She blurts out, “I fucked a king. That’s what happened.”

I did a good job ignoring my heart up until Valentina Cross crushed it.

CHAPTER 15

VALENTINA



PRESENT

PENELOPE JADE HOLDS UNTO MY INDEX FINGER AS WE WAIT for Aris in the gardens of the palace.

It's a lovely day outside, and I couldn't keep us contained in the palace's offices. They're radiating stress and angst. Penelope Jade's only been here for two days, and she's already louder than ever. Her coos are more anxious than before. She needed time to settle into our home down the street from here, and now she needs time to get used to the palace.

I do, too.

There are two guards close by, watching us. Dressed in black and bigger than my 'husband' even, they've been given orders by my uncle to protect the baby and me. I don't talk to them. They don't seem to enjoy chitchat. Besides, I don't entertain crowds anymore. I've lost the energy for it.

I've dressed my daughter as if she's going out when she's not. Kamila talked to Aris, and she scheduled a plan for him to spend time with Penelope Jade. He can't take her away from me because he's still adjusting to his new life post-coma. Whenever they're supposed to spend time together, I have to be there. It's Katantian court-ordered. I'd prefer not to be here, but Penelope Jade needs me. I won't leave her alone with him. Who knows what kind of tantrum he'll throw next.

"Hi." Where did he come from? Fuck. I sat here intending to notice him. I couldn't even focus for more than a second.

Aris comes forward, and Penelope Jade lets my finger go. She drifts away from me, focusing on her father. It stings, but I understand. Aris is an attention-whore. At least, the Kinky Aris was. Vanilla Aris is grateful for anything we give him.

I lift my daughter from my lap, and I hand her to Aris, careful not to touch him. I don't blush. I don't let him see me crack. I'm the mother of his child. That's that.

Aris starts talking to Penelope Jade, and I try to ignore it. I can't take this side of him. It's too much for me. I never imagined we'd be in this situation. When we got married, as basic as it was, I imagined that the ties between us were set in stone.

He's dressed in something the old Aris would wear. Expensive, stylish, and a touch of bravado. The watch on his hand costs more than our entire house's worth. Weston got the car, and Aris got the watch. I guess Vanilla Aris found the watch I cleaned and consequently hid in his closet after the accident.

"We need to talk," he says. His eyes are trained on our daughter, who's too fascinated with the lapels of his jacket to pay us any attention.

"About what? I'm just a gold-digging whore. Let me gold-dig in peace," I comment, crossing my legs. I used to dress up; now, I just walk around in joggers and sneakers that my cousin from America sends over. I don't feel like getting up from bed most days, but then I hear the baby, and I'm forced to face the day.

"I didn't mean what I said. Please, don't curse in front of the baby. I don't think..."

My head snaps in his direction, and I interrupt him, "Excuse me? Are you going to shame me for my parenting skills? Is that your leeway into taking custody from me?"

I bite my tongue. I can't let him see me cry. The thought of Penelope Jade being taken away from me is the stuff my nightmares are made of. I'm not as in tune with her as I'd like to be, but I'm working on it. I've been dealing with a list of

shit. I need time to process. She can't be taken away from me before I've even learned how to deal with her presence in my life.

I'm spiraling.

"I wouldn't dream of taking Penelope Jade away from you." Why do his words fill me up with hope? Silly cockroach. "We need to see eye to eye on certain things."

"If you want to talk about what happened, then be ready for curse words. You've thrown a lot of them my way in the past. If you want transparency, we can't talk in front of her," I say, gesturing at Penelope Jade. She bats her lashes, and both Aris and I find ourselves staring at her. Why is she so cute? Right, we're her parents, the most enchanting Katantians. I don't believe I'm that enchanting anymore.

"Okay," Aris responds. "I suggest we spend the day with Pen, and then we seek out a family member that's going to babysit her for a while until we talk it out."

"We don't have to seek out anyone. They're all waiting in line for Penelope Jade." I emphasize my daughter's name. We planned to give her that name for a purpose. I won't have anyone call her Pen or Penny or PJ like she's a pajama. She's the daughter of a prince. My cockroach DNA doesn't affect her status in the world of Katantia. She'll be treated with respect even if I have to walk over corpses to achieve it.

So the day goes by.

Aris holds Penelope Jade as we walk around the gardens. Eventually, she falls asleep, and we pick up her stroller from inside the palace. Then we venture outside of the gardens. We have an entire entourage of guards following us, but we don't pay them any attention.

"What's that?" Aris asks, pointing at the gates of the graveyard his family rests in.

I don't go there. I can count the times I've been inside that space, and it's never been a positive experience. I clear my throat. "Your family is buried there."

"Can we go see them?"

I hesitate. “Okay.”

Using my palace ID card, I open the gates. Aris pushes Penelope Jade through. It’s been a short while since Kamila took over, but it seems like she’s been around for ages. The graveyard is livelier than ever before. The trees are taller than I remember. Everything is spotless, with no leaves, dirt, or anything else that can disturb the dead’s peace.

There’s one new grave, but it’s unnamed. We all know who lies there, but I don’t know how to tell Aris. It’s difficult to guess at what stage he is. With everything that’s going on with us, there’s little time to discuss his relationship with his father.

Jordan doesn’t want to clarify, but I know that Aram and Spencer schemed to have my husband killed. It doesn’t matter who actually succeeded in harming my husband. One of them did it. These brothers were bound to ruin us, and I’m glad that they’ve fucked off.

A positive surprise is Queen Penelope’s grave and the changes her daughter has brought about. The last time I came here, it was an embarrassment. Unkempt and cheap in comparison to the rest of the Wraith family. Now, she rests with fresh blooming flowers and a massive gravestone that shows anyone who comes to see how loved she was by her children.

I can’t suppress the tear that travels down my cheek.

After my father’s death, we had a private ceremony in the palace. Mom found it appropriate to return his body to America so that he could be buried with his parents. My cousin Alex visits him, and he tends to his grave because we haven’t traveled over there just yet. Aris’s coma and the baby complicate our mobility.

There was a brief suggestion of burying him in Katantia, but Mom rejected the idea right away. Dad spent his worst years on this land. He wouldn’t want to be buried here forever. Where would we have buried him? Next to the woman he murdered and the king who caused all his torment?

I understand my mother's logic, but I can't help but miss my dad. He feels so far away.

Turning away from Aris and Penelope Jade, who's softly sleeping in her stroller, I sob quietly to myself. My chest heaves, but I take deep breaths to calm myself down. Meanwhile, I hope that Aris is so mesmerized by his families' resting places that he'll leave me alone.

"Valentina?"

I hiccup, walking away in a hurry.

As if whoever's up there that's pulling our strings wants to humiliate me even further, I trip, and I land on my face.

Talk about a déjà-vu.

Only this time around, I don't swallow my pain to seem strong in front of the object of my obsession.

"Miss! Are you okay?"

"Should we call an ambulance?"

"Mrs. Wraith, we should take you back to the palace."

I'm lifted from the floor, a whining mess. I can't stop crying, and I don't register what's going on. Voices are all around me, and I feel dirty. Something's crawling up my skin. I can't see through my tears.

"What do we do?"

"I'll bring some ice."

"We have to clean up the wound."

I'm shaking all over, and I can't stop. I want my dad. I want him to come out from wherever he's hiding, and I want him to call me his strawberry. He'll scoop me up, and he'll treat my wounds like he always does. He'll show me how to do it so that when I fall again because it's inevitable, I'll know how to treat myself.

I never learned. He taught me so much, but I never listened, or I forgot.

Fuck. Penelope Jade. I push out of my misery, wiping the tears from my face. The back of my hand is damp from my tears, and my eyes are burning. I can't speak, but I observe my surroundings. My guards are tending to the injuries of my knees, scratches with blood. Aris studies me with worry coating his sharp features. He's holding Penelope Jade, soothing her. She's making upset noises that break my heart.

"How are you feeling, Mrs. Wraith?"

"My name's Cross, thank you very much. Get out of my way," I say, pushing at the men around me. They mean well. I get it. I push at them some more, but they don't budge. Jordan! Ugh. He messes with my life. "Please? It's just a scratch."

"Miss, you fell pretty bad. Be patient."

So I become patient, letting them piece me back together. I sigh. Aris keeps watching me, and I feel a shudder. I know that look in his eyes. It takes me back to a time when I was a full-blown cockroach, stalking every detail about my obsession's life. Back when I stood in front of a mirror, I imitated voices I heard on the radio or on YouTube. *Happy Birthday, Mr. President...* No, we established that Marilyn sounded too much like I did already. Watching movies like *Don Jon. You're cute. I like you...* Scarlett Johansson had the voice I wanted to have. I had my dad download every movie of hers to imitate her moves and speech patterns.

One look from Aris and all of that comes flashing back. All the pathetic things I did to catch his attention. Did he notice the changes in me as I grew up? Mostly, I did it for him, but I did it for myself as well. I didn't want to be the pathetic cockroach everyone trampled on anymore. I yearned to show them that they were fucking wrong.

Where are they now?

I have no idea.

But I bet my money on the fact that they know exactly where I'm at.

Maybe I'm the gold-digging whore Aris accused me of being.

“I’ll take it from here,” Aris says, stepping forward. He’s placed Penelope Jade back into her stroller, securing her. She’s quieted down. He shoos the overbearing men away. He crouches down beside me. I sit on the bench by the gates of the graveyard. “Can you please give us a moment of privacy?”

Kinky Aris never knew what the word ‘please’ meant. I refuse to process this new development.

The guards murmur among themselves, and I ignore their hushed-up words about my well-being. They walk away, leaving us alone in the graveyard. They’re not going away for real; they must be right outside the gates. What’s the saying? Out of sight, out of mind.

“I’m sorry for bringing you here.” And then he adds, “I’m sorry for your loss, too. Mandy and your mom filled me in.”

Of course, they did. I roll my eyes. In typical Aris fashion, he ignores my annoyance, and he takes a seat next to me. “I’m sorry for offending you. It felt right to say what I said when I said it. Weston says I had a flashback. But if that’s who I was, then I don’t want it.”

But I want you. All of you. The bad. The good. Even the fucking Hole Store Aris. I lower my gaze to hide my face from him. I take deep breaths.

“You’ve tripped like that before, haven’t you? I sensed a panic inside that I found very familiar. I visualized an image, but that was a little girl in my head. I’m not making any sense, aren’t I?” He leans back on the bench, sighing.

“I was a little girl. You’re right.”

“That’s you? In my memories?” he asks.

I nod.

“I have to ask you a question, but everything inside of me tells me to leave it be.”

“You never listened to anyone before. What’s stopping you now?” I tease him dryly. My eyes drift over the stroller. We didn’t go through mutt, but there’s some dirt on the wheels. I’ll

have to clean it up before we enter the palace. Fylox and Kamila are meticulous cleaners.

“Did we have another baby?”

Penelope Jade. I chant my baby’s name to defeat the ache inside of me. *It’s okay*, Penelope Jade says to me in the voice I heard when I was pregnant. *Grandpa is protecting my sister now. They’re together...*

She spoke to me. My heart flutters in excitement. Am I still here after all?

“We lost our first baby,” I reveal. “She was the result of something ugly, but I would’ve loved her if I’d known she was inside of me. She went quietly. We only found out when I was in the process of miscarriage.”

“Ugly?”

It’s now or never. “The first time we slept together, you... You raped me.”

CHAPTER 16

ARIS



TWENTY-EIGHT YEARS OLD

I DON'T WANT TO SEE ANYONE.

My life is a clusterfuck. I've turned into my younger brother, hiding away in my room. Unlike Weston, I have a mountain of empty bottles of Jack by the bed. Is it in the genes? Are we all destined to become drunks? My brother manages to stay away from alcohol most of the time, but he's struggling, too.

He doesn't know what I'm dealing with. I'll never tell him. Valentina assures me that the king won't ever let the secret slip. But the king's the fucking king. He can do whatever he wants.

He fucked my wife.

He. Fucked. My. Wife.

I get up from the bed, and I kick the bottles. I trash the bedside table against the wall. It's the most anger I've felt in a while. Probably because I didn't drink myself to sleep last night. I decided to stay sober on my mother's birthday. The energy runs through my veins. I grab the hideous bedside lamp that's dropped to the floor, and I shatter it. I'm on a rampage, swinging at everything that comes my way. I'm incapable of controlling myself. I need to stop feeling this obsessive rage.

It's been with me for months as I deteriorate in my room while the world passes me by.

Why the fuck do I allow her to mess with me this way?

It was different before. Was it really?

Valentina's always been a thorn in my eye. Before I left for Cambridge, I had it under control. Obsessive big brother. A role that I wanted to fit in for Kamila, but her being born a year ahead of me messed with my plans. When I came back to Katantia and Valentina had moved out of her palace home, something snapped. How dare she move out of my space of protection?

"Aris?" The fear in her voice doesn't stop me. I shove and kick at anything, making a mess of my bedroom, correction, 'our' bedroom. I wreck the cream vanity, a new addition to *our* bedroom. I cut my hands at the broken mirror, but I see no need to stop. The dressers take more than a kick to break, so I batter them until their broken pieces are scattered all over the floor. I'm positive that I've strained something, but I keep going. By the time I'm finished with the walk-in closet, it looks like it's a dumping ground.

Her delicately small hands wrap around my torso, and my heart slows down.

I've done a lot of things. I hurt her at my graduation party. I did the unspeakable. She retaliated, fucking my father. But I won't hit her. Physical violence is a hard no. "Stop before you hurt yourself."

I want to tell her that she's crushed me. I'm fucked up in the head; all of the Wraith offspring are. Valentina put the final nail in the coffin. I've given my object the power to ruin me, and she did. Gloriously so.

"Are you going to throw me out?" Valentina asks. She's still holding me hostage in her embrace. I'm panting out of frustration. I'm not tired. I could trash the entire house if she stopped touching me.

"You keep asking me that question."

"And? What's your answer?" She's nervous. I can see it in how tight she holds me. She reeks of fucking strawberries and expensive sex. I want to shove her against the wall and fuck that question out of her.

Because despite my rage with my father, I know that I wronged Valentina first. Her fucking my father was her revenge. I hate that she knows me that well. I hate that I'm not angry at her. I'm furious with myself and how I used her like she was discardable. I hate that she put herself in danger to prove something to me.

My father could've crushed her. In fact, she couldn't walk straight for a couple of days after their... encounter. The bruises on her skin took two weeks to fully fade. I can still remember the look of disgust in my brother's eyes. He thought I did that to her. The need to wreck more of my belongings resurges, but her trembling fingers on my abs hold me back.

“You're my object for life. For better or for worse.”

She tightens her grip on me.

“I want to go back to the way it was.” She snuffles, trying hard to hold back her tears. She's a little fighter. She'd never cry in front of me if she could help it. But I'm a Wraith, and all I do is wreak havoc. “Back before you left. I don't like this new 'us.'”

“Before I left, I wanted nothing but to be your big brother, sweetheart. I didn't... It wasn't this intense,” I admit, and I feel vulnerable. I've told her too much, even though it's only a word. The thick silence that follows confirms what I've been praying for. I want her now. I can't go back to the time where she was just a neighbor that I felt the need to protect. She wants me, too. “You don't want to be my little sister, do you?”

I feel her small body pressed against my back. If she could only dip into my thoughts... She'd run away even if I've put a chain on her. My object.

“You want to fuck me, sweetheart? You want to fuck your big brother?”

She drops her hands from my body, and I miss her instantly. It's been months since I've let out any steam. I've been hiding inside of my house for too long. I turn around, and I see her biting her lip. I'm over with. But I've learned from my mistakes.

She fucked my father to make me pay for them.

So I'm not going to touch her unless she explicitly asks for it.

"Use your big girl words," I demand.

"I feel ashamed."

"Of?"

"I want this tension to be over." She swallows. Her fingers are still shaking, but her perky breasts are giving me a heavenly view. I can see their shape beneath her silky nightgown. Her nipples are right there, begging me to tease them. I keep my hands to myself.

We're in this situation because I fucked her when I shouldn't have.

Valentina continues, "I want you to be the man I know you are."

Do I even know what sort of a man I am? I'm almost thirty, and I have no clue where I'm headed. The only thing I know for sure is Valentina. In what way I'll have her, I don't know. But she's here to stay. Our little marriage proposal by my mother's grave is a pact I won't break.

"I'm sorry—"

"You don't get to apologize for what I did to you," I blurt out, and she jumps away from me in fear. I've done this. She fears me now. She thinks I'll hurt her again. "What do you want from me? Tell me, and I'll give it to you."

I want to give you babies. I want you to make love to me every fucking minute of every day. Claim me as yours. Tell me I'm the center of your universe. That's not what she says, though. She bites her lip again. Then she croaks out. "I want to be your friend again. But..."

She blushes, and I keep from pouncing on her with all of my strength.

"We're married. I'm your object. So, officially, my duty involves being your fucktoy. Right?" she asks.

“You’re not a fucktoy unless you want to be. Do you?” I ask her dryly. These are formalities that couples usually settle before they get married, but we’re not the usual couple.

“I... No.” Okay. I can deal with that. I’m strong enough, right? I can have a walking sex magnet in my house, and I can refrain from touching her. I can control myself if it means she’ll never touch my father again. I should’ve controlled myself at my graduation party, but I was drunk and high.

Do I have a split personality? I paid Taylor to bully Valentina when all I wanted was to be her hero, the big brother hero she deserved to have. I walked away from Katantia mostly because I had a degree to finish, but it also gave me perspective on my obsession with my neighbor. She wasn’t mine in any way, family or... object-wise. I didn’t have the right to meddle with her life. Then I went and stole the most precious thing Valentina had to offer.

I’m sick. There’s no other way to explain it. I’m a Wraith. Being a sick bastard’s in my DNA.

“What you said about being my big brother...”

“Talk to me, sweetheart. You’ve never minced words in my presence.” Is that the truth? She’s never been shy to express herself in front of me, but I don’t know if she keeps it real. She doesn’t open up the vault of her deepest secrets. Neither do I.

“Is that like a daddy thing? I don’t see you as my daddy. I have a daddy, and I love him. I would never.... No, never.” She’s nervous and fidgeting. She’s making me hard, but I don’t need her to know that. She doesn’t look at my cock, which is a good thing. She keeps her eyes on mine.

“I meant what I said. I thought of myself as your big brother. I didn’t mean anything sexual by it.”

“But you fucked me the moment you returned,” she reminds me.

“That wasn’t fucking. That was a rape.” ... and the darkest moment I’ve experienced. And I’ve seen my mother buried six feet under.

Valentina flinches. “Why did you do it?”

“You want the truth?” She nods bashfully. I’m going to be in trouble for this. “That was the first night I truly looked at you, and I saw you. Before that, I saw a little girl that needed protection. I take all the blame—”

“Be my big brother,” she blurts out.

I mentally prepare myself—more hours in the gym. I’ll drink a bit more. Perhaps it’ll erase the memories from that night. I’ll work on it. If that’s what she wants, I’ll give it to her.

“But talk dirty to me. Fuck me like you want to break me, but cuddle me afterward like you’re my big brother that cares about me so deeply.” By the end of her statement, she’s out of breath.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Exactly what I said.”

“You have a big brother fantasy?”

“You don’t have a little sister fantasy?” she counters.

I don’t. “This is what you want?”

“You as my big brother.”

“And are we fucking each other only? No other people?” I inquire. I’m just asking for clarity.

“Oh.” Her face falls. “We’re not in love or anything. We’re here because of the pact. I don’t expect you to be exclusive. I know you have options.”

We’re not in love? Then what’s the obsession I feel inside ever since she moved in with me? She makes me want to continue my wreck charade. She’s denounced what we have in front of my face. Then again, I took from her. I have no right to claim her love. If she doesn’t want exclusivity, I’ll give it to her. It’ll recuperate my image that’s taken a hit ever since I got married.

“You want an open relationship with your fictional big brother.”

She nods.

“Big girl words.”

“Yes, I want an open relationship with my big brother as part of our kinky routines.”

Kinky routines? Where does she come up with this shit? I run a hand through my hair. Fuck. She’s talking about kinks, and my dick wants to salute her with come splashed across her pretty porcelain face.

To my surprise, she adds, “I want you to show me the best sex I’ll ever have. You owe it to me.”

I owe it to her all right. “Is that all?”

“If you can’t fuck me good, I’ll have to find pleasure elsewhere.”

She’s got me tongue-tied. Where did this sinner come from? The more she speaks, the more I’m enchanted by the idea of being her big brother fuck buddy. Dropping my voice, I ask, “Are you challenging me?”

“I might be.”

“Good.” My hands are bloody, yet I reach for my cock. I fist myself, and her eyes follow my movement. “I want to fuck you so hard that your parents hear. I want your dad to come over here and threaten to kill me. That’s how good I’ll fuck my little sister.”

“Say mean things to me,” she begs, blushing some more. I see her squeezing her thighs together. I want to see her tight little pussy. It’ll make everything all right again. Fuck. If she keeps eyeing my cock like this, I’ll come in my sweatpants. Oh well. I’ll throw them out. I’m done wearing clothes to bed. I’ve been respectful, as respectful as a Wraith can be. But she’s asked for a fuck buddy.

She’ll receive him.

I stalk forward, pressing her up against the wall. “You’re scum, sweetheart. A dirty little cockroach. I like my fucks dirty. Tell your big brother how much you want his big cock to make that ache between your thighs go away.”

“Please.” She swallows. “Make it go away, big brother. Fill me up. I’ve... I’ve craved you for so long.”

I don’t know what drives me to ignore that last part of her statement, but I do.

And it takes me a long time to realize that Valentina revealed herself to me at that moment. She showed her true colors, but I painted them over.

CHAPTER 17

VALENTINA



TWENTY YEARS OLD

ARIS SMELLS LIKE USED THONGS, PAID PROSTITUTES, AND expensive whiskey.

I'm in my nightgown, as always. Waiting for him in our bed, I haven't slept tonight. After we fucked, he left the house. He's only returning now. It's been five hours. I couldn't sleep because we have a guest in the house.

That guest happens to be my former best friend. Former? Well, I showed her the monster that replaced the cockroach. I proudly displayed the monster that Aris has created in the past two years of our open marriage.

Am I happy?

Sometimes. I'm very happy when he's in our bed, tucked in beside me. I'm ecstatic when he's by my side at important functions. When he wraps his arm around me protectively in front of others, I melt.

What ruins my happiness?

The cunts he fucks when he's not around me.

I'm paying the sins of my stubborn teenage self. I didn't want to admit my feelings for Aris Wraith, so we agreed to an open marriage where we got to fuck whomever we wished. But our home base was each other.

Best believe that I'm not going to sit around and wait for Aris to have a change of heart. Or take control of the situation. No. I got out there, and I did my thing. I've been messing

around. It pisses my husband off that I let other men touch me. But he can't do anything about it unless he admits that he wants me as much as I want him.

Which I don't believe he does.

He's as obsessed with me as I am with him, but that doesn't translate into love. His heart definitely wasn't broken after his father fucked me. His ego was bruised, and he tended to it like a manbaby while hiding away in our bedroom. My heart was shattered when he took my first time. I'm still recovering from that, by the way.

Where my heart used to be, I've grown an endless hole of darkness where nothing means anything anymore.

Aris doesn't shower as he stumbles into our bed. I'm sure he does it to make me mad. Mission accomplished. It doesn't take him long to start snoring away.

I'm exhausted from my long day of flying back and forth between Chicago and Katantia. I flew to Chicago to pick up my *best friend* Mandy Rawlins for her silly Katantia vacation. We flew back to Katantia instantly, and we gave her a tour of Katantia, including a visit to the king and the nearest Hole Store. I can't feel my limbs. I should be sleeping.

But I'm not.

Instead, I lay there, unmoving. Cold.

Embarrassed. Mandy didn't recognize me today. I'm not the Valentina she used to know. That Valentina was the cockroach that everyone pitied and bullied. In her former shell, I've replaced her. The new me is a boiling pot of emotions, waiting to explode. Every second that I breathe, I feel an unquenched thirst to draw my husband's blood.

I want to feel his blood underneath my fingernails.

I need to see my marks on him because that ring on his finger? It doesn't mean anything. If the cunts he fucks see his marks, they'll know that they're fucking with my man.

"Sweetheart. Go to sleep."

That little word used to mean the world to me. It opened up my heart, and it let Aris waltz in to sweep me away. Now? It just slices through me.

“Leave me alone. I’m brooding,” I whisper-hiss as if Mandy can hear us. Weston made sure that our guest slept in the room farthest away from us. Good thinking on his part, I’ll give him that. Pity that he’ll forever be alone because he can’t seem to attach an object to his side.

“I can see that. Go to sleep before I make you.” Aris sounds like he’s half-asleep already. He was snoring a moment ago. He couldn’t make me fall asleep even if he wanted to.

“You can’t fuck me to sleep. Not tonight.”

He chuckles into his pillow. “One of these days... One day, you’ll understand. One sweet day...”

I understand more than he thinks.

This vicious cycle we find ourselves in? It’ll never end. I’m two years older now, in my twenties. He’s thirty. But we don’t show it.

We play around like children.

And just like in any child’s game, one of us is bound to lose.

I just pray to whoever’s up there that it’s not me.



WHENEVER ARIS LEAVES KATANTIA, IT’S KNOWN THAT I COME out to play. It’s the simplest way to torture my husband. He can’t step in to make it stop.

This time when Aris leaves Katantia, I stay inside. The king forced his son to go on a business trip to America because we couldn’t keep Mandy in our house. She was supposed to be our guest, but Kamila won her over. I’ve been made aware that I have to step up my game if I want to stay in the king’s favor.

After that massive failure, I halfheartedly tried to seduce my former best friend in Kamila's home. She rejected me, another blow to my already suffering ego.

I'm glad she left my house, and I don't want her back here. She reminds me of everything I used to be. The cockroach inside of me is fighting its way back into my consciousness, and I just want to kill it off.

Fuck being a naïve little girl.

I've seen shit. I'm in an open marriage. My mom regularly fucks the king, but she remains married to my dad, WHO ISN'T THE KING. Trust me, fucked-up is my way of life. Mandy's innocent and prude approach doesn't have the survival chances that I do.

So she shall stay away from me.

And she does.

While Aris is away on a business trip to the United States, I stay inside, avoiding contact with anyone after my failed attempt to bring Mandy back to our house.

I'm having a low phase, and I attribute it to Mandy's reappearance in my life. It's all going as great as a depressive and closed-off phase can go until Aris makes an abrupt comeback. Kamila and Weston announce their shocking engagement. Am I startled by it? Fuck yeah.

But what puts the cherry on top is the fact that something's off about my husband.

Our usual routine after days apart from each other includes a heavy make-out session that I direct. After making out, I either suck him off, or he feasts on me. Then we fuck. We do it all over again for hours until we grow tired.

This time, Aris steps into our bedroom, and he doesn't even look at me.

"How was your trip?" I ask. I'm impatiently filing my nails while lounging on our massive and comfortable bed. Our sheets are made out of heaven. He sent me a message before he departed from Chicago, so I was aware that he was coming

back. I put on my expensive lingerie. It's currently covered by my cream robe, but only one swift move, and I could be exposed.

"The usual." The tone of his voice lets me know that it wasn't *the usual*. There are dark rings below his eyes, and his wrinkles are visible today. He looks older than he did when he left Katantia a couple of days ago. He's undressing on his way to our walk-in closet, leaving piles of his clothes on the floor.

I'm not picking them up for him. We've got staff for that job.

Aris disappears into the bathroom, and I follow him.

"I don't even get a welcome home kiss?" I ask him, sounding far too desperate. *Dial it down a notch, will you?* I take a deep breath.

"I'm not in the mood right now. I'll talk to you later," he says, and I'm ready to burst. I know he's just returned from an excruciating trip, but I'm his wife. We're in an open marriage, but I'm still his fucking priority. He better act like it!

"Excuse me?"

"I said I'll talk to you later," he insists, turning on the spray of the shower. He steps underneath it immediately, not caring about the temperature. Before I can say another thing, he's washing without a care in the world.

That's a lie.

Something's bothering Aris, but I don't understand what it is.

"Did I do something?" Cockroach, *shut the fuck up. LEAVE THE ROOM.* "Please, talk to me."

"No, you didn't," he responds right away, but I can see through his lies. His right eye twitches slightly when he lies. It's right there with his treacherous scar above his eyebrow. "I'm just stressed out. Weston and Kamila are getting married. It's... Complicated. It's not you, sweetheart. I need time to wrap my head around whatever's going on. Aram's about to go crazy on us, and I've got to stay focused."

“Should we organize a photo-op?” I inquire, already envisioning my outfit. I’d definitely wear something that would have the gossip magazines chatting about me for weeks. Maybe a nip slip?

Aris shakes his head. “I’ve got it under control, sweetheart. It’s really nothing for you to worry about. I’ll handle my father.”

I nod, and I watch him shower. It makes me furious that he doesn’t invite me to shower with him. I overstay my welcome at his side while he combs his hair, puts on his cologne. We don’t talk. I just stare at him, doing mundane things. And he lets me. He always does.



NOBODY SEES IT BUT ME.

Aris has changed. Did I do something to deserve his pity? What’s that frown on his face about? Fuck. I’ve been too clingy.

My self-worth is better than that. I have to improve. I’ll set up my sewing machine, and I’ll finally learn how to make my own clothes. Then I won’t even bother to obsess over my husband.

We’re walking back home from Kamila and Weston’s exhausting engagement party. We both had a drink or two, entertaining my husband’s family’s guests. We fucked for them in the nude afterparty. I can feel the remnants on my thighs, but they’re only my fluids.

For the first time since I’ve known Aris Wraith, he didn’t come. He didn’t even insist on finishing. I was right there, naked and willing to help him out. That’s what we do in our relationship.

But he didn’t want it.

As we walk back home, we’re not holding hands.

I don't ask for much. I just want to hold his hand, but he's not letting me.

"I'm going to sleep at my parents' house," I announce once we arrive at our street. In the deep of night, we look tiny compared to the massive houses that house my family and his. Aris halts mid-step. I take a deep breath, expecting a tantrum from him. He turns around, and he gives me a firm nod. "Aren't you going to say anything?"

Aris shakes his head. "Go ahead."

No. This can't be. I wish to leave Katantia every night before bed, but I should've been careful. I don't want to leave like this. No. I refuse. The inner tantrum that I end up throwing remains hidden on the surface. "See you around."

Without any further touch, I retreat to my former house. I hear my shoes click with the solid floor, and I hope that Aris watches me as I leave. He's missing out.

My father installed a security system after Aris stole me away the night of my eighteenth birthday. In addition to my palace ID card, I need a code that's changed weekly. My mom sends me a message every Monday, so I know it. I press the numbers at the door, and I let myself in.

Home smells of homemade cookies, and I briefly envision my mom and dad spending time in the kitchen and chatting about the simple stuff. They look in love, but it's different from what I have with Aris. Not that we're in love. We're obsessed, but that's a story for another day.

Like the old days, my brother startles me when I hear his shouts from upstairs. I thought his gaming couldn't get more aggressive, but it did. Kicking off my shoes, I tiptoe around the empty spaces of the houses. My parents haven't come home yet.

Eventually, I approach my old room. After taking a thorough shower, where I shed a tear or two, I step out, and I put on my old pajamas from back when I didn't wear silk robes and sexy lingerie to bed.

The comfort I feel as I tuck myself underneath my freshly washed sheets is indescribable. My mom keeps my room clean. She claims she's made my room into a guest room, but everything's still the way I left it, and my parents have zero friends. Nobody would ever sleep over.

I haven't felt as pathetic as I do today in a while.

It's Mandy's fault.

She came here, and she's making me feel all the things that I repress.

I have everything I want. Aris is mine now. I don't want for anything. Okay, I'd like to magically grow a better hand for my sketching but other than that? I'm doing great. I'm better than all of the bitches who called me a cockroach.

I'm married to the Prince of Katantia, and there's a high chance that I'll be queen one day.

My chest heaves as I sob into my pillow.

I used to be a good girl. Now, I've turned into a bitter bitch that envies everyone because she's unhappy.

It takes me a couple of moments to calm myself.

Stop being such an ungrateful little cockroach.

I fall asleep.

“Strawberry? Is that you?”

I open my eyes, and the sun shines into my room. I didn't let the blinders down. It must be early in the morning, judging by my numbing headache. Dad sneaks into my room, gently shutting the door behind him. He seems positively surprised by my presence in my former room. “What are you doing here? You should've told me you were sleeping here last night. I'd have made breakfast.”

I pull down the covers, and I stretch in my comfortable bed. Yes, Aris paid triple for his king-size bed, and he has the most expensive sheets, but the comfort of my old bed is priceless. I respond, “I wanted to spend some time with my family. Where's Mom?”

“She didn’t come home last night. Guards say she’s still at the palace. I’ll check on her once I go to work,” he explains. He sounds sincere, but I can sense his worry.

“Let’s make pancakes?” I ask.

He nods eagerly. “I’ll call for strawberries. They imported some for the engagement party.”

Dad leaves my room. I go to brush my teeth. I get ready, feeling like the old days. I’m not wearing my ring. I put it on my bedside table last night.

By the time I go downstairs, I’m wearing my pink dance tracksuit. My body grew in all the right places except my height. I’m still small next to my giant husband when I’m not wearing my heels. With freshly combed hair, I stroll into the kitchen.

My brother’s at the kitchen island, drinking coffee and typing away on his phone.

Dad is by the stove, preparing the pan. He turns to smile at me because he can hear me even if I apply his silent step technique. “Sit. I’ll serve. The strawberries are fresh and sweet. They brought some chocolate ice cream to go alongside.”

I nod appreciatively. Dad turns his back to me to do what he needs to do. My eyes wander to the other being in the room. Ryan doesn’t even acknowledge me. He doesn’t talk to anyone other than Dad. After my brother hit me across the face, I sported bruises for days.

A couple of days later, while shopping electronics in the city center, my brother was jumped by two masked men. That day, Aris seemed happy. I remember his radiant face clearly. He looked happier than ever. My brother ended up with a broken nose and a few missing teeth.

My parents don’t know who attacked Ryan.

But everyone else does.

Am I still afraid of my brother?

Yes.

“Shoot!” Dad exclaims. “Our milk’s old, strawberry. Let me call the palace. I’ll be back in a moment.”

He rushes out of the room, and I’m left with Ryan. His chilling presence is enough to get me jittery. I’m married to one of the strongest men on the island, and the thought of my brother moving closer makes me cower. He’s a weakling in comparison to my husband or my dad. Skinnier than me and not muscular at all, he sits in front of his computer all day.

“What do you think of Mandy?” he asks, and I flinch. He notices, and like the pathetic little bitch that he is, he snickers.

“What about her?” I snap back.

“I took her out yesterday. I did everything right, but she didn’t put out.” There’s a catch. I’m waiting for it. “She’s not a whore like you, spreading your legs for anyone with a hint of money.”

“You have no money, dipshit,” I deadpan.

“Shut up, whore. At least, I’m not Aris’ doormat,” he counters. The fury in his eyes is intimidating. I don’t know what goes on in my brother’s head, and it scares me. We could have a good relationship, but we’re just too opposite. “Where are you going?”

I halt on my way out of the kitchen. “I’m leaving. If you want to fuck Mandy so bad, you should start jerking off or something. She’s a prude through and through.”

“At least, she doesn’t have stepbrother fantasizes like you, whore.”

“Stop!” How the fuck does he know about what Aris and I do in private? We don’t do that particular role play in public.

“What’s going on here?” Dad returns, phone in hand. His eyes are scanning his son and me with suspicion.

“Nothing,” I quickly state.

“Yeah, nothing,” my brother agrees.

“Don’t bullshit me, the both of you.” Dad steps forward. He places the phone on the kitchen island gently. “Apologize

to your sister. Now.”

You don't fuck around with my dad. Aris and Weston's attack resulted in bruises and loss of teeth. Dad's tortures are worse. I never experienced the hard stuff because I was a good girl until Aris stole me away from home, but Ryan's been through the wringer. Aram's punishment press run was nothing in comparison.

“I don't have nothing to apologize for,” Ryan comments, sipping on his coffee. I want to spit in it.

“You embarrassed her. She has a husband, and she's allowed to do whatever she wants to do behind closed doors,” my dad reminds my brother. I feel small, standing there and being discussed. Pearls of sweat form on my forehead. Dad heard us arguing. I just wanted a peaceful morning with my family.

“She does it in public, too, Dad. She fucking embarrasses us every day! She's a nobody, fucking her way to the top!” Ryan explodes. Before I can scream virgin at him, Dad launches at my brother, and I grimace at the sight. He grips him by the collar, and he lifts him from his seat. My brother struggles to catch his breath.

“Valentina's your sister. You will love her. She's the only family you have.” My father is begging my brother, but it sounds more like a demand. Dad doesn't beg.

“I'd rather be an only child!” He's the only child in the room. He's five years older than me, but he still needs babying.

Dad slaps him. I hear bones crack from one simple move. My brother finally shuts his now bleeding mouth. “Apologize. Now. Before I cut your balls off and have them for dinner. I taught you better.”

Ryan breathes heavily. He's in denial for a second, but then he remembers that our dad means every word that comes out of his mouth. After a moment of hesitation, my brother apologizes.

I nod, accepting it for the show.

Then I excuse myself.

I don't cry until I'm in the woods, running toward the beach in my pink tracksuit. I'm sweating like a pig, and I'm having a minuscule panic attack. I get lost in the woods, and it takes me some time until I finally find my way out of the crowded trees. I'm further away from the usual spot I once swam in with Aris, but that's fine.

Sliding out of my clothes, I jump into the water. Without taking time to acclimate, I start swimming laps. I'm in the water until my skin starts shriveling. I take a break then. Wandering around the empty beach, I wait until I dry.

Then I do it all over again.

This time, I stay underwater a little too long.



I REEK.

I place my palace ID card next to Aris's car keys, and I venture upstairs. Desperately, I need a long bath.

Mandy's brought hell upon us. I never knew she was such a bearer of bad luck.

My mother has never been hospitalized before.

"How's your mom?" Aris asks the moment I enter our bedroom. I ignore him. He's been trying to reach me for days, but I've begun distancing myself from him. Just like he did when he came back from the States. If he wants to end things between us, I'll survive it.

I can leave the country.

"Valentina, I'm talking to you."

I leave him in the bedroom while I take my bath. He doesn't disturb me as I clean myself. I'm out of tears.

I'm scared.

And for the first time in my life, I've lost faith in my dad.

Mom needed stitches like back when she gave birth to me. The men who did this to her, the king and his fuckbuddy, took turns, and they gave her an infection. I haven't spent a night at home in days. I'm out of patience.

All my life, I've been told to ignore what the king does to my mom.

I've had enough.

I'm scared.

My mother needs my help since my father keeps sending her into the wolves' lair. But how will I do this? I used my sex card with the king once before. I was lucky that he didn't insist on having more than one taste of me.

I dry myself, and I leave the bathroom. Aris sits at the side of our bed, lowered head and entwined hands. He takes deep breaths.

My mind is buzzing with idiotic ideas on how to remove my mother from the king's hold. I can't pull off an escape from Katantia. Mom hasn't left the country in years. She barely leaves the palace these days. She's always with the king because Kamila's busy with Mandy.

I slip on my comfy panties, and I lie down on my side by the edge of the bed. On my nightstand, I have a picture of my family back when we first arrived in Katantia. I stare at it.

"Valentina, please. Talk to me. How's she doing?"

I don't respond. The calm tone of his voice plays games with me that I'm not ready to win.

I'm scared.

My heart is pounding inside of my chest. I'm this close to putting on my clothes and going back to Mom. I'll camp outside my mother's room until she lets me in. She sent me away because I needed rest. I say bullshit.

"I've loved you since I was eleven years old," I blurt out. I shift, lying on my back. I stare at the ceiling now. I need to remove the picture on my nightstand. I have to help my mother. "I didn't know what love was then, but I loved you

anyway. You meant the world to me. You broke me the first time when you left for Cambridge. I couldn't stand how you showed off all of your conquests. I knew I wasn't worth your time while you were here, but once you left, and you started spending time with those European supermodels... I felt deflated. You were the first man who ever touched me, and that day you diminished every dream I had when I was a teen. I haven't forgiven you for that. I probably never will. I made you pay, but it didn't end up feeling as satisfactory as I had expected."

I inhale. "I hate our life. I want to be okay with what we do. But my inner cockroach doesn't want to share you with anyone. You're mine. My husband. My everything. I'm broken. I don't know if I'll ever heal. I... I think we've reached the end. We can't go on like this. I understand that you have your needs. I respect that, so I won't make you give up what you're used to. I'm asking for permission to leave the country. I'll make the necessary calls, and I'll join Carmelo and his son in Italy for work. That's what I've always wanted to do anyway. It's for the best..."

I'll leave for Italy, and I'll sneak my mom away with me. The king has no jurisdiction in Italy. He can't make us come back.

"I won't allow that."

I freeze.

I'm scared.

"I'm not happy, Aris. I want to leave. You'll be on your own. We're not good for each other. I can't stay here and watch my mom and the king..." I have no tears left to cry.

"I don't want to be alone." My head is spinning at his words. "I want you by my side."

Before I can respond, he continues, "You're mine, too. I take care of what's mine. If you're unhappy, I'll make you happy."

"What does that mean?" I ask.

"It means that I'll quit what I've been doing."

“You don’t mean that.”

“I do, sweetheart.”

I shake my head frantically, jumping out of bed. “It can’t be that simple.”

“It is.”

“No.”

He catches me with his strong hands, making me stand still. “If I don’t make you happy, you can leave. I’ll call up the jet, and you can pack your bags.”

“If I stay, you have to promise me that my mom won’t be hurt. You... You have to stay safe. I can’t... If something happens to you or her... even my father, I can’t. I won’t be able to deal with it. I need you to promise me that nothing will happen to you.” I’m baring myself open to him, and it feels freeing. It’s like a weight has been lifted off of my shoulders. I can breathe again.

“What happens then?”

I remain quiet.

“You can’t live like that, sweetheart. As much as I hate that you have a life outside of me, you have a life. You can’t end it because we’re not here for you,” he says, pulling me into a hug. He rubs my back with one hand, and with the other, he caresses my scalp.

“That’s my choice. I can think that if I want to.”

“Sure, sweetheart.”

“Promise me?”

“I promise. I owe you. I’ll never be able to make up for what I put you through.”

You never will... But it’s nice to see you try for once.

CHAPTER 18

ARIS



THIRTY YEARS OLD

SPENCER RAWLINS IS A FUCKING MONSTER.

Our palace means nothing in comparison to his estates. Half a million Katantians residing and paying taxes on our soil are irrelevant next to his 1.3 million employees at his beck and call all over the world.

Mr. Rawlins is the head of an online retailer that sells anything from electronics to its own fast-fashion brand. Said fashion brand produces its clothes cheaply in Turkey and Bangladesh. Do these people see the profits that result in fancy cars and massive mansions? No. It flows right into Spencer Rawlins' pockets. He acquired the company in the late nineties after its founder lost hope. He had enough money to spare for the investment from his involvement in Big Oil. Rawlins may only be number twenty-five of the wealthiest men in America this year, but pockets run deep. He's worth an estimated twenty billion dollars. E-commerce. Oil and gas. Real estate.

Katantia's already in business with most of his companies. He's responsible for our buildings. Our people visit his e-commerce retailer to import whatever they need from all around the world. Aram's fighting tooth and nail to upkeep his energy relationship with Rawlins Corp. Our country is ready for renewable energies, and the people ask for it, but their king is an attention whore that enjoys being the center of negotiations between East and West.

My last-minute visit to Illinois' wealthiest businessman isn't about any of the serious business. I'm here to discuss fashion. It's a façade. I believe that Father wanted to separate me from my brother after we fucked up with Mandy. He didn't have anything for me to do, so he came up with this Katantia clothing brand that Rawlins can distribute through his online retailer.

I'm wearing my most expensive outfit. My exhaustion is unbearable, but I think back to my wife sucking me off the last time I wore this custom-made suit from Savile Row. It keeps my brain from shutting down.

I miss her.

A trashy limousine picked me up from the Four Seasons Hotel, where I stay in a suite that costs ten thousand US dollars a night. All of that is paid for by Spencer Rawlins, for whom this amount of cash is pocket money.

Outside of a building that's lit up like a cheap Hole Store from the Katantian suburbs, I wait. The driver will take me inside once everything is ready.

What exactly am I doing here?

I thought we were discussing business. This looks like an American strip club. I planned to fuck a girl or two, but only once I was done with Rawlins. Aram taught us the importance of understanding different cultures. Americans don't mix business and pleasure, or so I thought.

"They're ready for you," the driver announces, and I exit the car. Approaching the entrance, the bouncers scan me. I hear faint music from inside the club. I can smell the weed. A smile crosses my face.

If this is what business with Spencer Rawlins is like, I'll come over more often.

Next time, I'll bring Valentina. She'll love it.

Without a closer check, I pass security, and I enter a dark and misty space. Two girls around my wife's age lead me into the main area. They're topless and in diamond thongs with

long plush hair. They wear heels, but they're still as short as my wife.

Once inside, I realize that the place is empty with the exception of Spencer Rawlins, his twenty bodyguards, and the harem of young girls he has around him. The music is exceptionally loud in here, and I can feel it in my chest. It smells like bubblegum and tequila.

My eyes land on Spencer Rawlins. His dick is being sucked by a naked brunette girl on her knees. In fact, all the girls are naked. Actually, all the girls are black-haired nymphs with dark eyes. Their eyes aren't real. No, they can't be. They seem demonic. They're wearing colored lenses.

Petite but juicy, they gawk at Spencer. They crave his attention like puppies with drool dripping from their chins.

"There you are," Spencer addresses me. He doesn't let me see how affected he is by the blowjob he's getting. It must be a good one. The girl sucks him like a Katantian pro would. "I had a slight slip up earlier. One of the girls got hurt. My men had to take care of her."

Did I want to know what these men did to the hurt girl? Probably not. Would I care? I don't know. Probably not. I'm the Prince of Katantia. This shit doesn't faze me.

"It's nice to meet you, Mr. Rawlins." I would offer my hand, but I'm guessing his fingers are glistening because he fingerfucked the girls before my arrival. I don't want their juices on my hands.

"You're more impressive than imagined," he says. I stand there, being ogled by Spencer Rawlins. All the mornings in the gym before anyone wakes? They've paid off. My brother might be the better guy, but I'm the beast. He analyzes my appearance with skeptical eyes, and I feel like I'm in Cambridge all over again. His mind runs a thousand operations at once. No wonder he's a business-savvy billionaire. "Aram's an ugly man, but you turn it into something fierce. Good for you. You get more pussy than the rest of us."

“With all due respect, I’m just a prince,” I tell him. I’m not impressed by him thus far. Getting a public dicksucking isn’t an accomplishment. But I won’t tell him that.

“You are, aren’t you?” He smirks, and I see the monster in him. “Do you like my girls?”

I let my eyes wander because it would be rude not to. The girls are fine. Average at best. I’ve had better. “Yes, who wouldn’t?”

“I ordered them in honor of your wife. They look just like her, don’t you think?”

The world turns upside down. Valentina and I have an understanding. I don’t think we particularly like it, but we participate in it. This man is poking a bear. He might be rich as fuck, but my right hook can cause brain damage.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I ask. I keep my voice calm. If he’s a bitch, I can be a bitch, too.

“Your wife. She was destined for great things before her entire family uprooted itself to go to Katantia.” Repulsion rains on me and my fists are itching. I have to be careful. His men might not have a chance with me on a one-on-one, but as a group, they put me down. This wife Spencer speaks of isn’t allowed to live if it’s not by my side. I won’t end myself prematurely. *Think this through.* Even if Spencer seems like a bigger creep than my dad, who’s the fucking King of Katantia. “Her father made the impossible choice. He always had to play the hero that Travis Cross...”

The girl on her knees keeps sucking his dick, and I wonder when this will end. There’s no business for me here. I won’t be the reason for the escalation between Aram and Spencer. If they want to fight, they can do it on their own terms. I struggle to keep my focus.

“Does she have tight holes?”

“Who?” I’m lost.

“Your whore of a wife.”

“The tightest.” My wife is incomparable. She is my entire life. Being away from her robs me of my air. Out here in a foreign country, I feel estranged and weak without her.

I’ve gone on trips without Valentina before. This time, it feels as though I’ve been sucker-punched. My object didn’t react well to her best friend’s visit. I thought they’d be all over each other, but their chemistry is off. Valentina doesn’t want a lot in life. She wants me. Period. That girl? Spencer’s daughter? She has no idea what she wants.

If my brother has the hots for her, he’s in for a challenge.

“I would’ve liked to fuck those holes. I’m sure she’s quite the looker, taking after her mommy.” Spencer spears the words into my skull. He’s trying to get a rise out of me. I won’t let him succeed. We’ve had royal press training. A billionaire bitch won’t break me. “Were you her first?”

He doesn’t let me answer. He continues, “I bet you weren’t. The Cross women are the filthiest of them all. Whores in the nastiest way. You wave a wad of cash in front of their ugly faces, and they take the bait. Then, it’s time to feast on the fish you’ve caught. I like it crispy and without bones. Do you know how painful it is to remove a living person’s bones by force?”

I don’t flinch.

“I wouldn’t know, of course.” Spencer smirks again. The girl bobs up and down on his dick. It finally looks like he’s going to finish. He groans, grabbing the back of her head. He pushes himself further into her throat until I hear her gagging. He lets her go after a hot minute. She turns around, wiping the drops of come from her leaking mouth.

I’m a sexual person. I like this sort of shit. Why is my dick dead right now? Fuck. “Aren’t you going to ask about your daughter?”

“Who?” The girls snicker. Out of the corner of my eye, their tits jiggle. Real, like my wife’s tits. Fuck. He ordered women that look like Valentina. My mind is racing. They’re horrible imitations of my one and only.

“Mandy Rawlins.”

“Oh, that little bitch.” He clears his throat. He invites me to sit on the opposite side of his booth. The naked harem of girls doesn’t look at me, and I’m glad. I don’t want my weakness to be used against me right now. Upon closer inspection, Spencer looks like somebody I know. I can’t quite place it. His hair is ash white, and his skin is full of wrinkles, displaying his long and busy life. You don’t make billions by sleeping. “She’s not my daughter.”

“Then what is she?” I inquire, confused.

“Just a little bitch that I unfortunately fathered. I’d get rid of her if I could.” I don’t want to know what that means. I have a sick father already. I know people with God complexes. However, my father actually has a God complex. This man in front of me? He might be a God. Spencer Rawlins doesn’t look like it right now, sexed-up and probably on Viagra. But he shits money and privilege. “When she comes back, I’ll send her to the factories. She’ll learn what real work entails. Cleaning up after me while she was growing up wasn’t enough. She needs to starve some more like the poor kids on the television. Perhaps she’ll end her life and put me out of my misery.”

Unmoved, I observe Spencer. He clearly has a lot to compensate for. I’ve been around men like him all my life. They don’t move me. They’re scared little shits with muscle to protect them because it doesn’t matter how much money they make. They’re still mortal.

“The Cross family deserves to be executed. Travis Cross is an atrocious man. He’s murdered and stolen. He’s a threat to society. I’m sure he raped his wife, and then he married her like a scumbag! Do you know what happened to Travis’s parents? They died in a car crash. He was so alone after that, abandoned and hopeless. He started stalking his neighbors, and he killed those poor people! Travis killed his wife’s parents because they looked at him the wrong way. He stole little Felicita and her brother. He coerced them. He groomed them! No wonder Felicita is so in love with him. His children are seeds of a demon in a human disguise.”

I listen to his bullshit, but I don't let it drown me. It's no secret that Travis isn't to be fucked with. My wife looks at me like I'm crazy every time I dare to speak up against that man. She idolizes him. She loves her dad with all of her heart because he never let her down. Everything he does, he does it, so his children have a future.

"I'd like to offer you cash in exchange for a year with your wife," Spencer rambles, and I freeze. "She'll be taken care of. I have lots of needs, and she'll come back to you a more experienced whore. I'm sure you Katantians appreciate that."

"No."

"I'm offering \$36.5 million. One hundred thousand dollars per day. Doesn't that sound enticing? Think of the cars you can buy." His attempts to entice me are futile. I don't fall for that shit. I don't want for anything. "I'll be paying her more than the average whore. I'll also send you the money she'll make on the days when I'll let her be fucked by my friends. What do you say?"

"No." The word burns on my tongue. I want to twist his neck and end this farce.

"You want more money, don't you? It's your wife that I'm going to be fucking, after all. Plus, you and the king have been inside of her. I believe the king fucked her ass. I think I have a picture of it." My pulse is sky-rocketing. I clench my fists underneath the table, and I keep a straight face while Spencer pulls out his phone. He scrolls through its content, and then he turns it around. It's not a picture.

It's a video.

It's a fucking video of my wife's asshole bleeding while Aram mutilates her.

I've been doing all right, but this video takes me back to a time in which I didn't know where the road would end.

"Don't worry your head about it. He didn't rip her open. It's blood from her pussy. He fucked her raw like the whore that she is." I try to numb out the unbearable sounds of pain my wife is making while Aram thrusts in and out of her in the

video. “What do you say? Fifty million for you. Pimping pays well. You should try it out some more. Katantia has a lot of business for men like you.”

“I don’t pimp out women,” I say through my bared teeth.

Spencer Rawlins chuckles, throwing back his head. “Oh, you don’t? Poor Aris. Fifty million. Yes or no. I’ll make you a rich man. Your wife will be a new babe by the time she comes back to you.”

“Fuck you.”

“I’ll do you one better. I’ll fuck your wife.”

I rise from the booth, and I grab him by the collar, pressing him against the cushions. “Don’t ever speak of my wife that way again.”

“I’m doing you a favor. I’m paying to get rid of your trash. People dare to claim I’m a bad guy! I believe in climate change, Aris. Recycle. It’s good for the earth.” He’s not making any sense, and it agitates me even more.

“Stand down!” Orders are barked behind me, but I don’t move. Underneath my grip, Spencer is panting. The girls are whimpering, fake worry splashed on their faces. “I’ll shoot you.”

“It’s okay. He won’t go any further.” Spencer’s body is giving up on him, but he sounds stern. “He knows that I only need to make one call. I have lots of trigger-friendly friends over there in the region.” I shudder. It’s not a joke. We’re a small island surrounded by superpowers. We’re easy to wipe out. “One call and your entire country will be turned to ash. Is that what you want?”

I let him go.

“Good boy.”

I sneer at him. “I’m not selling my wife to you.”

“I accept that.” Then, Spencer adds, “I hope you’re ready to live with the consequences. Ride off into the sunset with your whore for all I care.”



A RUDE AWAKENING BEFALLS ME.

I'm back home, but I don't want to leave Valentina's side. After fucking up the business deal with Spencer Rawlins, I was flown back home out of emergency. Thank fuck because I couldn't take one more minute in that monster's presence.

An intense need to protect Valentina overcomes me, and I can't perform my duty if she's constantly at the hospital. I can't keep ignoring her like I did before we talked, so I give her my attention whenever I see her. Now, after our long conversation, her mom's finally coming home. That means I can steal my wife away more often. Felicita is feeling much better. It doesn't mean much in the grand scheme of things, but I have to protect her daughter for now.

A couple of days after her mom's return home from the hospital, Valentina brightens up again. It's not a genuine happy mood, but I'll take her smile in any way, shape or form.

That night, she goes to bed naked. I join her. "How are things going?"

"Great. She's still sick with the flu." She says that with immense satisfaction. The flu means Felicita stays out of the palace. Aram doesn't fuck sick women.

I pull her toward me, pressing her back against my front underneath the sheets. She lets out a deep breath. "We haven't done this in a long time."

The back of her neck tempts me. I kiss it. My mouth moves to her shoulder blades, across her spine. She's ticklish, and she flops around like a fish out of water. I grab her pussy, flicking her clit with my thumb. Her giggle comes from her heart, and I save the sound in my memory. It's been too long since she's sounded a tiny bit carefree.

"Aris."

"Sweetheart."

I stop with the kisses, and I embrace her from the back again. My fingers remain at her clit, lazily playing with her.

“I love you.”

“Say that again, sweetheart.” Fuck. I never knew it could feel like this. I don’t understand love. I felt an ounce of its realness with my mom and grandma. They showered us with the good stuff. When they weren’t around anymore, darkness took over. What am I saying? The mask fell, and the darkness showed its real face. My siblings and I finally saw what Katantia truly meant. So, no. I don’t understand love.

But the girl pressed against me has forced me to find out what it feels like.

“I love you.” She grinds against me, shifting to look up at me with her big eyes. They’re dark, but tonight, they gleam. “I can finally say it out loud.”

Valentina nuzzles into my arms, drawing us even closer. My cock presses against her, and she welcomes it. I plant a kiss on her forehead while I’m fingering her tight pussy. She writhes against me, making me harder. Against her forehead, I say, “I’m obsessed with every breath you take.”

Sometimes, I catch myself counting, one more breath of life. She’s alive and kicking next to me. She’s mine. I own her.

“You’re mine forever,” I remind her. It’s not like she can forget. I won’t let her. I’ll make her happy. “Is this what you wanted?”

Reluctantly, I remove my fingers from her pussy. They’re dripping in her juices, and I use them to stroke myself. Lifting her hips, I poke at her entrance. Not going in, I tease her slit with my cock. Her tiny whimpers of pleasure break me into pieces.

“It’s so wrong.”

“I know.”

“But we’re married,” she purrs. Her lips are parted, and I know exactly what I want to stuff her mouth with, but we’re taking it slow again.

“I didn’t mean for it to happen. I just... You were the man I could never have.” She moans as I press the tip of my cock inside of her just a little. My girth always challenges her, even after I’ve fucked her countless times. “I know that I should hate you, but I never could. Not for real. You’re my soft spot. I can’t deny you. Please, don’t ever hurt me again. If you do, I won’t be responsible for my reaction.”

I fill her, my balls pressing against her skin. I plant a kiss on the top of her right shoulder. “I promise.”

I promise to keep you safe. I promise to give you the life I’ve always envisioned for you.

I promise to obsess over you forever.

CHAPTER 19

VALENTINA



TWENTY-ONE YEARS OLD

ARIS SHOULDN'T BE SMOKING IF HE WANTS TO DRIVE US BACK home.

He takes a drag of his joint, and then he offers me some. I refuse. I don't smoke. Dad would kill me. I tilt my head to the side, eyeing the joint. I can feel Aris's smirk on me. I grab the joint, and I inhale.

"Take it slow, sweetheart," Aris warns me when I start coughing. He takes me into his arms, and I breathe in his scent. I close my eyes, dreaming of a better day. It's winter, and we should be freezing our asses off on the mountain next to Euphoria, but we're not. My husband's in sweatpants, and I'm in my silk pajama robe. We couldn't sleep.

Kamila is gone.

Mandy is... Her father has her.

Weston is a mess.

We're in the middle of it all, trying to figure out our next move.

"I hate smoking," I declare, handing him back the joint. I won't be doing that again. Aris takes it, and he inhales. When he exhales, he does that thing with his lips. He makes smoking sexy. That sounds whack.

He butts the cigarette, and then he kisses the top of my head like the old times. "We should leave."

“I don’t want to abandon my mother,” I tell him, pouting against his strong chest. I can hear his beating heart clearly. I want to reach into his chest and steal it, package it. Have it on me at all times. This heart keeps my husband by my side.

“I can’t really argue against that,” Aris responds, defeated. “I... I don’t want to leave the country behind. It feels irresponsible.”

“Who are you, and what have you done with Aris Wraith?” I ask. He caresses my hair, reaching beneath to cup the back of my neck. I let myself drift off while he rubs my skin with his thumb. It’s not sexual in any way. We’re just in each other’s presence.

I have everything I ever wanted.

He’s finally fully mine.

My arms are wrapped around him, and I start to feel a high from the weed. It’s intense, but I can handle it. I’ve been feeling this heightened sense in Aris’s presence for years now.

“I’m sorry for everything. What I did was unforgivable. I broke your heart before I even knew that it was mine.” He presses me against his body as if I’m thinking of running. I would never. I’m here to stay.

The one time I ran from him, I fell, and I tripped.

“Now, you know. So take good care of it,” I warn him. We’re parked next to Euphoria, the café with the best view of the Katantian city and the palace. It’s the highest spot that’s reachable by car. The view is magnificent. The sun’s about to come up, and the sky’s got this pink shade to it. I don’t see all of that.

I’m enveloped in my husband.

I shouldn’t feel this happy while our families are both broken beyond repair.

But I do.

And that was my mistake.



I HAVEN'T UPDATED MY SHOT.

My eyes wander across the crowded beach of the South Side. We've picked the nudist beach because our intentions aren't pure, but Aris and I haven't left the car yet. I'm on top of him in my tiny bikini.

He's shirtless and hard as a rock beneath me.

"Is this what you want?" he asks sincerely.

I nod. "Yes. Please. I don't know where the world is going, but I know that you and I are forever. We'll make the best baby there ever was."

Aris beams. My fingers trace that tiny scar above his eyebrow. My back is pressed against the steering wheel. As tiny as I am in comparison to Aris, we still don't fit in this car.

His hand presses against my belly while his other hand grips the back of my thigh. "A baby. Our baby. Fuck."

His aura darkens, and I worry. He breathes hard, and I kiss his nose delicately. "Our first baby is with your mom. She's taking care of her, I'm sure."

"Don't say those sort of things..." He turns away, but I see that the words touched him in his glossy eyes.

"We were punished for our sins," I tell him. Katantians don't believe in any religion. I don't either. I have a connection to something that I can't quite name. "They took our baby from us because we weren't ready. I believe that we're in that space now where we can become our own family."

He nods. I've never seen him like this, and it opens up a new chamber in my heart where I'll lock this moment in forever.

"It'll take some time until we get pregnant, though. I've only been off the shot for two months," I explain.

“Then let’s start practicing.”

I chuckle. Leaning forward, I kiss my husband’s eyes. I lick away his sadness. The tiny tears taste bitter and ugly, but I take them because they’re a part of him. I grind on his growing erection, and my bikini goes wet. His cock makes me ache every time it’s inside of me, but he kisses the pain away. We don’t fuck and go anymore. Part of our new routine’s holding each other after we’re spent. It’s one of my favorite moments.

Sliding my wet bikini aside, I play with myself while Aris watches. He’s letting me take the lead, and I do just that. We’ve been practicing. Once I’m confident that I can withstand his cock, I stroke his erection from above his swim trunks. My hand dips below, and I take him out, angry, veiny, and ready to fuck me. Aris adjusts in his seat, careful not to crush me.

We’re expected at the beach in a few, so we have to hurry.

I lower myself on his length. I bite my lip so that I don’t cry out. My threshold for pain is low, and Aris’s dick isn’t making it any easier. My husband takes possession of my mouth while I find a comfortable rhythm to ride him.

Aris finishes faster when I drag it out. He likes me playing coy, inexperienced. The blush of my cheeks adds to that particular taste. We have lots of role-plays, but this one is the most efficient. So I drop my signature deep voice, and I go high. My moans are louder and more urgent. I’m sweating, even if it’s a cold season. I haven’t taken off the top of my bikini, and Aris fondles my breast with his empty hand.

“Touch me,” I pant, and he listens. He squeezes my skin, and then he drops his other hand to my pussy. He parts my wetness, picking up on our combined juices.

“This tight pussy is my home. I won’t ever have it taken away from me.” He kisses the side of my neck while he rubs my clit. “Come on my fingers, sweetheart. Make me sticky. You’ll lick me clean afterward. Show me how much you’ve always wanted me.”

I come for him, clenching around his cock. I slow down for a moment while he makes me lick his fingers clean. Our eyes meet, and his smirk kills me. Then I pick up my speed. I don't have double orgasms very often, but when I do, they're heavenly. Our thrusts are more aggressive and forceful. He spills inside of my first, and I follow with my second orgasm.

I go numb in his arms. I lose track of time. When he slides out of me, I feel empty. He fixes my bikini, and he gives my pussy a pat. "Let it cook now."

"I told you. It'll take time..." I feel like napping in his arms.

"This is Katantia, sweetheart. Our baby's on its way."

Aris helps me out of the car, sweeping me off my feet. He carries me while his come sits inside of me, warming me up. His sadness has dried up, and in its place, I see the typical clown that entertains his people.

I hope we get our baby.

It'll bring us a piece of good news.



MY HUSBAND IS RUBBING THE SOLES OF MY FEET WITH HIS delicious fingers. He's staring at nothing in particular with his gray eyes of delight. He's happy. The family's back together. There's going to be an addition to the family.

A little bundle of joy.

A girl.

She's growing in my belly.

"Have you decided which room she'll get?" Aris asks. We're dressed up and waiting for the clock to strike nine. Kamila has invited us to a night out with her new men. It's been months since Aris and I decided to have a baby. At the time, our world was a mess. Kamila had disappeared into thin air, and we didn't know what had happened to her.

It turns out that she wasn't abducted. She wasn't harmed in her time away. No, Kamila spent months hiding as part of a plan my father and my uncle had constructed. In the meantime, she fell in love with her protector and my uncle's son. Now, she has two loverboys, and she brought them back home to Katantia.

I'm pumped about them because they're hot as fuck. My hormones aren't making it easy on me. At all. Meanwhile, my husband is just happy his big sister wants to hang out with him.

"I'm thinking the one on my side. Your side has the closet. We won't hear her if she makes a sound from over there," I remark. My feet will be covered in white sneakers tonight because those are the only shoes that I can wear without having my feet swell. I put on a little black dress with sparkly spaghetti straps. No bra. My bump is showing. I feel good, wearing make-up again after being holed up inside for so long.

Sneaking out for small chores doesn't do it for me. I want to be seen. I don't hide anymore. I love my husband, and he loves me. We're fucked up, but we own up to it.

"Don't they have baby monitors for that? I bet your dad knows all about it," Aris responds. His thumb rubs my big toe, and my insides curl in relaxation. His fingers work magic. We do this every night as a good night ritual. Only tonight, we're getting ready to go out.

"I don't want my dad's help."

"Don't be so harsh on him," Aris reprimands me. He leans down to plant a gentle kiss on my foot.

"I'll be as harsh as I want to be. He fucked up! He didn't keep us safe. Jordan had to come all the way from Chicago to fix it! My mom can finally rest and live her life. I'm disappointed in him. All these years, he meant everything to me. He had the answer to the questions of the universe. Until I realized that he didn't. He's a mere mortal posing as a God!" I rant, and my heart palpitates. At that moment, the baby decides to kick, and I press my open palm against the spot. Aris follows the movement, and he covers my hand with his.

I'm breathing hard. I must have upset the being in my belly. *I'm sorry, sweet girl. I won't trash talk your grandpa anymore. Even though he deserves it. He really does. He put grandma through hell. Ok. I'll get myself together.*

"She moved?" Aris asks, astounded with wide eyes.

I nod. "It was a tiny flutter, but it was right there."

He curses under his breath. Then he runs a hand through his perfectly styled hair, messing it up. "I'm not ready for her."

"What do you mean?" I ask, shifting our hands so that they're intertwined.

"She's going to change everything. Mark my words." He says that like it's a bad thing.

"I know she will." My baby girl will be epic. I'm aware of it already.

"Sweetheart, one day you'll understand." I never know what he means by those words. They keep reappearing, and they make me shiver on the spot. I'm distracted when he touches upon a subject we've been actively discussing ever since the baby became a she. "But today's not that day... So we'll call her Penelope?"

"Penelope Jade," I remind him.

"Won't it be easier if she has one name?" He looks at me, and I want to jump his bones, pregnant lady or not. My hormones have been going nuts these past few weeks, and it's resulted in lots of frisky situations. Thankfully, we live alone now. My husband's brother used to live with us, but Weston moved out after Kamila left Katantia a couple of months ago. Aris and I can happily enjoy the freedoms of having our home to ourselves.

"Penelope Jade Wraith has a nice ring to it," I claim, awfully sure of the name.

"She sounds like somebody's grandma," he remarks, and I draw my eyebrows together. My baby doesn't deserve to be bullied. Not even by her dad. Fuck that!

“You. Will. Never. Speak. Of. Our. Baby. That. Way. Again.” And after I take a moment to breathe, I add, “And hopefully she’ll grow old and gray and become somebody’s grandma. What about your sister? Kamila Ruby Wraith. Who came up with that, huh?”

“I didn’t mean to offend you,” Aris says sincerely. He’s a joker. It’s the role he inhabits in public, and it’s hard for him to shake it off. But. I. Don’t. Care. My baby will have an epic name because she deserves to be treated like a princess—a queen.

She’ll never be a cockroach like her mom.

“I’m seriously turned on by you going Momma bear on me,” he confesses.

I shake my head. “Well, you’re not getting any pussy tonight. For a week! As punishment. She hears us when we talk. You have to be mindful of what you say. You don’t want her to have any early trauma, do you?”

He sighs, and my eyes fall on that scar above his eye. It represents everything he was in the past, but it adds to his beauty. “I just have to give your pussy a pat, and you’ll be writhing under me, begging for me to fuck you. See, your pussy and I have a pact that I won’t break. When I see her all pretty and pink and glistening, I just have to make her feel good—”

“Aris!” I call out, and he starts tickling me.

Laughing and touching each other inappropriately, we fool around until it’s time to leave.

She changed everything, Aris. Too bad you weren’t here to witness it.

CHAPTER 20

ARIS



THIRTY YEARS OLD

A PREGNANT LADY AT HOME MEANS WE BOTH HAVE TO GET tested once a week. Our health care system is too busy these days. After Kamila came back, people have been going at it with the parties. Our doctors are busy with broken ribs, chlamydia, and dildos stuck too far up people's asses. That means we, even as rulers of this country, can't keep the doctors busy.

My wife's pregnant. Everything has to be perfect. The entire family is working together so that our little baby can join us soon.

I carry the containers of pee and blood on my walk to the palace. Passing my sister's home, I'm still startled by the men that now protect her property. Shame fills me. I was never able to provide safety for my sister.

Picking up my pace, I leave the men at my sister's property to do their job. At the palace, I hand our pee and blood samples to the staff. They will take care of sending it to the lab. In a couple of days, we'll have the results as always.

On my way out, I crash into Travis, who's standing in the middle of the entrance hall, doing nothing. He stares at the doors, watching as people move in and out of the palace.

"Don't tell me you'll install metal detectors," I joke, taking my place next to him. The more I look at the entrance, the more I feel like it needs renovating. Sure, the staff cleans it well. It's shiny and without an ounce of dust. But it's

antiquated. This whole ancient theme with Greek columns all over the palace is getting old.

“That’s actually a good idea,” Travis responds. He flinches awake from whatever depths he was in. Rubbing his face, he faces me. “We should have a conversation.”

“We? As in you and I?”

“Don’t play dumb, Aris. I know you’re not,” Travis snaps. He leads the way out of the palace, and I keep up with his pace. When I realize that he’s taking us to the graveyard, I roll my eyes.

“What are we doing here?” I ask, annoyed. I sound like a spoiled child. In many ways, I am.

Travis doesn’t answer my question. Instead, he swipes his card to allow us entrance into the graveyard. I hear the click, and I see the red light blink. Travis lets me in first. He follows, gently shutting the gate behind him.

I don’t move further into my family’s resting place.

“My daughter is pregnant with your daughter,” he states. Travis seems restless, twisting the wedding band on his finger. I’ve never noticed that he even wears a wedding band. When I raise my gaze, his darting eyes make me take a step back.

“Yes, I know,” I respond purely because when Travis Cross speaks, you engage. You don’t give Travis Cross a reason to get upset.

“She hasn’t... Valentina hasn’t opened to me ever since you put that ring on her finger,” Travis says. “Even before that... There was something wrong, but I never caught what it was.”

Travis stops fiddling with his ring. Now, he clenches his fist. Am I going to be beaten up in front of my family? They’ll turn in their graves, for sure. He continues, “I don’t know what you did, but you have hurt my daughter.”

“I have,” I reply in honesty. There’s no need to lie.

Travis Cross takes a step forward, and I feel small. We’re almost the same height, but his eyes have seen more tragedy

than I could ever even envision. The hands that protected my wife have murdered in cold blood. He's caused my family agony. My family has done the same to his.

"I will kill you if you hurt her again."

"Noted." His nostrils flare. I fight to keep from showing my reaction. It's not every day that your father-in-law threatens to end your life. "Will you bury me next to my mother? You murdered her after all."

"Yes." His narrow eyes darken, and then the devil exits his soul. "Don't make me do that."

"I won't. I'll try."

"That's not good enough. I need to trust you. I don't. Not one bit," Travis admits. The dark rings of fatigue below his eyes gawk at me. "You will have two of my girls soon. I never wanted my girl to stay on Katantia. This was always a temporary plan. She wasn't supposed to stay here. She was supposed to move to Italy to follow her dreams. You ruined all of that..."

"What do you want me to say?"

"I can't murder my granddaughter's father."

"No, that's a bad thing to do."

"I agree. So you have to promise that you'll leave them in peace when the time comes."

"The time for what?"

"You're a ticking time bomb," Travis tells me. The tight smile on his face fails to reach his eyes. "Whatever happened between my daughter and you, it'll come back to bite you in the ass."



I DON'T WANT TO BE HERE. I ACT LIKE I DO BECAUSE IT'LL make me more popular with my wife and my sister. They want to go out and have fun, while I don't want to risk their lives. I

want to stay inside, hide in our houses behind barricaded doors.

I wouldn't mind taking my wife for a swim either. But I don't feel safe out in the open with her. We'd have to have a backup, but our swims are our private spot, and guards would jeopardize that.

Fighting to keep my eyes open, I watch the show. My hand is entwined with Valentina's. At some point, she feels the baby, and we touch her belly. It's too soon for big movements, but she insists that the baby is giving her secret messages.

The show ends, and I feel elated. Finally, we can go home, fuck a little. Eat something.

But no.

The actresses invite us for a night out. I play my part well. I've been doing it for years. I was spoon-fed manipulation as a kid, so nobody notices that I'm not in the mood to party. It's one of those days where I want to go home, watch a movie, and cuddle my wife safely in our bed.

At the end of our dinner at the Greek restaurant with the actresses, who keep trying to proposition me, Kamila, and her men, I fabricate a story on how I have to leave the house early the next day. I don't. My schedule is cleared for my wife, but she doesn't know that. I come and go at my own leisure.

"I don't want to leave you alone. It's not really safe," I tell my wife, rubbing her arms. They get cold easily, and the wind is cruel tonight. She looks at me with her bewitching eyes, wide and loving. We're finally at a place again where she shows her adoration for me. It awakens sentiments in me that I don't know how to deal with.

"But Kamila has Alex, Fylox, and her bodyguards. I'll be much safer here than with you pushing the speed limit to get home in time," Valentina responds, pouting at me. I want to part those lips and stuff my cock between them. She knows I'd never speed with her pregnant next to me. The Ford is my lady, but my wife is my sweetheart. I only have room for one in my heart these days.

“We’ve got her,” Alex tells me. I know they do. He and Fylox can take me on any time. I’ve been working out my entire life. Occasionally, I’ve swung my fists at people. But I’ve never taken on an American professional athlete. I’m not ashamed to admit that he’s a massive man, all bulked up in the right places. He behaves like a celebrity; I notice it in the smile that seems so genuine that even I am spellbound by it. I feel like I trust the guy, and I’ve barely exchanged two sentences with him.

Then there’s Fylox. He’s not as big as Alex, but he’s got a ferocious nature. He could be a model in one of those boring shows Valentina has been watching on the laptop lately. He looks like he could give a fuck less about who I am. I don’t impress him at all. He barely even acknowledges my existence. To a man like me, who’s usually the center of attention, that’s a problem. He’s fucking my sister, and he thinks he’s too good for me?

Fylox doesn’t say much in our presence. Alex chats away while Fylox calculates how he’s going to grill my neck if he catches me slipping.

He annoys me, but he doesn’t play when it comes to my sister.

Kamila is safe. If Kamila’s safe, I can leave my pregnant wife in her presence.

“We’ll bring her back to you before midnight,” Alex adds. I shift to face Valentina. I take her in. I never thought she could be more radiant than she already was. But now she’s exactly that. Every day that our baby grows inside of her, her glow becomes more apparent. She’s the only thing I see. I don’t want to see anything else.

I can’t wait to meet Penelope Jade.

Rolling my lips, I exhale. “Babe? Behave, yeah? Don’t be late. I love you.”

Nobody knows that she’s my sweetheart. It’ll stay that way. We separate our public and private life well. Valentina tilts her head to the side, blessing me with one of her

bewitching smiles. Her lips are fucking puffy these days, and I can't hold it back much longer. I grab her, kissing the fuck out of what's mine.

She removes herself from the kiss. Only I can hear when she whispers, "I'll bring home sweets that you can eat off my body. How does that sound?"

"I just want to eat your pussy, sweetheart."

She giggles in response. "Shh! They'll hear you... You can eat my pussy, but I want to go for a swim tomorrow. Will you take me swimming after you return from your appointment? I miss the water."

I'll take her swimming right when we wake up, for fuck's sake. I pull her closer, making a show of our little hug. Scandalizing my sister and her new boyfriends, I grope my pregnant wife in front of everyone.

"Be a good big brother for me and jerk off to my image before I come home," Valentina teases, and I let her. I might do just that.

"Don't let them change you," I tell my wife. "I love you just the way you are. Naughty as fuck but mine."

I plant a kiss on top of her head, and then I enter my car.

Fucking strawberries. V loves them way too much. I've been talking to a guy in Germany who's all too willing to become my strawberry delivery man. I make a mental note to speed up negotiations with him before the baby comes.

Without Valentina in the car, I decide to speed.

I'll be home in less than ten minutes.

When I hit the highway, I realize that my brakes are broken.

I try to steer the car towards the side of the road so that I don't do any damage to anyone. I hear the speeding car before I feel it. In a matter of seconds, life flashes before my eyes. Even though I feel myself burning at the fire that has broken out in the car, I see myself in the water with Valentina. Back when everything was peaceful. When I was looking out for her

with a slightly obsessive nature but at a safe distance. She wins the race against me, and I want to hug her, but I can't. She's not mine...

I can't see. Everything hurts, and it smells like death.

Before I drift off, I think of our two babies. Which one will I get to meet?

CHAPTER 21

VALENTINA



PRESENT

IT'S BEEN A MONTH SINCE THE GRAVEYARD, AND ARIS HASN'T looked me in the eye ever since I told him that he raped me.

Everyone in the palace claims that he's distanced himself. He doesn't speak to anyone except the queen. Kamila is the only person he can't deny. She communicates with him about Penelope Jade. He hasn't seen our daughter much. The one time he visited us after the graveyard turned into a disaster. He threw a tantrum, the baby couldn't stop crying, and I was silently shellshocked. I've been through this once before. I don't need a repeat of what happened after he took my first time.

We were in a better place before the accident.

After Aris's tantrum, Kamila offered to take Penelope Jade to the house so that Aris could see the baby. Of course, she's the queen, and she has better things to do than meddle with our relationship. Kamila's visits have been sparse.

I have avoided Aris. I let him know about my plans through Kamila. She said he was okay with them.

I'm unsure of what will happen now. The country's thriving. Aris is awake. The baby's doing well. Mandy and Weston decided to leave Katantia for good. They booked a jet to America the other day. I invited myself to the trip. I can't stay on Katantia any longer. I'll explode. I need a break, and I want to visit my father's grave.

Penelope Jade has more luggage than Mandy, Weston, the guards, and I. Our special guards sit in the row behind us, chatting amongst themselves. Mandy and Weston are awfully cuddly to my right. They're supposedly reading one of Mandy's articles on Katantia, but all I see is Weston's hand subtly groping Mandy's tit while she giggles like a naughty schoolgirl.

I roll my eyes. I can't ask them to be decent because I've done worse. But it annoys me. When Aris used to grope me in public, he did just that. He groped me. He didn't hide it. He wasn't ashamed. I guess Weston hasn't fucked the Western standards out of Mandy just yet.

Meanwhile, I occupy the other corner of the jet. Penelope Jade is pressed against my chest, her fingers lazily fiddling with my jacket. She's been fidgeting for hours, unable to find peace. It's as if she knows that we're leaving her father behind for a while.

I've come to terms with it.

Jordan and my mom only agreed to our departure after I passed their hideous tests. They're making me feel like a cockroach all over again. I can make my own decisions, thank you very much. At this point, I'm pretty much a single parent. It's been a couple of months now, and I'm starting to form a routine with Penelope Jade. I handle her just fine.

We're about to embark on her first trip outside of Katantia. I have her passport and all the other documents they'll check at the airport. Alex is expecting us. Mandy and Weston will stay for a couple of days until they continue their journey westward. Mom and Jordan insisted on that. Just to have somebody to check on how I'm doing with my own baby. It's pathetic. I wish I knew how to convince them that I can take care of us on my own.

One of the flight attendants approaches us, asking us to put our seatbelts on. They are about to close the door, and then it'll be take-off time.

I check Penelope Jade, but she doesn't need anything. She's drifting away just like I am. We woke up very early

today to get ready for our first trip together. I give Mandy notice, and she nods. I close my eyes, careful how I place my arms around my daughter. She's in a special belt that's connected to my seatbelt, so she can't slip off easily.

And then my peace is disrupted.

"What are you doing here?" Weston asks, and my eyes flutter open. Penelope Jade squirms in my arms like she knows exactly who's standing in the middle of this jet.

He looks like a fucking mess.

It seems Aris hasn't shaved in weeks. His hair has grown out, and there's a darker shade to it than before. Not that he was ever too blonde. His dirty blonde hair always had a tendency to be more dirty than blonde.

His clothes come out of our closet from back home, but they're wrinkled. The red eyes he sports tell me that he hasn't slept well. He seems skinnier, and that scares me. He hasn't accepted any staff back to the house after I left. Who feeds him? Does he even eat anything at all?

"I asked you a question, Aris." Weston doesn't back down. "Get your ass out of here."

"I'm coming with you. I won't miss Pen's first Christmas." His voice is tired, croaky.

"We're Katantian. We don't celebrate Christmas," Weston reminds his brother. Mandy holds on to Weston like Aris is about to attack them. He seems intimidating like this, all roughed up and dirty. I've seen worse from Aris. So I stay unbothered.

"Pen's not fully Katantian."

"Her name's Penelope Jade. Sit down, or leave. We're on a tight schedule," I blurt out. Aris twitches at the sound of my voice, and I don't take pleasure in that. Penelope Jade has calmed down after hearing her father's voice. If he thinks he can hold her in the state he's in, he's got something coming.

I may not dress up anymore, but my baby is looking like the star of our ensemble. I've dressed her in a cute baby outfit,

plush and warm for the cold weather in America. She looks like a little teddy bear, and she's all mine. Kamila got Penelope Jade tiny boots for the winter, and I've got them on the seat next to me along with her food and all of her other necessities.

We were supposed to go on this trip alone, but I can admit that Aris's presence doesn't bother me. I already felt a certain way about leaving him behind like this, brooding and unhappy.

Aris takes a seat across from us, and his eyes are fixated on his daughter. His eyes are glossy, and I inhale a sharp stench of alcohol. "You're drunk? Are you serious?"

He doesn't respond.

Weston is about to pounce on his brother to get him out of here when Mandy grabs his upper arm, holding him back with her presence, not her strength. She whispers something to him while eyeing me. I nod at her, and we have a silent understanding. I'm okay with Aris being here.

He just needs to do better.

Aris and I ignore each other on the flight.

Once we land, he looks sobered up from the alcohol but awfully miserable still. While we depart the jet, Mandy whispers to me that Aris didn't sleep at all. Behind us, Weston and Aris hiss around about who gets to carry the baby's bags.

I sigh.

It could be worse.



PENELOPE JADE'S EYES ARE WIDE AS THEY TAKE IN THE Indianapolis Airport. I don't want to put her in her stroller. We have our guards trailing us, keeping us safe. But I don't want to put a barrier between my baby and me right now.

I don't feel stability in this environment.

Before my family left Chicago to move to Katantia when I was a preteen, I barely remember making any trips outside of the city. We went to Detroit once. Maybe Milwaukee. But that was that. Dad didn't have time to take us on vacation. He was too busy working for Spencer Rawlins.

Indianapolis is a new place for me. I've worn its team's shirt for months now, and I'm also currently wearing one of the briefs that Alex sent for Weston. He didn't want them, so I grabbed them for myself. Long live the cockroach.

We don't have to wait for Alex.

As soon as we exit, he's there with an entourage of three cars—two for our guards and luggage, one for us. My cousin steps forward, and he's as bright as a star. His smile is infectious. Suddenly, I feel happy to be here.

The first thing he sees is us.

“Penelope Jade! It's no nice to finally meet you, sweet girl! She's grown so much. She seemed smaller on Facetime,” Alex says, hugging us. He shakes and kisses Penelope Jade's tiny hand, and my daughter beams a smile at him. “Welcome to Indianapolis. Let's get you guys home.”

His eyes land on my husband. Soon-to-be ex. Nemesis. My fatal flaw. Who is Aris these days?

“I wasn't expecting you,” Alex addresses him, shaking his hand. We haven't explained who Alex is to Aris. He only knows that Alex is my cousin. “It's good to see you.”

Aris nods halfheartedly.

Alex welcomes Weston and Mandy, and then we head to his home. He drives his SUV, which has a seat installed just for the baby. I bet that his dad made him go over the details ten thousand times. Alex is a very talkative man. Throughout the ride, he makes conversation with us about Katantia, the baby, and his career.

We don't talk about one topic.

Kamila.

Weston came to Indianapolis because I'm here with his niece. He wouldn't have stopped here if it were up to him. Weston doesn't talk to Alex while Mandy and I conversate the most with him. Kamila's husband is relaxed, charming, and easy to chat to. The complete opposite to Kamila's boyfriend Fylox.

Aris has no idea what's going on, and I can see that on top of everything else, this frustrates him as well.

We arrive at Alex's mansion inside of a gated community. Our things are taken to our rooms. We take some time to wash off the journey. In my private bathroom, I check Penelope Jade's diaper one more time.

Everyone assembles in Alex's massive dining room. Dinner's served by his trusted staff. Jordan keeps us up to date with every detail of his son's life. We have enough things to discuss, but Weston remains quiet.

Dinner is a continuation of the car ride.

Mandy and Weston retire to their room. Aris goes to his. Penelope Jade and I go to ours. I didn't ask, and he wouldn't know to offer, so I bathe Penelope Jade alone. It's a gloomy affair since we're both used to having my mother around for baths. I manage, though. I have everything I need within reach.

Once the baby's fresh and clean, I try to get her to sleep, but she's restless. She's not crying her eyes out, but she can't calm herself either. I decide to go on a walk in the mansion. With Penelope in my arms, I don't even feel tired. I'm too wired, being in this new place.

I end up at the gym. The lights are on, and I can hear somebody's shoes tweaking.

"Isn't there a law against working past bedtime?" I ask my cousin. He heard us walk in, so he's palming the basketball in his hand instead of dribbling it. He's bigger than Aris, and he's probably stronger at the moment, too.

"What are you guys doing up?" he asks, entranced by my daughter. She steals everyone's hearts.

“We can’t sleep.” I add, “I usually have one of the guards drive me around until she falls asleep. Or I just take endless walks around the house.”

“Can I hold her?” he asks.

“Fylox and Kamila say that you shouldn’t sweat on the baby. Dry off first,” I tell him cheekily. He smirks at me. We approach the benches where he empties two water bottles. Then he pats himself dry with one of the towels. For now, it’ll do. I hand Penelope Jade to Alex, and she’s already freaking out of excitement. She’s warmed up to the guy already. We all did from the moment he stepped into our lives.

Alex is a good guy. His only flaw is his obsession with work.

I watch as Alex talks and cheers Penelope Jade up. I wonder if she’ll ever fall asleep tonight. He can hold her with one hand over his head, but I beg him not to test that theory. We start exploring his mansion on foot.

“How is Kamila?” he asks. Of course, he knows the virtual answer to that. They’re still husband and wife. There’s no divorce plan. It’s just that she’s the Queen of Katantia, and he’s a one-time champion of his league. MVP. All-Star. Defensive Player of the Year. His dad mentions all of his accolades at least once a week. As he should. Alex Winters is a legend in the making, and nobody will stop him.

Not even the love of his life.

“She keeps herself busy with work, family, and Fylox. Not always in that order,” I comment. Penelope Jade’s face relaxes, and I have a feeling that she’ll finally fall asleep.

“She’s okay, though?”

I nod.

He exhales. “It’s strange sometimes. She’s the only woman I see, but I can’t see her through the screen. It hides all of her secrets.”

“Have you cheated on her at all?” I ask out of mere curiosity.

He looks at me as if I've offended him to the fullest. His smile drops. "No, I haven't. I'm not here to break my vows to Kamila. I do the work. Has your husband twisted your way of thinking about men?"

"Nah, not really. Our cheating was planned. I always knew that he was off..." I'd like to curse, but Penelope Jade's here with us. Half asleep but still present. "... entertaining other women. So you guys are really doing this? Two men and Kamila?"

Alex nods. "It sounds more complicated than it is."

"I bet." I have tons of images in my head, but I'm quick to wash them away. He's my cousin, and Kamila's the queen. There's nothing erotic about these two in my eyes. "How's the season going?"

"As I expected it to go."

"Which means?"

He smirks. "I'm winning."

"Good for you." Penelope Jade falls asleep, cocooned in Alex's massive and long arms. "You're good with kids."

"That's what all the Moms say," he comments.

"Will you ever have your own?"

He sighs. "It's up to Kamila."

"What happens if Fylox impregnates her first?" I ask. Am I trying to cause drama? Perhaps. Cockroach, die.

"He won't," he states, sounding just like his father. "And if he should, which he won't, but hypothetically speaking, it's not a competition. He's my best friend, and she's my wife."

"You sound so Katantian. I'm proud of you." I grin at him.

"I don't take that as a compliment." He clears his throat. "Listen, I've been thinking. Tomorrow, when we go to your father's grave, I want you to consider whether you'd like to move here with me for a while. I know how overbearing my father can be. I see how the family treats you two. If you need time away from the helicopters, you're welcome here anytime."

I have enough space, and I live alone. You can travel with me to my games if you don't want to stay here on your own."

I find myself staring at the tiles on the floor. "Thank you. It's true. Our family's a bit too much. If I'm frank with you, I have no idea what I'm going to do next. I have Penelope Jade, and it seems like I'm going to be taking care of her on my own. Aris needs more time... He's not with us at the moment. I don't know if he'll ever be again."

"He'll come around," Alex says, trying to comfort me. It doesn't work.

I sniffle. "I missed my mom earlier. We always bathe Penelope Jade together. She's not too heavy yet, so I didn't need any help, but I felt so alone."

"You're not alone. You have the entire family. Everyone loves you and Penelope Jade," he reassures me.

"At the end of the day, it's just her and me. I never wanted it like that. When we tried for a baby, I thought we'd go through it together. Now, I'm a single parent. I should just stop making plans."

Alex glances at Penelope Jade. "You shouldn't have to do this alone. Are you sure you don't want Aris to have a room close to yours? You'll still have your privacy, but he needs to be around her. You're not divorced. He's only in recovery."

I sigh, running my hand through my hair.

"Let's think about it tomorrow after we visit my father's grave. I need to decide whether I'll take you up on that offer of yours."



WHEN WE ATE BREAKFAST EARLIER, I WAS SURPRISED AT Aris's refreshed appearance. Even now that I'm by my father's grave, and he's holding Penelope Jade, I'm shook. He's trimmed his beard so that it doesn't look like a wild bush. His hair is styled appropriately. He's put on clothes for the occasion, and his eyes are seemingly rested.

He's not drunk, so he gets to hold Penelope Jade. Weston observes his brother with curiosity while Mandy's attached herself to Weston by his arm. Alex stands beside them, but he's not smiling for once.

They're giving me my privacy. They don't look at me, but I see them standing there.

The gravesite is spotless, as promised by Alex. He doesn't always have the time to tend to it himself because of his constant traveling. At least he tries. I won't fault him for his job.

Now that I'm finally here with my father, I don't know how to act. I kneel at the site, and I feel my eyes water. There's a fuel running through my veins as I read what's on his gravestone. There's no mention of my father's dark side. His parents are also buried here, but I don't feel any connection to them because I never met them, unfortunately. When my dad was a teen, my grandparents died in a tragic car accident that changed the course of my father's life.

He's here beneath me. My fingers tremble. I don't want to think about his bones. I don't want to know what's going on down there. In my head, he's still somewhere, snapping at the people who work for him at the palace. In my head, he'll come to my bedside at night before I go to sleep, and he'll call me his strawberry.

I lost faith in my dad after my mom was hospitalized over a year ago. We were promised peace, but we received more of Aram's fuckery. I couldn't do it any longer. But before I could act, Kamila left Katantia, and all hell broke loose.

During my pregnancy, my dad was by my side, but I turned cold on him. I didn't trust his word anymore. If he couldn't keep my mom out of the hospital, then who could? My dad was the most efficient mean guy out there. Even the King of Katantia occasionally admitted it.

Dad's death cut me open. He died the way he lived, like a hero. He jumped in front of a bullet for Kamila.

Hit after hit, first, it was Aris, and then they took my father from me. Eventually, I broke, and Penelope Jade wanted out of my body.

I can hear her cute noises from where I kneel by my dad's grave. I hope he can hear her, too. He'd love her with all of his might like Mom does.

Should I talk to him? I feel ashamed. He's been here for months, and I've only now managed to come and see him. He's been out here alone for so long. My fingers tremble as I hold on to the flowers in my hands.

Time passes. I don't realize that I've just been sitting at my dad's gravesite, staring at it, for over an hour until Mandy comes to me. She presses a hand on my shoulder, and she tells me that it's time to leave because my daughter is starting to become restless. She's hungry. She always eats at one PM.

Perhaps I should stay with my dad.

A lot of things that he did were wrong, but he was my dad. I was his strawberry. My mom doesn't need to forgive Dad, she says, because there's nothing to forgive. My dad, uncle, and Mom worked as a trio to take down Aram Wraith, the now-deceased King of Katantia. It was all part of an elaborate plan that nobody knew of. I was kept in the dark, and for that, I've felt the need to hate him. Now, I'm empty. I don't feel the need to hate him anymore.

I've forgiven my father.

The ride back to Alex's place takes hours. It's a quiet ride that only Penelope Jade disrupts. She's still in Aris's arms, and he's fully invested in making the most out of the time he gets with her. She giggles for her father, giving him all the cute noises that are usually reserved for me. Mandy sits between us, a barrier needed for my sanity. Meanwhile, I stare mindlessly out of the window.

Once we arrive at Alex's home, he starts packing up. After Mandy and Weston leave tomorrow, he has to fly to Miami. New York City. Then he's back in Chicago. He has a full schedule, and he wants to know if I'll join him.

“I will stay here,” I inform Alex. Immediately, he sends a message to our security team so that they can make the necessary arrangements.

“What about him?” Alex asks, referring to Aris. He’s somewhere in the mansion, entertaining Penelope Jade. After everyone watched me feed her, she started getting sleepy. I don’t think she ended up sleeping after all because I can hear her noises now.

“He’ll probably stay with the baby and me,” I say.

“I have a car for you. The guards know which one it is. My father said not to let Aris drive here, so the guards will take you anywhere you need to go. The key to the house is downstairs in the entrance hall. You have the code for the alarms on your phone. I’ll send you the number I call for all my services, cooking, cleaning and all that good stuff—”

“Alex. Relax.” I take a deep breath. “I swear Kamila and Fylox have rubbed off on you.”

“I’m just happy you want to stay here. I’m sorry that I can’t be around, but—”

“I know. Go get your rings. We’ll be fine.”

And he does. Get his rings, I mean.

Do we end up being fine?

I have no idea.

CHAPTER 22

ARIS



PRESENT

THE MASSIVE MANSION IS EMPTY. ALEX LEFT FOR WORK. Mandy and Weston are continuing their travels. Our security is outside, guarding us and making sure we don't take a step out of line.

It's just the baby, Valentina, and I. We haven't been this alone in a while.

"I want a divorce," she blurts out, but I see her face is full of hope. Deep down, I've fucked with her head so much that she still craves me.

I give her a nod. "Okay."

"That's all you have to say?" she asks, her eyebrows drawing together in a fury that I've become accustomed to.

"There's nothing else to say. You'll get what you want," I tell her. I haven't been myself since she said what she said at the graveyard in Katantia. I knew that our past wasn't pure, but I had never expected it to be that bad.

I raped my wife.

That's not something I can get over. If the other Aris was able to move on, good for him. I can't.

"What if I want to travel the world with your baby? What if I never want to see you again?" she asks. Valentina is trying to get a rise out of me, but it won't work. I've numbed myself to the point of not giving a shit.

“Then that’s what you’ll get.”

“You’ll abandon your baby?” she asks, and her tone breaks what’s supposedly left of my heart.

“I’m not abandoning her. You’re taking her away. That’s good. I’m pretty sure that I won’t be of use to her anyway.” Valentina looks at me as if I’ve stabbed her. My gaze drops to Penelope Jade, who’s soundly sleeping by my wife’s side. It stings, but it’s necessary. The more I find out who I used to be, the more I want to dig a hole and crawl in it.

“She’s only going to be like this once in her life. If we don’t talk it out and solve whatever mess we’re in, you’ll miss out on the best moments,” Valentina warns me.

I’ve thought about that. I have. But it’s of no use. I won’t change my mind. “We’re talking right now. I’m giving you a free pass to do whatever you wish to do with your life. You don’t deserve to be dragged down by me. I doubt I’d even make you happy at this point. We’ll go our separate ways then.”

“Why did you come all the way to Indianapolis then? What was all the first Christmas bullshit about?” she breaks those words out in a hiss.

“I wanted to be away from our family. Here, we can talk without limitations, no outside influences,” I state. “Do you want me to leave today?”

“No.”

Sighing, I respond, “I’ll leave tomorrow then.”

My wife is as gorgeous as ever. If I look at her some more, she’ll convince me to stay. I shouldn’t. The right thing to do is leave. We’re toxic. I hurt her. She bit back. It’s time we end the cycle. “I didn’t let you on that plane so that you could just abandon us!”

“I’m not abandoning you. We’re just going our separate ways which we should’ve done before all of this happened.” I gesture at her and our baby. Valentina goes green. I don’t blame her.

Valentina rises. She's breathing hard, and I can feel the twitch of her fingers. She wants to hurt me, but even in my weakened state, she won't get very far. I wish she could hurt me. I'd feel better afterward.

But she can't.

At this point, everything she does, I deserve it.

"You know what?" She's fuming. "Fuck. You. Get the fuck out of this house. NOW. I don't ever want to see your face again. You're a coward. A fucking pussy."

I see that I'm upsetting her. Lately, she stopped cursing in front of the baby. Now, she's going all out. I take a deep breath, and then I get up. I'm taller than her, so from my perspective, she looks like a little demon that hasn't got her way. She's pacing, red as ever.

"I can't believe I wasted half of my life on you. I thought you were better than this. I thought you were strong. But you're not. You live to hurt me, and that'll never change..."

She continues her rant, but I've shut down.

I'm already gone.

CHAPTER 23

VALENTINA



PRESENT

CARMELO'S AGED WELL. HIS HAIR IS BLACKER THAN MINE, but I know that he dyes it. He's dressed in a suit, leather shoes, and golden glasses. His sight must have worsened.

Earlier today, the guards drove Penelope Jade and me to Chicago. Alex's team is playing tonight, and Carmelo has flown in from Milan to visit us. Penelope Jade and I have been alone in Indianapolis for three weeks now.

My mom and my uncle are going crazy in Katantia. They have been threatening to fly over here and drag us back home, but Alex has managed to calm them down.

"She's adorable," Carmelo says, wiping tears from his eyes. The moment he saw us, his emotions took hold of him. Penelope Jade observes him with curious eyes. She's been moodier lately. "She looks just like you."

"That'll change. She's still a baby," I assure him. To meet up with Carmelo, I decided to put on appropriate clothes. The guards and I went shopping in Indianapolis. I got a dress, heels, and a matching bag for Penelope Jade's things. I even purchased make-up. I'm not that good at applying it anymore. It looks way too cakey on my shiny skin, but at least I tried.

I sit in the secluded booth that Alex got for us in the arena, and my feet hurt from the heels. I don't feel comfortable in my dress. My baby wears what her aunt got her for the winter weather. A pink wool dress with thick tights so that her puffy legs and feet don't get cold, paired with a fake fur vest.

“I’m sorry for your loss, Tesoro.”

I gulp down the sobs that threaten to erupt. It’s different when I leave the room to cry while Penelope Jade is asleep. I don’t like crying in front of her. She needs to see me be strong for her. Stronger than Aris.

“I visit him whenever my schedule allows it,” Carmelo tells me, and my heart flutters. Dad would appreciate his friend’s efforts. “I’m older now, and I’m not as involved with the business as I used to be.”

I tilt my head to the side, and I smile at him. “You’re not old. You’re mature.”

“You always knew the right words to say,” Carmelo responds, sniffing. He’s upset, but he’s fighting through it.

“How’s Michele doing?” I ask.

“He’s magnificent. I’m so proud of him. He runs the brand.” Michele’s only twenty years old. I see pictures of him on the news sometimes, but that’s that. I don’t use social media anymore. “He’s got a boyfriend in Milan, and they’re up to no good, I’m sure. But when he runs his business, he does it well. I can’t believe that my son’s a prodigy.”

“I always knew he’d become one,” I tell him. Michele was never the warmest person to be around. He always had goals that nobody would even dare to think about. When I wasted time looking through magazines to get a glimpse of Aris Wraith and his most recent conquest in another European city, Michele was in his room, envisioning, sewing, matching. He was the most popular guy at his school. Everyone wanted to be him or fuck him because he looked like he couldn’t give a fuck less about anyone in his periphery.

He was so much bigger than Katantia back then, and now, he’s actually become everything he envisioned back then. I’m sure there’s more to come.

Carmelo dries his tears that have ruined his make-up. His skin is kissed by the sun. “What did you want to talk about? It sounded urgent. You should call more often, Tesoro. I broke your dad’s promise once. He sent you to me to become a

woman, and I turned you into Aris Wraith's wife. What happened? Will you ever tell me? Your secret will be safe with me."

"I want to design baby clothes. I've already begun sketching," I reveal, and his jaw drops.

Carmelo takes out his phone, and he starts typing away. "Brilliant! Yes, I can see that happening. Have your skills improved, Tesoro? If not, I know Michele has some guys in Milan who'd love to help you out. We'll arrange everything. I love it! But wait... Will you be working from Katantia?"

I don't hesitate. "Yes."

Kamila says that Aris has disappeared. Nobody has seen or heard from him in three weeks. That means I can safely return to Katantia soon. As much as I'm enjoying my independence, I don't like keeping Penelope Jade away from the family that actually loves her and would do anything for her.

"Will you let me know what happened before you turned eighteen? I've never got over how fast things changed. Was it my fault, Tesoro? I apologize if it was. I didn't mean to... I thought you liked your gown. You were born to wear such beautiful pieces. Michele and I have been thinking about that day a lot—"

Before he can utter another word, I tell him what he wants to know. I watch as his heart shatters while I finally unveil what I've been hiding from my elders for so long. Aris is gone now. I doubt that he will ever come back. I need to get it off of my chest.

By the end of my story, I make Carmelo promise that he won't tell another soul. He starts crying all over again, and we hug it out. I don't cry. I shed enough tears about it in the past. Now, I have my baby to care about.

"And now he's left?"

I nod. "I wanted a divorce, but I didn't want him gone. I didn't intend to kick him out of his daughter's life. I simply wanted our relationship to take a backseat while Penelope Jade was still like this. Now, he's gone, and I have no way of

reaching him. It seems like he's punishing me for something that he did. I thought we were over it. I thought we had moved on..."

Carmelo murmurs something Italian to himself, and his eyes are glazed in sorrow. "Your daddy wouldn't allow this."

"I know," I reply, hurting deep inside. "Dad would've chopped his head off if he knew."

My former boss nods, hanging his head. He swallows. "I'm going to return to Katantia. I want to be there for you."

"What about Michele?" I ask.

"He doesn't need me, Tesoro. Michele's been his own man since his mom died." Carmelo sniffles some more. "I don't think he'll ever have any children. Will you let me be a part of your lives? I can be your assistant with the line."

I smile at him and his eagerness. "I'm not good enough to have an assistant."

"You pushed an entire being out of you. I think a little fashion line won't be that big of a problem."

The game begins, and the arena trembles around us. I don't need to watch to know that Alex is winning. He keeps his promises, unlike some other people that I know. Alex wins the game. When he returns to Indianapolis a couple of days later, I thank him for his hospitality.

Then I make my way back home.

CHAPTER 24

VALENTINA



PRESENT

I'M BACK IN MY OLD ROOM. ONLY THIS TIME, THERE'S A CRIB for Penelope Jade next to my bed. I can't separate from her just yet, so we sleep in the same room for now. Uncle Jordan has remodeled my parents' old bedroom on the same floor as my room, and he's turned it into Penelope Jade's future room.

Mom sleeps downstairs. My uncle added new living space, building her a small room for privacy. She spends most of her time with us, and she didn't initially want the room, but Uncle Jordan made it happen anyway. He spent a month building it with men he trusts his life with.

Every morning before Penelope Jade wakes, I walk to the nearby beach, and I swim for exercise. When I return, I take care of Penelope Jade's needs. Mom lets me do it on my own now, which is a step forward. She gets to have her for eight hours every day while I go into town to work on my baby fashion line with Carmelo.

We offered him space in Kamila's old house or even the Wraith brothers' place. He didn't want any of that. Since Carmelo's old home full of memories was ruined by last year's tsunami, he resorted to buying himself a condo in the city center, and that's where we work from.

My body hasn't been the same since I gave birth to Penelope Jade. It frustrates me. I eat more, and I gain weight easier. I'm feeling strong because of my morning swims, but they don't help against my body's various stretch marks. I

could get rid of the fat rolls with a plastic surgeon's help, but I don't give a fuck anymore.

I'm a hot bitch. Cellulite or whatever other concepts society comes up with to trample on women can go fuck themselves.

Every Sunday, I take Penelope Jade to see her other grandma. Sometimes, Kamila comes with us to her mother's grave. She tells us stories about Queen Penelope, and Penelope Jade goes all fluffy about it. It's a sad place for the Wraiths, but Penelope Jade perks up like she senses something that we don't.

Penelope Jade will be one year old in three months.

He has missed so much. Every time my mind drifts, and I think about the man who's formally still my husband, I grow weak. I've rediscovered my energy after talking to therapists that Kamila arranged for the local sex workers. Carmelo's the only person who knows exactly what happened, but the therapists help me with my postpartum. Aris makes me lose the progress I've made, so I keep myself busy.

I don't want to think of him, but as the days pass, my daughter starts to look more like him.

It crushes me inside.

"Valentina? You've got mail," my uncle announces from downstairs. His voice roars through the house, but he's not shouting at me. He rarely gets angry at us; he saves that for his employees. He's only ever upset when I sneak out without my security guards.

"I'm coming!" I announce. I slide into my heeled slippers and my silk robe. Aris isn't around, but I've been starting to feel more confident in my body lately. I guess working with Carmelo has me in a different headspace. I can't go to work in sweats and a hoodie. He'd ban me. I've been putting more and more effort into my outfits as the days pass. Carmelo's eyes sparkle when he sees that I'm gradually finding my way back to myself.

I descend the stairs, and I see my uncle at our door. He's dressed for work. My uncle looks good in his expensive creaseless black button-down shirt. He's currently growing out his natural hair, but it's a long process. Jordan wakes up hours ahead of anyone else in the household. He's at the palace before his employees. He runs the palace, and he runs Katantia, too.

My uncle holds a massive brown parcel with stamps all over it. It's not from Katantia; anyone who wants to send me stuff nationally can go hand it to the palace.

He places the parcel on the floor, and he starts cutting it open with his butter knife. Meanwhile, I check where it came from. *Milan, Italy*.

"The scanners at the airport were jealous. They said they want what's in that parcel," my uncle comments. He opens the parcel, and I dive in. It smells like expensive fabric, lilies, and youth. The first thing I notice is a letter.

"Dear Valentina," I read out loud. It's engraved in gold. "We're pleased to hear that you're back and better than ever. If you should ever desire to work with us in Milan, you're always welcome. We're excited to sell your baby clothes. My father also mentioned that you'd like to donate most of your pay to charities for single mothers and orphaned children. That's duly noted. All the best, Michele Ciccone. P.S.: Please, work on your curved lines. They're better than your old drawings, but they still look messy. We can't have messy in our company. I'm sure Dad can teach you a technique."

Uncle Jordan congratulates me, and then we get to unpacking. We sent in the first sketches a month ago, and Michele must have sped-produced the clothes. They're in Penelope Jade's size and a bit bigger because she's still growing so much every day.

"Where are the pink clothes?" Uncle Jordan asks.

I pick up one of the green ensembles, and I inspect it. Flawless quality. This costs a ton of money in Italy. It costs even more on Katantia. I explain, "The rich are into alternative colors for their babies nowadays. Or, let's say, being liberal

and open about gender is very hip right now. We've designed clothes in all colors, and it won't be promoted with a specific gender attached to it."

"Where did you hear about that?" he asks, picking up a blue dress that Penelope Jade will definitely wear on Sunday when we go to visit her other grandma.

"Carmelo's been talking my ear off about it," I admit.

My uncle's phone rings and I see his mood shift. He's immediately alert, and his eyes wander around the room, wondering if there's an intruder. He picks up. "What's the matter?"

"Oh."

"Yeah, we're coming."

Uncle Jordan hangs up. Then he turns to me. "Let your mom know. We're going to the palace."

I nod, and I do as told. I have to go to work in an hour, but if he says I have to be at the palace, I guess it's important. After notifying my mother so that she can watch over the baby, uncle Jordan and I leave.

Asking what's going on won't help me find out. Uncle Jordan is secretive like that. We enter the palace. My uncle's relaxed, but I pant, revealing that we speed-walked over here.

He presses number five in the elevator, and I figure that Kamila wants to see us.

Once we arrive at Kamila's floor, we're greeted by a jittery secretary that won't even look us in the eye. Uncle Jordan expertly navigates me through the hallway, and we end up at Kamila's main office.

I hear her distressed voice through the walls, and I grow worried.

"You can't force him to come back," Fylox tells her as we enter the office. His steady voice resembles his body language. He sits on the opposite side of Kamila's desk, laid back and unconcerned with whatever's bothering Kamila.

Of course, Kamila and Fylox see us coming, and they stop their argument.

“You didn’t have to come,” Kamila immediately states, brushing the red hair from her face. She’s pacing around the room, sweaty and agitated.

“This concerns my niece and her daughter,” Jordan claims, and nobody dares to argue.

“Is something wrong with Aris?” I ask. My heart drops. I can’t feel that there’s something wrong with him. I can feel his living and beating heart in my body even if he’s miles away. Perhaps, it’s only my imagination.

Kamila rolls her eyes. “Other than the fact that he just spent three months in a cat and mouse game with the men I sent after him? No, nothing’s wrong with him. He’s still a pain in the ass who’s abandoned his baby and his wife.”

Her words scar me. It’s been over a year since Kamila left Katantia and our world changed, but I’m still not used to being accepted within the royal family. I swallow, not responding verbally.

“They found him?” Jordan asks, and Kamila nods.

She explains, “He’s back in Cambridge for whatever reason. He’s moved his money into a different account, but when he sent a generous allowance to the palace for Valentina and Penelope Jade earlier this month, our people started investigating.”

“Why didn’t nobody tell me he sent money?” I ask, sounding like the gold digger that everyone thinks I am. I’m sure that’s the exact image in their mind. While in reality, I just want to tell Aris that he can shove his cash where it hurts.

And I know it hurts because he never let me slide two fingers in there. Meanwhile, I took his entire dick, and he never once saw me complain.

“We wanted to confirm the origins of the money before we came to you,” my uncle explains. “Do we know what he’s doing in Cambridge? Is his memory back?”

Kamila shakes her head. “I just spoke to him on the phone.”

“Translation: She just shouted at her brother on the phone,” Fylox comments, and Kamila turns as red as her hair.

“What business does he have in Cambridge! Fucking idiot! I can’t believe it!” For Kamila to curse, this must truly upset her. I watch as Fylox flinches at Kamila’s curse words. When in Fylox’s presence, everyone’s ordered to keep their language clean because cursing triggers him when done in a social setting. “How can he do that to his own daughter? We never had a father. Our mom died. What does he want? Is he content with his daughter growing up half an orphan?”

I twitch at her choice of words. Barely audible, I ask, “What did he say?”

“He said that he won’t be coming back anytime soon. I threatened to ban him from the country forever, and then he caved in. He’ll be calling every week, and at some point, he’ll come to visit. He doesn’t remember anything, and it’s starting to frustrate me. When did we get to this point? I’m sure there’s something that’s bothering him, but, honestly, I couldn’t care a less...”

Kamila keeps ranting, and I stand next to my uncle, reminiscing the night that caused all of this.

It was a beautiful night with gorgeous people dressed to honor the Prince of Katantia.

Aris Wraith had a blonde fuckdoll as arm candy, and he paraded her around until he disappeared, doing whatever behind the scenes.

He chased me down while I was innocently consuming my fruity strawberries.

And then he took something from me that I’ve only now started to recover from.

CHAPTER 25

VALENTINA



PRESENT

KAMILA PLACES A FRESH BOUQUET OF FLOWERS ON HER mother's grave. It looks like a flower shop over there, and, honestly, I can't judge. This week, it's a set of sunflowers that she grows in the palace's gardens. I wish I could put some flowers on my dad's grave in person, but the circumstances don't allow it... Next to Mandy and me, my mom holds Penelope Jade, rocking her back and forth. We're trying to be respectful, keeping our distance from Kamila. Fylox accompanies her, and he looks awfully in touch with his feelings.

Surprisingly.

It's Queen Penelope's only grandchild's first birthday today. The entire family has gathered from around the world. The male Wraiths are somewhere in the palace. Mandy and Weston returned for a week from America, while Aris surprised the entire family with his impromptu visit.

When Aris and Weston first met after their arrivals, tensions were high. Aris wasn't looking for a fight, but Weston was eager to let out some tension on his older brother for being away. We decided to let Aris and Weston talk it out alone.

"I'm ready. Let's go have a party," Kamila states, sniffing. Fylox takes her hand, and she takes one last glance at her mom's grave. They turn around, making their way outside of the graveyard that holds many memories for me.

I take a deep breath, and I pray that I won't trip on our way out of here. I have a whole party to host—okay, that's an exaggeration. There's an entire household of staff out there, but I still can't have bruises on my knees! Carmelo has dressed me up in what he calls the proper attire for the mother of a princess but the youthful version.

Once again, I'm dipped in gold from head to toe. The heels on my feet make me ache, but I fight through the pain. My legs might be short in comparison to Kamila's or even Mandy's, but I'm working my just-above-the-knee length dress. When I move, the sleeveless one-shoulder fringe dress moves with me. Other people balance sweet and sexy. I balance slutty and mommy.

We leave the graveyard, and we head for the palace where no expense has been spared. It's the first celebration after Kamila became queen, and the entire country is celebrating. Just not at the palace, like they used to. Kamila and her staff picked the guests on a case-by-case basis. Jordan had to preapprove everything. When I was asked who I wanted to invite, I told them about the Ciccones. Everyone else I know lives inside the palace.

Candy, balloons, shiny chandeliers, weird cartoon characters that my daughter will hopefully never like (but chances are that she will), and a birthday cake that's ten times her size await at the palace. Plus, gifts from all around the world arrived earlier today. All the socialites that came here in secret in the past send the new Queen of Katantia their well wishes and thousands of dollars worth of gifts. We're going to go through the gifts, but we will most likely donate most of them. We might live in the palace compound, but we don't have space for other rich people's bullshit. We have our own, thank you very much.

Penelope Jade's eyes don't leave me as we approach the palace. Her tiny hands are reaching out for me. Carmelo asked me to keep the baby away from the dress, but I don't plan to listen. I take my daughter from my mom, and I enter the main hall with my mom and Mandy by my side. Penelope Jade is a big crawler now, taking her energy from her dad. She hasn't

truly walked yet, but she's getting there, so we still carry her. The entire family is distraught by how fast our little one is growing.

Kamila's gone upstairs because she's the queen, and she needs to make an even bigger entrance.

The selected guests brighten up even further at the sight of us. Our guards intimidate them enough for them to remain seated. We will make the rounds after dinner has been served.

"Sweetheart?" The voice comes from behind me, and my baby shifts in my arms, trying to pull me backward. Obviously, she can't because she doesn't have enough strength. But I can feel her need to be loved and cuddled by her father, who has neglected her thus far. The phone calls and video conferences don't do either one of them justice.

I turn around, and my world slows down. For a quick moment, I'm transported back into time. Back when I was a silly cockroach, and Aris was destined to be the King of Katantia. He walked into a room, and all eyes turned because, yes, he was a prince, but also because he had the aura of the most charming winner. There was a kindness attached to him. A kindness that he rarely showed, but I was lucky enough to witness it firsthand—whenever he wasn't hurting me.

Aris Wraith's hair is longer than I'm used to. It's slicked back perfectly. I gawk at his trimmed beard that comes in a lighter color when it grows out. It hides his jaw that was made to torture me. At last, our eyes meet. His gray eyes have a hunger in them that I haven't felt in months.

I swallow.

"Hi." It's supposed to come out shy and obedient, but I've grown out of that phase. I don't owe Aris anything other than the fact that I now live right next to a palace—and even that is something my father provided for me before he did. We don't use the money Aris sends us. I've been donating it to local charities that the palace supports. The South Side of Katantia needs all the support it can get after last year's tsunami.

My designer baby clothes make enough money to support my little family, even when I give most of it away to charity.

Yes, I've become the bitch that does charity.

All the fucking time. Dad would be proud of his strawberry.

You could say I'm high class now.

"You look stunning today." The words leave his mouth, and my heart pumps loudly. It wants out of my chest. We can't deal with this right now. I remember every detail about that fateful night right before I turned eighteen. It could be a coincidence, or Aris's memory is finally back.

"So do you," I respond, praying that my drooling is purely mental.

"Happy Birthday to our baby girl."

I nod. Happy Birthday indeed.

"Did you come to pick up the 'Father of the Year' award?" I ask, unable to keep back the snide comment. He doesn't respond verbally, but his eyes speak volumes. I can understand why he keeps his distance. I don't like it. I wish he were a greater part of our daughter's life.

But I know that he's aware of how toxic he is for me.

We're both dressed like we're getting married today. Aris's tux is flawless, not a single crease. He smells like heavenly wood and exotic spices, but he doesn't talk like it, so he must be sober.

The celebrations begin.



MY DAUGHTER'S FIRST BIRTHDAY PARTY OVERWHELMED ME.

At the palace, the staff is busy cleaning up. Penelope Jade's gifts await in the main hall. We were too tired to go through them tonight. Mandy and Weston sleep in Kamila's home. Alex, Fylox, and Kamila are in the palace doing

whatever they do when they're reunited. Alex had to beg his coach to fly to Katantia for two days just so that he could be present for my baby. It touches me that he did that for us. Kamila seems the happiest when all three of them are together. When they are apart, it seems like there's always something on her mind.

Speaking of a person occupying space in somebody's thoughts, Aris had booked a hotel room in the city like a commoner. Weston and Kamila almost beat that idea out of him. Now, he's next door.

Like the old times.

I sit on the steps in front of my childhood home. I've changed out of my golden spectacle of a dress. It hurts to walk on my soles, but I manage because I have to. I like wearing heels when it's appropriate. I don't do it for anyone but Carmelo and me.

Alex cheekily brought me strawberry gum from America, and I'm chewing on it as I sit out here in the open. It's warm, and I can walk around in shorts. I do just that.

Tomorrow, I have a day off to spend with Penelope Jade. Last year around this time, we were both struggling. She was barely hanging on with her fragile little body that should still have been in my womb. I was just out of labor, exhausted and high on the drugs provided by my doctors. Stitched up.

Alone.

One year later? I'm still alone. Dad isn't here anymore, and Aris has decided to take the high road. The kinky Aris I knew would've never selflessly left his family. I might be alone, but I'm less lonely. I've accepted that my daughter will grow up with a queen as her aunt. She has my mother as a constant in her life. I'd do anything for Penelope Jade.

Even if Aris doesn't want to be here because it makes him feel better about himself when he punishes himself, we will manage.

"Sweetheart." Where did he come from? And why is he wearing sweatpants that leave almost nothing to the

imagination? He came back to torture me.

“You should be in your house. There’s a curfew for the residents of the palace. We’re not allowed to leave our houses after midnight,” I tell him, avoiding his gaze. He hasn’t grown bigger. It’s just that I haven’t seen him in so long, and it feels as though he’s more massive than ever before.

“I’m not a resident of the palace,” he replies.

I sigh. “Don’t I know that.”

“I’m a lecturer in Birmingham now,” Aris reveals, and I tilt my head to the side. “I work on sexuality and gender studies.”

“What did you just say?” I ask, and he repeats his shocking statement. “I didn’t think...”

“You thought I’d go back to England to party?” I nod. He continues, “I’m not that Aris anymore. I’m a postgrad with a degree from Cambridge. I have a lot of opportunities.”

“Opportunities that keep you away from your daughter,” I comment, souring.

“I want to be a better man for you.”

“So you remember now?”

“I don’t,” he unveils, running a hand through his deliciously messy hair. I could envision grabbing that hair while he went down on me. I fight the imagery that threatens to make me spill my guts out to Aris. “I remember that night and some other key moments like when we first met. I remember my mother’s death. I’m working on my issues with a therapist.”

“What issues?” I ask like I didn’t spend almost half of my life dealing with those issues.

“Anger management. Depression. Irritability. Obsession. Insecurities. These are some of the things I’ve been dealing with,” he tells me. “Teaching has helped, and I’m doing better.”

“Are you going to come back?” I ask. I sound too needy again. I don’t need him here if he can’t be here. I don’t. I don’t. I don’t. *Cockroach, die.*

“I won’t.”

“Thanks for letting me know.”

“I’m sending you money every month. Is it enough? Do you need more?” he asks, and I scoff at him.

“No, I don’t. Your gold digger of a wife can take of herself nowadays. Thanks for allowing me to stay in the palace. I appreciate it,” I respond, casually fuming. “You can take your guilty conscience and shove it up your ass.”

“I seem to think that you liked it shoved up your—”

I don’t let his deadly smirk that displays his perfect teeth distract me from interrupting him. “You’re lucky I’m even talking to you.”

“I know,” he admits. His lips move, and I’m mesmerized by a deep urge inside. I miss the fuck out of this man, but we’re not good together. He’s punishing himself for hurting me by staying away. In reality, he’s pathetic. We have everything we need. He doesn’t need to be a lecturer in the UK.

Although I must admit that imagining Aris as a teacher does something to me that has me in need of new panties.

Of course, Aris sees my reaction to his presence, and he steps forward. Before I can react any further, he puts a gentle hand around my neck with his thumb almost brushing against my earlobe. He bends my head backward, and his lips press against mine. I allow it. I part my lips, letting him in. He’s warm against my skin, and I soak up his heat. Katantia can get hot like the desert in the summer, but I’ve felt so cold lately.

His kiss feels like a flash of the old days, possessive and urgent. There’s nothing subtle about how he owns my mouth at that moment. I’m lifted from the stairs, and I press myself against his strong body.

Aris's body is more defined now than I remember the last time I had him this close. I feel smaller than usual in his presence.

I remove myself from his kiss. Breathing hard, I lose the sense of time for a moment. It's not like I haven't been on sort-of dates. Katantian business is conducted over sex and food. But I never gave in. My eyes wander across the road, searching for Kamila's new security drones.

"By tomorrow, the entire family will know that we kissed," I inform him, and he shrugs.

"Let them know." He tries to be playful, to act like the old Aris. This is his tell; he doesn't remember much, but he's trying to be a better version of his old self.

"Let's go to our special place," I say. His eyes open wide. He probably has no idea what I'm talking about.

Swiftly, we disappear into the density of the woods near our homes. I lead him through the woods toward the beach that I visit every day for my morning swim. My uncle has carved a special road for me, with lights and concrete, so I don't get lost out here. I can't go far even if I get lost because the fences of the palace compound are massive, and don't let anyone in or out.

We don't make it to the silky sand I call my home away from home.

In a surprising turn of events, Aris takes me from my special road, swaying me away from the safe route I'd chosen. In a matter of moments, I can barely see the shape of his body. We come to a halt in the middle of nowhere. At least that's how it seems in the dark. I smell the nature around us, sunflowers, and soil, and I let the calm consume me. It's humid out here, and I feel it out of my pores.

Aris presses my back against one of the larger trunks of an innocent tall tree. It's the middle of the night, and I want to get out of here. Yes, there are cameras everywhere. But it's still dark. At least out on the beach, I can see the moon.

Here, it's just he and I.

His hands explore my body underneath my clothes, and I can't help but feel his hard length below my fingers. His urgent tongue is almost down my throat as he lifts my shirt for better access. It might be night, but the cameras are recording us. Shame fills me, but it doesn't overwhelm me. I've done worse. If Big Sister wants to stalk everyone on the compound, she'll have to accept that we have needs, too.

Needs that are dripping and pulsing for something to fill them up...

"Is this what you want?" he asks. I feel his breath on my skin, tickling me into oblivion. Is this really happening? Are we acting like silly horny teenagers? It's almost insulting that he has to ask me what I want at this point, but I understand. I've learned my lesson, and if I didn't want him to touch me, I'd scream. Kamila might be in the middle of an orgy with her two boy toys, but my uncle or his team are definitely aware that my husband and I are out here getting naked.

I nod, and his thumb rubs a spot below my ear that makes me tingly. "Yes."

I add, "I'm not on any contraceptives."

"I'll pull out, yeah?" he asks as if his life is depending on it. One second is all it takes for me to revert back to a time where we lived in the four walls closeby. I shake myself out of it. It's of no use.

I don't plan on getting pregnant again by this man anytime soon, so I'll jump when he starts to tense up.

He might have me horny, but he doesn't own my soul anymore.

Lies.

"Have you touched this tight little pussy while I've been away?" His fingers play with me while I stroke him. He's hard quicker than I remember, and I'm already a wet mess waiting to get fucked. We've reverted back to our old selves just like that.

I try to nod, but the hand on my neck blocks me. He brushes a thumb across my lips, dipping inside. I lick at it like

I want to lick what he's packing, but let's not get ahead of ourselves. Although I'm starting to feel like I've forgotten what it's like to suck dick. I haven't done it in so long.

"I asked you a question, sweetheart," Aris insists, dipping the fingers he has on my pussy lower to an area I didn't even think Vanilla Aris considered.

"I was thinking about your dick. Let me be," I respond like the brat that he turns me into. "And, yes, I touched my pussy. We had lots of fun."

We didn't. Not really.

"Did anyone else touch what's mine?" My heart flutters, and I know that I should step back. We're about to fuck. Why does he have to make it about ownership again? This isn't us anymore.

I bite back a sob. "No, nobody did. I tried, but I couldn't go through with it. She... She's changed me."

Our daughter caused all of this. She's to blame, and I don't care. I'd rather be a lonely old lady than a whore of a mom who sleeps around because she can't fill the void in her heart. I'm not like the other women in Katantia. They fuck around because they can.

I used to, but I can't anymore.

"Turn around," he orders, and I can't help but pant in response. He's very aggressive today, and I have to admit that I like it. That was our routine in the past. I do as told, and I help myself out of my shorts. I'm momentarily cold, but he warms me up when he presses against me. He's pulled his cock out, and he's between my thighs, sliding along my wetness but not entering me. "Did you miss your big brother, whore?"

"What?" I tremble under his touch. "Please, don't speak of him..."

Aris wraps a hand around my mouth, and I smell him, rolling back my eyes. His fingers used to smell like weed from all the rolling that he did, but now, it's just my pussy that's been on his skin. I smell myself on him, and I die a little bit.

“I don’t remember a lot, but today, when I looked through some pictures in our home...” *Our home?* He thinks of us a unity. Fuck. *Cockroach, you better die.* Who am I talking to? The cockroach is already dead. I’ve taken its place, and I won’t let Aris worm himself into my soul again. “...And I saw a man in your family pictures. One that isn’t your father. He looks like him, but he’s the weak and pathetic version of him. I researched it, and I found that he’s been sentenced to life without parole in one of the worst prisons of Katantia.”

Ryan Cross doesn’t exist as far as I’m concerned.

“Did you also read what he did?” I ask cautiously.

“He threatened you, Mandy, and Weston. He tried to rape you, his pregnant sister at the time.”

My hands drop to my belly where my baby isn’t. My baby is back home, protected by her family. Ryan can’t hurt us. He walks on the same soil as us, but only until his small dick and loose ass give out, and he dies a slow death.

“I want to murder him for what he did,” Aris blurts out.

“Fuck me instead?” I beg.

“Why did we play big brother and little sister? Your brother’s a monster.” The venom in his voice poisons the air around us. He’s shaming me for my kink. His dick is still enveloped around my needy pussy lips, but he’s not entering. Good.

I try to shift out of my position against the tree, but Aris doesn’t let me. “I’m asking a simple question.”

“I can’t give you the answer you want to hear,” I hiss.

“Try me.”

“I like it, okay? I enjoy imagining that we’re somehow related and fucking each other brains out regardless. The taboo aspect of it all makes my pussy ache. Others have Daddy issues. I have big brother issues. He never truly loved me like a sister. He was obsessed with his ideals, and he took it out on me. So while I had a loving family, his love was always a missing link. I don’t want to disrespect my father’s honor, so I

don't participate in a Daddy kink. I like fucking my fake big brother, sue me," I rant, and he still holds me close against his body. His rockhard cock must be coated in my juices. I bite my lip thinking about it, but I won't fall into his trap.

"I understand."

"What?" I'm shook.

"I missed my little sister, too." Baffled, I tilt my head to stare at the frame of his face. I can barely see the outline of his eyes. "I missed playing with her tight juicy pussy. I want to fill her up with my come."

"You don't have to do this," I tell him, but between my thighs, I quiver. He's got a strong hold on me against the tree. His hands start wandering again.

"You've been a bad little sister, and bad little sisters don't get their big brother's come up their pussy. Where do you want it, little sis?" he asks, kissing my shoulder blade while he massages my tits.

"I..."

"Wrong answer, sweetheart." He pinches my nipple, and my entire body twitches. I feel Aris's tip entering me. "Bad little sisters let their big brothers decide where they finish."

One swift move and Aris slides into me, so deep that I feel his balls against my pussy.

I hadn't imagined Vanilla Aris to fuck me like this. I feel like his doll, used and fucked against a tree in the middle of nowhere. He's rough with me tonight, and I keep my mouth shut because I want it to last. We have lots of role-playing variations, from soft to hardcore. We never did electrocution, scat, or a complete total-power-exchange slave scenario, but we've done a forced sex fantasy. I liked that about my Kinky Aris. He never shamed me for my needs.

After all, he was the one who shaped me.

"Want to bet who can last longer?" Aris asks, and I swear I can hear his smirk.

I shake my head. “No. Please, don’t. I need to come. Now.”

His chuckle is made of torture and lust. I meet his every thrust into my wet orifice. I play with my clit while he’s busy with my tits. Kinky Aris was an ass man. Vanilla Aris fondles my tits like there’s no tomorrow.

Long story short, his thrusts become more urgent. I can hear us, wet and sloppy. Thoughts cross my mind... It wouldn’t be too bad to have his come inside of me, wouldn’t it? Like the old days. I’m close, and my pussy is sucking him dry. He can’t leave now. It’s the best part. He’s fucked a ton of pussy, but mine is the tightest.

He’ll never have anyone like me again.

Aris pulls out of me, and I’m momentarily stumped until he forces me to my knees. I happily oblige, but I touch my needy clit. “Keep your hands on my cock. Bad little sisters don’t get to come without permission.”

I roll my eyes as he stuffs my mouth with his throbbing cock. I stroke him as he pushes further inside.

“Don’t roll your eyes at me.” He enters me to the brink, reaching the back of my throat. I have no choice but to accommodate him. “Swallow every drop. Be a good little sister for me.”

He finishes on my tongue, and I take it all in. Licking him clean, I realize that there’s a different taste to him. He must have changed his diet. Has he stopped smoking? I do everything and anything to clean him up and satisfy him because I know that I’m next.

He doesn’t let me dress up while he holds my hand, and we rush back to our home. I don’t even care that half the world of the palace has seen us. We owe them zero explanations. Once we’re inside our home, we barely make it up the stairs. He fucks me in the kitchen, on the floor, against the counter. We move to our living room where it’s more comfortable. We get bored, so we go upstairs. We find the condoms that we stored for emergencies. They haven’t expired yet. He spends a

healthy amount of time between my legs, eating me out. He gives me the orgasm he refused me in the woods. Then he fucks me to another orgasm against the mattress. After I come, he pulls out, and he parts my cheeks. He licks my tight hole, and he fingers me there, too. Later, I watch him wash his mouth in fascination. He fucks my ass in our private bathroom with only my juices and his spit as lube.

We fuck all night like we used to.

But the morning after, I'm the one that leaves him.

CHAPTER 26

VALENTINA



THREE YEARS LATER

ARIS'S DICK HITS THE BACK OF MY THROAT, AND I GAG. I'M panting, but I work through it. I've ruined my dress, so I'll have to change before we leave our... former house. We're officially divorced now. We took care of it three years ago. It became official a couple of months later when Kamila stopped trying to interfere with our relationship.

My ex-husband now resides in Birmingham, but he flies over here more often, even if it tires him out. The video calls that he uses to see our growing daughter just don't suffice. Occasionally, we visit him when I have to travel to Europe for work.

Carmelo and I went viral on Instagram once, and now we have a thriving business. All the celebrities want our baby clothes that come with the promise of an Italian fashion house and a Katantian spin to it. Our clothes are gender-neutral and vegan—the rich people's wives love that. Occasionally, I have to be in Milan because Michele is adamant about explaining my designs to him in person. Mostly because he wants to micromanage our every contribution to his brand.

Penelope Jade, Aris, and I just returned from another overseas trip. We traveled with Mandy and Weston, who have been awfully secretive throughout the trip.

Our daughter is with her grandma in her backyard, gardening and playing out in the open. She likes to climb the trees a lot which we have to be careful about because she's too

young to be Tarzan. I see her hug her precious trees when nobody's watching. She's still quiet and reserved. Sometimes, I wonder if Aris and I are at fault with our fucked-up-ness. Then, I take a deep breath. Perhaps that's just the way our baby is going to be.

A silent force to be reckoned with.

Aris and I finish up with our impromptu sex session. I clean up and change while he fixes his clothes. He's got a new degree now, and his official name is Dr. Aris Wraith. Who? Aris. I chuckle.

"What's so funny?" he asks as he zips up.

"We all thought Weston was the brains of the family," I tell him.

"I'm well aware."

Most of his memories have returned by now. There are still headaches from time to time, and there are certain things he doesn't remember, like beating up Ryan after my brother hit me years ago. It's all okay, though. Weston works through all of that with him, filling him in on how exactly they planned the attack.

Once we're proper, we pick up my mom, our daughter, and my uncle. My uncle and my mom disagree with our friends with benefits type of relationship. They judge us every time they see us.

But we don't give a fuck.

We never have.



DINNER AT THE PALACE IS A STRANGE OCCURRENCE. MANDY and Weston keep to themselves. Alex is here, holding on to his wife and the Queen of Katantia. It's the start of his off-season. He didn't win a ring this year which has set the mood for his vacation. He'll be here for three months while Fylox is away, doing whatever in the wide-open world.

After we all eat, and Penelope Jade is two seconds away from throwing a glare tantrum, Mandy clears her throat.

“We have an announcement to make,” she declares, shaking. I’ve never seen her face this red. Her eyes are blurry. She inhales sharply. “We...”

“Mandy and I will attempt to get pregnant this year,” Weston takes over.

That’s the moment that we should cheer for, right? Well, we can’t. Mandy doesn’t have a uterus. She had it removed years ago because of health complications. She’s in her twenties and as infertile as she can get.

“We’ve been talking to this doctor from Oxford, and he says we only need to find a surrogate. He will take care of the rest,” Mandy explains. It falls on deaf ears. The table remains quiet, and there’s zero support for their hopeless case. Before Mandy had her uterus removed, they managed to save some of her eggs. Back then, it seemed impossible to ever achieve anything with the few eggs they managed to salvage. “Technology has advanced. There’s a ninety percent chance that this will work.”

Uncle Jordan comments, “Why don’t you two adopt? There’s plenty of orphans in Katantia. It’ll save you both the heartbreak.”

Mandy shakes her head in disbelief. Weston comforts her. He pulls her into a hug, and I watch as my best friend sobs into his arms.

“We believe in our doctor. He’s done it with other patients. He’ll do it for us, too,” Weston insists.

“And who will be your surrogate?” Kamila asks.

“We don’t know yet,” Weston tells us. “The doctor has the tests ready for her. We will begin our search for her as soon as we’re back in Texas—”

“You don’t have to,” I intercept. All the eyes in the room turn to me, and I freeze as I become the center of attention. “I volunteer. Run your tests on me. If I’m a match, I’ll do it.”

My mom immediately asks, “Are you sure?”

“Yes, Mom, I’m sure. My father killed both of their mothers. I owe them that. Plus, I don’t see anyone else at this table who’s willing to support them!” Aris grabs my arm, signaling me to calm the fuck down. I don’t. “Take your hands off of me.”

“No.”

“I said—”

“I’ll be by your side this time around, from start to finish.”

EPILOGUE

VALENTINA



THE DRONE ABOVE MY HEAD HOVERS IN THE SHADOWS OF THE night. I'm not supposed to see it, but I feel it. My guards may be asleep, but the drones work 24/7. There's a team in the palace, waiting to step in if I need it.

I don't do this very often. Visiting Queen Penelope's grave in the middle of the night, I mean. Back home, my baby is asleep in her bed, in her own room. My husband snores away in 'our' bed. We don't sleep together that much. It makes our situation... complicated. We're taking it slow.

A little after midnight, I finished the sketches that are due in Milan in the morning. This strange feeling in my tummy made me put on my flats, slide on a coat and grab my palace ID card.

Past the house in which my family lives and the neighboring former home of the queen, now filled with her brother and his wife, I trot towards my mother-in-law's resting place. I take deep breaths, and the cold envelopes my lungs. I should be resting in bed, taking my vitamins, and eating exactly what the snob doctor ordered me to eat.

I swipe my card at the gates of the graveyard. If I had gone unnoticed, now somebody definitely knows that I'm out and about. Swiftly, I tiptoe around the grass as if the dead will tell on me. The fresh flowers we placed on Queen Penelope's grave the other day are bright in the night. She's drawing me in, asking me to come closer. I do.

Halting in front of the massive gravestone, I kneel. I bow my head, and I talk to her. My hand is covering my belly and hopefully her future second grandchild.

My whispers fill the silence. Even nature is still in this space. Not one leaf moves.

When I finish spilling my guts and all of my fears, I wait a couple of minutes.

I make my way out with a heavy heart. Everyone tells me that I only need to be myself, no stress or frustration. It will all work out. But I see the worry in Mandy and Weston's eyes.

I don't want to disappoint them.

As I shut the gate behind me, I hear the wind blow, feathering away.



IT'S BEEN A YEAR SINCE MANDY AND WESTON ANNOUNCED that they wanted to try for a baby. Endless medical exams later, we know that I'm a fit. I'm such a fit that I now carry their three-month-old baby in me. We're getting along well. She doesn't speak to me like my baby did, but that's okay. She doesn't cause me any trouble either. I've barely had any morning sickness. She lets me work as long as I have to.

I know she's a girl. It's just a feeling that I have.

"Sweetheart, are you ready?" Aris asks from our walk-in closet. I hear Penelope Jade mimick her father and his pet name for me. When she says it to my face, I die a little bit. Penelope Jade is helping her dad pick out a tie for tonight's dinner at the palace.

I apply mascara on my eyelashes, carefully and abundantly. It's not a competition, but it kind of is. My little family always steals the show at family dinners. My sleeveless one-shoulder black gown— yes, I wear gowns to dinner—is waiting on our bed. Calling out to Aris and our daughter, "I need a moment!"

Their laughter echoes through the walls, and my heart fills with flutters.

Forty minutes later, we're late, but we're styled to the best of our abilities. Aris wears a ridiculous green tie that Penelope Jade picked out for him, but he looks marvelous in the glasses he now sports. He's the professor of the house, and when he looks like that, with his combed-back hair and the five o'clock shadow on his jaw, I want to do things to him that we should do in private.

Penelope Jade wears a green suit with a white button-up shirt like one of the comic figures in the books Alex sends over from the US. I doubt that she should be seeing superhero imagery at four years old, but she likes it when her dad reads them to her before she falls asleep. A natural entertainer, he cleans the stories up so that she doesn't go to bed scared.

Our daughter leads the way as we stride to the palace. She's in good spirits today.

We're the last ones to arrive, as always. The staff leads us to the main dining hall, taking our coats. There's chatter in the room, but it stops when they see us. Food hasn't been served yet, and everyone gets up to greet us like we don't live ten seconds away from each other.

My mom cuddles Penelope Jade, and she whispers something in her ear that I can't quite catch.

Eventually, we all take our seats. Everyone's here except Alex. He's playing for another ring back in Indianapolis.

We eat, and I notice that Fylox is exceptionally reserved. He stares at his plate, barely eating anything. He doesn't talk to Kamila, which he does to ease his nerves when in public and around too many people.

After dessert, Penelope Jade gets up, ready to leave. She hugs me as I sit at the table, begging to go home.

Kamila clears her throat. "I have something to tell you."

Fylox looks like he wants to die, sinking into his seat. He never disrespects my uncle like that. In Uncle Jordan's

presence, he's a good soldier. Fylox looks like he hasn't slept in weeks.

"I'm pregnant."

"What?"

"How? When did this happen..."

"You weren't trying, though, were you? Are you going to keep it?"

Penelope Jade removes herself from me, and she approaches her aunt at the head of the table. The eyes in the room are following my kid as she pulls her aunt into a hug. "Pregnant like my momma?"

"Yes, like your momma." Kamila hugs Penelope Jade back, and I hear Kamila snifle.

"Fylox?" Jordan addresses his soldier. The room quiets except for Penelope Jade, who's asking Kamila sweet little questions about the baby. What's going on?

"I don't think it's mine..." Fylox mutters, and my eyes go wide. So that's why he's in such a mood. This complicates things for Alex.

"Are you sure?" Jordan insists. He doesn't look happy, and I worry. Kamila being pregnant is a joyous occasion. I feel Aris stiffen beside me. I know what he's thinking about, so I let him hold my hand. If Kamila wants this baby, she's having it. End of story. Weston seems speechless, observing my daughter and her aunt.

"What does all of this mean?" Weston finally asks.

"It means we've got baby showers to plan," I respond. I rise from my seat. Aris follows me as I join my daughter by Kamila's side. "Congratulations. How far along are you?"

"Four to five months. Doctors say I'm at twenty-two weeks."

"WHAT?" Jordan yelps. This means she's further along than I am. Holy shit! She doesn't look pregnant at all. Fylox looks more pregnant than Kamila; his skin is pale and frail.

Meanwhile, Kamila is radiating a glow that I assumed came from Katantia's recent economic growth and international investment interest. "Why don't I know anything about this?"

"We only found out a couple of weeks ago when... Fylox noticed that something was wrong with my stomach. With everything going on, I didn't even notice that I haven't had any of my periods." She blushes, and Penelope Jade looks up at her tall aunt with big eyes. My daughter doesn't get her height from me, thankfully. So far, she's growing bigger than we ever expected her to be at that age.

And she likes spending time with Kamila and Fylox the most. I don't know what they give her, candy or cartoons that she's not supposed to watch. But they are the Penelope Jade whisperers of the Wraith siblings.

"That's... Mom would be ecstatic for you," Weston blurts out.

"It's a boy," Kamila reveals.



I USED TO DANCE, SO I SHOULD BE MORE ACCUSTOMED TO THIS shit, but I'm not. I hate yoga. I'd prefer swimming to being on a mat on the floor, doing all sorts of weird positions. Fylox is in the corner, keeping an eye on us. If it were Aris, he'd be staring at my ass. But Aris is at work, giving lectures on the male gaze and women in film to eager Katantian students. He keeps telling me that almost all of his students have propositioned him for sex, male, female, and non-binary. I want to bite all of their heads off!

"Valentina, you're not in the moment," our instructor comments. She's in a pretzeled-up position, stretched to the point that I feel nauseous looking at her. She's thicker than both Kamila and me, and we're both heavily pregnant. Her flexibility stuns me, and if I were in a phase, I'd compete against Kamila to become her favorite pupil. But I'm not. I just want to get this baby out safely. I'm Mandy and Weston's

own stork. It's fun until my entire body hurts only from sitting at my desk.

“We'll go swimming next week, okay?” Kamila tells me, and I decide to put more effort into our activity. We've been doing a lot of things together now that we're both pregnant at the same time. Her belly has started showing, or maybe now we see it because we know. Ever since their secret has come out, Fylox has recuperated. He watches Kamila like a hawk. Their dynamics scare me because I couldn't imagine having two Arises in my life. Kamila has two men who'd do anything for her. Alex almost quit his season, risking lawsuits and loss of money.

I sigh.

An hour later, we're sweaty as fuck. I don't know about Kamila, but I just want to lie down somewhere and catch my breath. Mandy and Weston's baby has been acting up lately, eager to meet her parents. I don't blame her.

Mandy and Weston decided to stay here for a couple of months until it's safe to travel with the baby. Weston's going back and forth between the States and here, preparing their house for the arrival of their baby.

I don't like the idea of them being alone over there, but it's their family, and I don't have a say. Not everyone likes our helicopter family 24/7.

Kamila and I finish our yoga session. We get ready in her quarters on the palace's top floor while Fylox waits for us. I'm ready first because I decide not to dry my hair. Stepping out into the hallway, I catch Fylox staring at the city of Katantia from one of the windows.

“Don't you have a job?” I ask him, tilting my head to the side.

“As a matter of fact, I do.” His nonchalant tone doesn't get to me. Nobody messes with Fylox. They all shy away from him, the scars on his skin. The fact that he's Kamila's second husband, metaphorically speaking. He doesn't talk much, and

he's got issues. Basically, he's too difficult to be around when you just want to let loose.

I disagree. Stepping closer to Fylox, I'm tempted to give him a hug. He's struggling with Kamila's pregnancy. He's older than me, but when I look into his pretty face and make no mistake, Kamila has gotten herself two of the most gorgeous men on earth... I see a little child that reminds me of my daughter. I can't wrap my head around the fact that he stays here with us when he spent years being tortured in the city and in our suburbs. His entire childhood was stolen from him, and the baby that grows in Kamila will one day find out.

Aris had those days as well. He wondered what his daughter would think of him if she found out how he and I actually got together.

"Are you finished narrating my sob story in your head?" Fylox asks, turning around to face me. As always, I'm tiny in comparison to my company. He's several inches taller than me, and he doesn't mind looking down upon me. In fact, Fylox is the type who enjoys that.

"I wasn't. I was comparing you to my husband. Then, I would've considered your reasons for sticking by Jordan for so long. You're quite fascinating," I tell him, hoping to cheer him up. He doesn't smile for anyone but Kamila, and we know that because she tells us about it. Not because we see it with our own eyes.

Fylox's gaze drops to my round belly, and I step back, for whatever reason.

"I know what he did to you," Fylox blurts out.

"How?"

"Big sister has eyes everywhere. Also, spoiler alert, I'm the big sister—Jordan, too. Kamila doesn't want to spy on her family." His narrow eyes lack emotion, and he doesn't move his body at all. He's a statue in front of me, casually detailing how he stalks us. "Occasionally, I catch you two talking about it."

“Do you also watch us... doing it?” I ask, my jaw dropping dramatically. Is he a voyeur? I should feel weirded out. In fact, Fylox probably expects me to call him out, but we’re in Katantia. Here? Anything goes.

“No, I don’t. That’s absurd,” he responds defensively but sincerely. His brow twitches, and his eyes fill with sorrow. “I find you two fascinating, and I don’t say that just about anyone.”

“The great big Fylox finds us fascinating? Tell me more!” I urge him, taking a step closer to him. He seems cold like a Chicago winter, ruthless and without mercy. But he’s amusing when he wants to be.

“Will our... child be like yours?” he asks, his eyes averting mine. He gazes out of the window, and I notice a slight blush on his bleak face.

“Oh, Fylox.” I decide to show my daring nature. His hands are clenched in fists next to his still body. I take one of his fists, and I try to open it. Uncomfortably, he flinches at my touch, but he lets me in. I’m now holding Fylox’s hand. That’s a goal I didn’t know I wanted to accomplish. “I can’t tell you what your baby will be like. All babies are unique. But I know Kamila and Alex. You, too. You’ll be wonderful parents for him.”

“How can you be so sure?” His voice is low, and I swear that there’s a tremble there somewhere.

“I mean, Aris and I are managing just fine. I’m the daughter of a murderer, and he’s the offspring of the psychopaths who created Katantia. Look at Penelope Jade. She’s the sweetest little diva ever,” I tell him. I take a deep breath. “Thank you for coming with us wherever we go. You shouldn’t have to. You’re making Aris feel like he’s neglecting us.”

“How can he be so calm about this?” Fylox blurts out.

Tightly, I grip his hand. “I’ve done it before. I survived. Kamila’s not the first woman ever pregnant. You’re our favorite stalker, but you have to think about yourself for a

minute. When he grows up, I'm pretty sure he'll want to travel the world, study somewhere exotic. Meet people. You won't always be there to keep him safe."

He doesn't say anything, but his hand tightens around mine. There are no tears. Fylox doesn't cry in front of us.

"What happened to you won't happen to him, Fylox." I sigh.

"You know what it feels like. You know it'll never stop. I can't trust—"

I interrupt him before he spirals. "I know what you mean, but I don't feel it to the extent that you do. I didn't suffer as much as you did."

"Nonsense. We're all the same. I have to... I have to keep Kendrick safe for Alex. It would break his heart if something happened to Kamila or Kendrick..."

"You'll call him Kendrick?" I gasp.

Fylox nods.

"That sounds like a proper name for a king," I blurt out in excitement. Then I relax. Fylox is still tense. He looks like he's about to explode. "You can follow us everywhere while she's still pregnant. Once that's done, you will slowly start to distance yourself, give them a bit of space. Have you forgotten about all those secretive things you do when you disappear for months? You haven't left Katantia in ages."

He nods, broody and adorable like he is. "I'm neglecting that part of my life."

"Well, you shouldn't. Little Kendrick will have honorable fathers, unlike my husband and Kamila did. Go around the world and kill all the bad guys, Fylox. We've got a kingdom here that loves us. Have you noticed how Aris and Kamila drink tea together after we go to their mother's grave?" I ask, rubbing my eyebrow with my finger. "It's quite refreshing to see them get along like that. Aris values spending time with his big sister."

“I hope that Kendrick and Penelope Jade will get along, too.”

“She’s already asking to help me make clothes for him. She’s ecstatic. It’ll do her good to have people of her age around. They’ll form a good clique when they’re older,” I inform him, and his eyes find mine.

“Have you forgiven Aris for what he did to you?”

“I forgave him a long time ago.” I swallow. “We find ourselves talking about it often. The therapists say that we have to talk about it, or else it’ll fester and grow into something poisonous. We’re in a trial phase right now, figuring out if we can still be together after everything. Even if he doesn’t remember some of the details of his past life, he’s still my Aris. If we can raise our child in peace, I’ll be happy. Being his wife was one of the biggest shows I’ve ever been a part of. It was exhausting.”

“You loved it, though,” he comments. I nod.

“That I did.”

“What are you two chatting about out here?” Kamila opens the door, strolling out with her red hair dry and straight. The roots of her hair are dark brown because she hasn’t dyed it ever since she discovered her pregnancy. She’s even wearing a hint of make-up. She notices me staring at her face. “I have a teleconference with property developers from China. Are you coming?”

Fylox nods, and we stop holding hands. Kamila beams at us, aware that we had a little heart to heart. I say goodbye to the both of them, and I make my way home.

This cockroach made her nemesis pay. She satisfied her urges. She hurt him as much as he hurt her. But if her nemesis thinks he can get rid of her, he’s fooled. Trample on this cockroach. Spit at her. Slice her up.

But I’ll rise from the dead, and I’ll take what’s mine.

They say my nemesis is bad for me. I’m bad for him, too. He’s never met somebody like me.

And he'll never have another.



ARIS

PEARLS OF SWEAT COAT VALENTINA'S FACE, HER ENTIRE BODY. She's sweating a lot, but that could be because the air conditioning is malfunctioning or because she just gave birth to Mandy and Weston's child. The lucky parents are outside the hospital's nursery, watching their baby girl through a glass.

Amalia Wraith came out after six hours of labor, during which Valentina showed me the warrior that she hides inside of her.

"Stop staring at me like that," Valentina urges us. She's motionless in her hospital bed while Penelope Jade stands beside her bed, her hands on the sheets. She wants to reach out to her mom, but she holds back. I told her to go easy with the hugs for a couple of weeks. "It's uncalled for. I'm not that interesting."

"Momma, will you have another baby?" The question is innocent, and our daughter speaks it in an irresistible tone of sweetness. She's a moody little thing like her mom. She'll make a good Princess of Katantia one day.

"What did I tell you?" I remind our daughter. I didn't raise my voice, but PJ dips her head obediently.

"What did you tell her?" Valentina asks, her eyebrows drawing together. "You don't bow to your dad, sweetie. Up with your head." Our daughter listens. "There you go. Your daddy loves you. No need to act so compliant around him."

"What is compliant?" PJ asks, thoroughly confused.

"Something you'll never be, baby." Valentina sighs. Then her eyes meet mine. "I don't want to have another baby. Do you?"

I shake my head. "I'm perfectly content with you two."

“Thought so,” V adds, smirking weakly. She pats her hand on the empty space next to her on the bed, inviting PJ to join her. PJ jumps at the opportunity. She’s a quiet girl, but she likes to have us close. She’s not afraid of our hugs or familiarity. “Did you see Amalia yet?”

“Daddy took me to see her earlier,” PJ tells her mom. Penelope Jade’s a mixture of my eyes with her mom’s face and dark hair. She proudly displays her arrogant resting face, but she’s never rowdy. She’s sweet to anyone she meets. I can’t believe that we made this child. I sit back on my seat, pretending that I’m not having an existential crisis over here. “She’s tiny.”

“Do you want to grab your aunt and uncle? Tell them that I want to get something to drink,” Valentina asks. PJ rushes out of the room in an instant, and I hear a guard trail after her. We’ve got the entire floor to ourselves, but one can never be too sure.

“Why did you send her away?” I ask Valentina.

“You have something on your mind, Aris. I know that you do.” Her tired eyes study me every inch. She’s got her sketchbook on her night table, her phone. She could be doing anything but gazing at me like that. I shift in my seat.

“Fylox said that Kamila sends you well-wishes. Kendrick is making them lose their minds,” I comment, avoiding the subject at hand. “Alex hasn’t slept in three days.”

“Aris.”

“Yes?”

“Spit it out. Did you fuck a student or something?” Valentina lifts her upper body from the bed, flinching. She stretches her neck to the left, to the right.

I shake my head. “I didn’t fuck any students. I only fuck you these days. I thought that was the deal.”

“It sure is,” she agrees. “Then what has you shaky? You can barely stay seated. You look like you want to go for a run.”

She's right. I shift in my seat again. I take a deep breath, and I summon the old Aris for advice. He didn't feel this nervous around his wife. He was at ease with her... Well, V was his wife. She's not anymore. I think that's what's bothering me. "Marry me. We'll have a big wedding. All the babies will be in attendance. We'll do it right this time. We'll have the biggest celebration the country's ever seen. William and Kate, who?"

Valentina's eyes widen, but she doesn't say a word.

"You don't want to get married again?" I ask. Our past will never cease to plague me. She's all the magic I need in my life, dark, mysterious, and beautiful. We've found common ground. We both get what we need from this relationship. We have our baby. We've done our duty for the family. Why shouldn't we be husband and wife again?

I sigh. Perhaps I misread the situation. If she wants to keep me as a fucktoy on the side, I'll let her have it. Nothing has to change. We still live in the same house, after all.

"Is that even a question?"



VALENTINA

ONE YEAR LATER

MY UNCLE ALMOST HAD FIFTEEN HEART ATTACKS TODAY. I, being the bride, haven't seen him much. It's only the third most important day of my life or so. I'm getting married. Again.

Uncle Jordan is coordinating the security for our massive wedding feast, and I can feel the drones stalk us from above. Their curious scans can detect fevers. It's insane, but my uncle wouldn't let us host an event with four hundred people unless he had the most up-to-date equipment to keep his family safe.

Earlier today, Penelope Jade walked me to the palace. Hand in hand, we led the bride's convoy to the entrance where her father waited for us. His tux fucked me up at first glance,

and I had to bite back the silly lust I felt. We have an entire week booked in the Maldives. I hate that we won't take Penelope Jade with us, but everyone in the family is here, and they want to take the kids to Tokyo Disneyland.

The people waiting at the palace didn't matter to me, although they added to the grand feeling of the event. Kamila had to pull out the big guns for us to have the wedding of my dreams. My uncle almost didn't let us.

Now, we have our guests. The massive decorations. The six-story cake. Glitter everywhere. Stilettos and gowns next to suits and leather. I wear a creation that Carmelo crafted himself for four months. Soft music accompanies our day. A live orchestra flew in from London with the best international musicians. There are tons of parties planned all over the country tonight. Everybody is celebrating our union.

Our baby shines in her little suit of silver and green. She doesn't like dresses, so we don't put her in dresses. Simple as that.

Next to me, Penelope Jade doesn't smile. Today, she's serious. She has a job to do, bring Momma to Daddy. Once she hands me to her dad on top of the red-carpeted stairs, I hear her squeal, something she hasn't done in a while. She steps back, and Aris leans in to kiss my cheek.

"You're beautiful, sweetheart. Magnificent," Aris tells me. I breathe him in, his familiar scent mixed with a hint of wood and spices. I can feel my elevated heartbeat in my fingertips. He must feel it, too. His hand holds mine as we proceed to the main hall. Penelope Jade holds her dad's hand, and I'm this close to tears. Our family's not far behind—everyone except Kamila. The Queen of Katantia and her husband will make an entrance once everyone is seated.

The ceremony comes and goes. When the time comes, Aris kisses me attentively as he always does when Penelope Jade is around. Kamila gives the final speech, and just like that, Aris is my husband again.

I could go on and on about the celebrations.

But they weren't the most fun.

At the end of the night, Aris carries a sleeping Penelope Jade with her head on his shoulder. Barefoot, I walk beside my husband and Penelope Jade. The rest of the family is still at the palace, entertaining our international guests.

We reach home, and I can't help but glance at my old house for a moment.

I'm trying, Dad. I really am. Please, let us find our peace.

My heart pounds in my chest, and I lose myself in the moment, letting my memories overwhelm me. I feel myself shiver, the cold night. At everything that happened in the past. At the thought that my father is somewhere watching us.

"Momma?" I almost trip when I hear my baby's voice. She's standing at the doorway, her hair messed up and her gray eyes sleepy and red. "Are you coming? We have a surprise."

I take a deep breath. I follow my eager child into our home, and I wonder where the hell Aris went. He was supposed to put her to bed, not wake her up.

"In here!" Penelope Jade yelps, pointing at our dining room. I follow her tiny footsteps, and I'm stunned at what I see. Aris and our daughter smile devilishly as I take in the massive strawberry cake on our dining table.

"Do you like it?" Penelope Jade asks, and I nod. "Can I have some?"

"Only three little strawberries. You can have cake tomorrow. I promise." Penelope Jade turns around, focusing on the cake. She plucks some of the strawberries that decorate it, and she starts chewing away.

Aris steps closer to me, and he puts his arm around me. "It was her idea. Penelope Jade knew that you don't like chocolate cake as much as strawberry, so she had me order this from F Me French."

"I love you, you know that, right?"

"I love you, too, sweetheart."

“Sweetheart!” Penelope Jade chimes in.

I don’t want to be that girl, but the trash has been taken out. I’ve taken its place, and I mightily like it here. We’re not the perfect family. We’re far from it.

But we try.

And we love each other.

And that’s all that matters, my little strawberry.

CORRUPTED

4



CHAPTER I

JORDAN



I KNOW WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE.

“Mr. Winters, I asked you a question,” she addresses me. She doesn’t look at me. People rarely do. “Give me your number.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that,” I respond. My family has my phone number. That’s it.

She clears her throat, and she draws a thick line on her white notepad. Her nails are always cut neatly, and her cuticles are intact. “You don’t pay attention. Mr. Winters. Nothing gets past you in the real world, but when we’re in this room, you don’t listen. I asked for a number that means something to you.”

The couch I sit on is brand-new. Every year, the palace finances a new one. I’m supposed to relax and lie down. I’ve never done that in my therapist’s presence. What is a number that means something to me?

4. My son’s jersey number comes to mind. Indianapolis will retire that number, and if they don’t, they’ll have a massacre to deal with. Massacre.

“3013.” I run my hand over my black beanie. It’s the new one my son sent me after he got his third ring. It feels good to know at least one of us has accomplished something great.

“And what does that number symbolize?” she asks.

“Death,” I tell her. As expected, she freezes. Her doe eyes finally glimpse at me, and I feed off the fear she emanates.

Fuck, this makes me hard, and I'm not even interested. I don't fuck girls like her. If she wasn't my doctor, I would've never even spared her a glance. She's not my type. Ivy Lin, her anglicized name, is the goody-two-shoes protégé my daughter-in-law Kamila, the Queen of Katantia, hired five years ago. She's one of the doctors the palace pays to heal their traumatized nation. A load of bullshit if you ask me, but then again, I'm the one meeting a psychiatrist every month.

I've encountered this woman fifty times ever since she stepped foot on Katantia. I know where she lives, what she eats, who her friends are, and who she fucks. That last part is easy. She doesn't fuck anybody, and it rubs me the wrong way. She's too perfect to remain un-fucked on Katantia.

"D-death?" she stutters, and I can't help my grin. Ivy is a professional, and I'm sure she's heard a lot of crap in her five years of Katantia.

But I doubt she's ever had a murderer on this seat.

Not that she knows that I'm a murderer.

3013 is one of my deepest secrets. Travis died with his number, and I will die with mine. We don't kiss and tell in my business.

"I'm messing with you," I say, and she relaxes her tense shoulders. Everything about her is correct, from her posture to her tentative breathing. "It's the street address of my childhood home."

Ivy nods, biting her lip. She's flustered, tucking her jet-black hair behind her ear. "You said your foster parents were murdered. Is that why that number symbolizes death for you?"

I nod, and she takes in the movement. Her lips are heart-shaped, not too plump, and not too slim. They're somewhere in the middle. A glance at how she carries herself, I see that she takes no notice of my eyes trailing every detail of her body.

Ivy Lin's a professional.

I am, too. We're in different businesses, that's all.

Fylox, my favorite second-in-command, once described us as professional stalkers, but we're more than that. We're pitch black, and our eyes have seen things that no ordinary stalker would deal with. I protect what's mine, and what's mine now is this country and the family that runs it. What's mine is my son, who's still in States, working his ass off to be better than I ever was.

"Mr. Winters..." People don't say that name to me. Kamila's palace runs itself on a first-name basis. Ivy Lin's one of the few that say that name to me. It's a name I made up. It doesn't mean anything to me, but Ms. Lin believes it's what defines me, so I let her. I've given her starving curiosity crumbs of my life, and she's still not fed. She never will be. "Mr. Winters, are you still smoking cannabis?"

My daughter-in-law Kamila's pregnant now, so she and Fylox have stopped smoking with me on the palace's roof. Now, I do it alone—without the people my son's in a relationship with. Yes, he has a wife, and his best friend's part of their relationship.

Instead of addressing my doctor, I nod at Ms. Lin. My psychiatrist gives me a look that I would interpret as a glare if I cared enough.

She shuts her notepad, folding her hands on her lap. Her jeans-clad legs are crossed, her feet tucked away in black pumps. Her style is all over the place. She's trying to prove something, but I don't think she knows what exactly.

"I think our time's up." My gaze turns to the old clock behind her office on the other side of the room. I rise from the couch, ready to go about my day. I have grandpa duties at the palace.

She clears her throat. "Do you think I'm of help?"

I forget how young she is. She came to us in her late twenties, about to earn her credentials. I've seen her glow up in her field. Even if I don't believe in this shit myself. Inhaling, I straighten my posture. "You're brilliant. I'm not the easiest patient to have. Keep up the good work."

“We’ve been seeing each other for years.” *Fifty times, to be exact.* I have eyes on her because outside of this office, I don’t have time to worry about a doctor’s loose mouth. Ivy Lin is a professional, though. She hasn’t let my ramblings about my life reach outside of our sessions. Good for her. “I just don’t see the point—”

“Are you breaking up with me?” I ask, amused.

“I... I don’t know,” she responds honestly.

“We’re not optional. It’s court-ordered. The Queen of Katantia herself has appointed these sessions,” I remind her. While my son Alex is overseas, this is how I bond with my son’s wife and her boyfriend, who is also my protégé, my favorite second-in-command. We go to therapy. We don’t take pills. Kamila does, occasionally, when her seizures resurge. We smoke weed and crack jokes at our strange lives on top of the palace, reminiscing about the ghosts that haunt us.

“Yes, but the queen and her boyfriend have been making progress. You...”

I let her have a moment. *Choose your words wisely.*

“Just go,” she blurts out, and I’m momentarily stunned. She’s been flustered before, but her professionalism dominates her presence. I don’t affect her on any other day, and I wonder what’s changed today. “The front office will notify you.”

“About what?” I ask, tilting my head to the side.

“Your new psychiatrist. We’ve had a new influx of physicians from—”

“You think they’ll get to me?”

She nods.

“All right.”

I glance at her one last time. Kamila won’t like this development. I’ll miss Ivy Lin and her clean-cut attitude. Her light blush always managed to amuse me. She’s the best at her job, and I doubt that anyone else will extract a word out of me, but I’ll let her have her meltdown.

“Goodbye, Mr. Winters. I truly hope you get the help you deserve.”

I don't give her anything but a quick nod. I'm out of her office before she can stop me.



IT'S BEEN A COUPLE OF HOURS, AND I STILL HAVEN'T THOUGHT of an excuse to drop out of my therapy sessions.

I park my Cadillac Escalade in the parking facility inside the palace compound. Scanning each car I walk by, it takes me a couple of minutes to reach the palace. I shake myself out of my compulsive needs.

At the entrance, I'm greeted by men I've hired. I know their names. Every single person that works in this compound has been vetted and tested by me. I let them pat me down and scan my palace ID card. After all, I must set an example for the rest of the compound, and I'm very well aware of the power I yield.

Once inside, I hurry up the five floors of stairs. I don't use the elevators because they're for pussies. I'm in my fucking fifties, but I take these stairs like I own them.

“Good morning, Jordan,” the girl at the queen's reception greets me. Maddie's a teenager, but she puts on her *fuck me* eyes every time she sees me. I'd have her fired because I don't do pathetic little girls, but Kamila hired this girl to give her a chance at a steady job. She's been in and out of homes since her parents abandoned her in Katantia four years ago. I can't blame her for wanting a father figure in her life. I'm a father to many already, and I don't do charity.

“Good morning,” I say to Maddie. “Where's Felicita?”

Today, Maddie's hair is blue, taking after the queen's scandalous teen years of everchanging hair colors. She tucks a lock of hair behind her ear, biting her lower lip. “Your sister's just down the hall in the baby's playroom.”

“Thank you. Have a nice day.” I roll my eyes once she’s out of my sight. I put up with the thirsty girls of Katantia because of my family. That’s not a fucking lie. I don’t need women to boost my ego. It’s already thick enough.

3013 and counting. Not a single charge. I’ve never been put in handcuffs in my entire life.

The windows I pass are as tall as I am, showing me Katantia’s sunny day. I say I hate it, but in all honesty, life’s been calmer ever since I came here.

I enter the playroom and find Felicita on the floor, kneeling and clapping for our young king. He’s jumping up and down in his activity center. His daddy sent it to him from America. It’s fish-themed after an animated movie we watch every other Sunday.

My sister notices my presence, and she gets up from the floor. She’s surprised to see me back so early. Never one to miss a chance to look good, she’s in a long flowery dress and heels. How she manages the heels and my grandson, I have no idea. Her auburn hair is loose, wavy, and long over the shoulder. Her teal eyes study me, picking me apart. She’s tiny in a family of giants like her daughter, but she’ll cut you in two if you let her. It’s in the family. She asks, “How was your therapy session?”

She hugs me, and I hug her back, comforted by the fact she’s still here. We live together, and she sleeps on the same floor as I do in her home. I still need confirmation of her presence.

“It was all right,” I tell her. The game noises and music stop. I glance at my grandson, and he meets my eyes.

Immediately, I take on the role Felicita and I have seemingly been made for. We’re the grandparents that everyone relies on. Our kids and their kids come first. “How’s my king doing today?”

Fishing Kendrick out of his activity center is an easy task for me. He gravitates toward me more than his daddy did when he was a baby.

“He looks just like you these days,” Felicita says as Kendrick starts fiddling with my black leather jacket. I forgot to take it off, and I know his mom doesn’t like it when he comes into contact with outdoor jackets. I hand him to his aunt while I remove my jacket and hang it outside the playroom. Then I come back inside and take Kendrick back into my arms.

He’s a heavy little kid, and he’s very big for his age, too. He’s got all of that from us, his daddy, and I. The only thing he got from his mom is his pitch-black eyes. We thought they’d start changing at some point, but they never did.

“Say a little something for me, my young king,” I say to the baby. He giggles in response. His tiny fingers trace my hoodie. He grabs the fabric, fascinated with its soft touch. He’s too young for numbers or letters, but he clutches the clothes his daddy sends over more than anything else.

Kendrick doesn’t say anything, but he keeps making his cute little noises. He’s more expressive than Penelope Jade was. She was always a quiet little baby, and it felt like a reward when she responded to our silly baby talk.

I let the baby do its thing. My sister glances at us, and I see the love in her eyes. “Do you want to do something for yourself today?”

“What?” she asks as if she didn’t hear me.

“Do something. Go shopping. Have a spa day. What do women do in their free time?”

A sad smile coats her face. We have packed lives, but they’re not our lives. It’s like we’re raising kids all over again. We don’t have to do it, but both my sister and I keep ourselves busy because, quite frankly, our social lives are a mess.

“Remember when you and Travis used to take me to that diner with the horrible soup? Who sells soup in a diner?” she says, and the image pops up in my head. We were kids back then, and Felicita had bad aches whenever she was on her period. I hated when her teal eyes filled with tears. Pain painted an ugly picture of my little sister. Travis and I took her

to the movies, parks, anything to distract her. She hid behind us everywhere we went, the baby of the family.

“Are you okay?” my sister asks.

I nod. “Yes, of course. I remember everything.”

We were innocent back then, Felicita and I. My foster sister and I hadn’t lost ourselves just yet. Of course, I didn’t know about my foster sister’s past back then either. It helped upkeep the image of innocence in my head.

“I can’t go back to that,” Felicita says. Kendrick reaches out for his aunt, and she picks up his little finger with her hand. “He’s gone.”

“It’s been five years,” I remind her. Five fucking years since Travis stepped in front of a bullet that aimed at Kamila. “He wouldn’t want you to—”

“Don’t be such a hypocrite.” She sniffles, and the sound rips me apart. The fact that I’m holding Kendrick calms me down. “You’re doing the same thing as I am... He would’ve loved the kids so much. He would’ve done the exact same thing.”

“That’s very true, but he didn’t love you like that,” I remind her. “He had that boy Kamila has hired. He would’ve found comfort there. You don’t have anyone.”

“Are you giving me a lecture on how to be a single widow?” she asks, a faint smile on her face. “Besides, I don’t need comfort. I’ve had intimate relations with almost every man on this island, and I’m confident I don’t want any of that action right now. What about you? You wouldn’t even touch any woman with a ten-foot pole. You’ve got offers. Every woman in this palace would love a piece of—”

“Not in front of my grandchild,” I warn her. Kendrick chuckles and plays around like nothing’s wrong.

“Stop worrying so much about me. Get your own life,” Felicita suggests.

“I don’t need a *life*.” Clearing my throat, I add, “I’ve got a family and a country to keep safe. My plate’s full.”

“You don’t get any comfort, though,” Felicita says, winking at me. She’s trying to hide her tears, but they’re there. She was always dedicated to Travis and being his widow has taken a toll on her.

“I don’t need comfort,” I argue.

Felicita raises her eyebrows. “Everybody needs comfort. You’re in the land of comfort. Perhaps we should get you a stripper for your birthday. Pay her a little extra, you know. Get you a sweet deal and all.”

“Hey. My grandson’s not allowed to know what strippers are,” I tell her, tickling Kendrick to distract him from registering our discussion. I hiss in a whisper. “Strippers dance. They don’t provide *comfort*.”

“Ha. Ha. Ha,” Felicita responds. “Not on Katantia, brother. Here, everything is possible. And besides, since Alex can’t be here, we should host you a birthday bash with all the ladies invited. I’m sure the *gifts* would be endless.”

I’m not the best parent out there, and it’s debatable whether I have a right to demand that my son comes home for my birthday. But he’s in the playoffs, which means no flying across the world to meet his family’s needs. Kamila flew to LA, where my son had an obligation when she and Fylox found out the baby’s gender, and even that was too much. We don’t even call Alex right now so that he can focus on the game.

“I know you’re growing up on Katantia,” I tell my grandson. He yelps. “But women aren’t objects. You treat them with respect, okay, young king? Be like your pops and ignore the *gifts* this country has to offer.”

“Don’t listen to your grandpa,” Felicita says, kissing the top of his hand. “I’m still throwing you a birthday bash.”

“I won’t attend!” I threaten her.

She chuckles as we make our way out of the palace to take a stroll with the baby in the fresh air.

CHAPTER 2

JORDAN



MY OFFICE IS FULL OF ALCOHOL, CIGARS, FLOWERS FROM MY admirers, and sneakers.

It's my fifty-first birthday, and I'm writing a hate email to one of my son's assistants. I expected the results of my son's cars' inspections yesterday, but the fucker ghosted me. Alex is busy with his playoffs, so I don't want to bother him with this.

I'll take care of it myself, and I'll fire the lousy piece of shit if he doesn't do as told *via email*. Alex forbids me from yelling at his employees.

There's a knock on my door, but I ignore it. I'm fixated on finishing my email. The keys of my laptop have miraculously survived the months of abuse I put them through. I change laptops frequently. There's always a new model to test, fewer fingerprints to be left on the internet.

“Sir?”

I roll my eyes, but I finish my email, and I send it. Typos can go get fucked. I'll show up to the assistant's home, and then I'll let him laugh at my typos while I extract his fucking eyes and let him eat his eyeballs.

“Come in,” I yell, shutting my laptop.

Måns walks in with a low and subdued gaze. His posture is strong and proud, though. He's my soldier through and through. I tell him to cut his pompadour-like sandy blond undercut every day, but he doesn't listen. My soldiers don't need to look like Elvis. We shouldn't add too many details to our looks as palace employees, but since Måns is my top

soldier, he gets away with it. “Sir, do you have a minute to spare?”

“I told you don’t call me ‘sir,’ son. I’m Jordan,” I remind him, gesturing at the seats in front of my desk.

Måns nods, lowering his gaze. What’s so interesting about the edge of my desk? It’s plain wood, with no fancy ornaments. It looks like a low-level secretary’s desk, but I don’t care. It survived the hundreds of times I’ve knocked it over in my five years of being in charge. “I’ll make the necessary arrangements, s—”

He stops himself before calling me sir again. He goes on, “I’ve been hearing some rumors.”

“What type of rumors are we talking about?” I ask, sitting back on my chair. Måns reminds me of Fylox when he was his age, fierce and loyal. He doesn’t have a hint of darkness in him, unlike Fylox, though. He’s a good kid, trying to find his footing in this world. Måns is the younger brother of one of the doctors in the Queen I hospital. They moved to Katantia five years ago, and he’s been working for the palace ever since.

“So, my friends in California say that the databases we have are outdated...” He goes on to give me an entire oral presentation, and I take in the details. The kid isn’t dumb, and he works hard. He’s got something, so I trust him. If there’s one thing my therapy sessions have helped me with, it’s trusting others more.

Now, I know that I make mistakes. Others do so, too. Whether I let them in or not, mistakes will be made, nonetheless. We’re humans, not robots. Still, I don’t trust just about anyone. I have my favorite soldiers, and Fylox keeps teasing me about the ranking system my employees have created.

Fylox teases me.

Kamila has changed my boys. There are some days where I wish that Fylox and Alex had separate women, but then I see

our young king, and I know that it works for them. Two dads are better than one. Fuck. What did the kid say?

“Excuse me?” I blurt out.

“I said Happy Birthday,” Måns utters. He’s a big guy, but he knows authority. And when I’m in the room, even the top dogs cower. “Mrs. Cross has sent out invitations. She said to dress up.”

“As what?” I ask, not having bothered to involve myself with my sister’s party for my birthday. If I could somehow stay at home, I would. However, Weston and Mandy have traveled all the way from Texas to be here for my *special day*. Aris and Valentina will babysit all the babies, their own, Kendrick and Amalia. I must make an appearance at my party.

“Ehm...” Måns struggles to find the right words. “All the women are supposed to come dressed as schoolgirls. For men, the dress code is suit and tie. Basically, we’re supposed to look like professors.”

“For fuck’s sake.” I’m disgusted at this shit, squinting my eyes and flaring my nostrils.

“It’s just a party,” Måns assures me. “Mrs. Cross doesn’t mean anything by it. Right?”

“Måns, it’s been five years. She’s Felicita, and I’m Jordan. Cut the Mr. and Mrs. shit,” I demand. He makes a note of it, but I know that he’ll start back up with it in a week or two. He’s in my sister’s bodyguard roster, but my sister rarely leaves the palace. When she does, I have one of the old guys take her where she needs to go. Måns has more intricate tasks at the palace. “And no, my sister means something by everything she does. She wants me to fuck a schoolgirl, and I’m not having it. I’m too old for this shit.”

Måns flinches at the curse word. In front of my men, I rarely lose my temper, but my sister is trying to aggravate me. She has succeeded. “We’ll all be there. We’re very sorry that your son can’t come. Mrs.... Felicita has organized an entire theater downstairs. She will live stream the game during the party.”

“For us, his game is in the morning,” I remind Måns.

“It’s a party. It’ll go all night.” Måns smirks. *Fuck it*. I can afford one night of entertaining my family. “I have to go back to my shift now.”

“Yeah, I know. You don’t want to lose your top spot on the ranking system,” I say.

He laughs while walking out of my office.

I go back to my desk duties for now. Tomorrow, I’m scheduled to investigate the new training facilities for my men.

And so, life goes on.

CHAPTER 3

FELICITA



MY GRANDDAUGHTER FASTENS MY STILETTO HEELS WHILE MY daughter fixes the final touches of my dress. We've been in Valentina's master bathroom for an hour now, adding the final touches to my look. Jordan is uncomfortable with the professor and schoolgirl theme of his party, but I'm taking full advantage of it. The schoolgirl look is for the guests; I'm the headmistress of this school.

I didn't come to my daughter's home for a makeover, but it's what I received.

My daughter's entire make-up collection is on display on the marble countertop of the vanity. I didn't let her transform my face. She applied a little mascara and lip gloss, leaving it at that.

The clothes I wear aren't mine, though. They make my makeover what it is—an effort to look and feel good about myself for one night. It's a sexy dress, and as I stand there looking at myself in the mirror, I question whether I should be the one in it. My daughter's eyes sparkle at the dress. My granddaughter's the anti-dress girl of the palace, but even she's mildly impressed.

It's one of Valentina's more elegant pieces. Without sleeves, it hugs my curves, and it showcases my cleavage without giving away too much. It's a perfect fit for my body because Valentina took my measurements. My daughter loves seeing me confident and comfortable in my skin.

I pretend that I'm both—when, all I want is to crawl back into bed and hide there until Monday comes and I must babysit one of the kids again.

Jordan's birthday party is about to start, and as the organizer, I should be one of the first at the scene of the crime.

"Mom, you're one hot MILF. I bet all the boys' jaws will drop tonight!" Valentina cheers for me by my side. Penelope Jade peers up at her mom, weirded out but also amused by Valentina's strange lingo.

"You're ready!" my grandchild reveals, rising from the floor. I take a step in the heels, and I feel wobbly. It'll be a long night.

Penelope Jade's tall for her age, and she certainly doesn't get it from our side of the family. The women on our side are all short while the Wraiths...

Yeah.

"This party is for Jordan," I claim. I must keep it together for my babies. Valentina is a mom now, and Penelope Jade is five years old, but I can't see them as anything other than my baby girls. "You better check his outfit before he leaves, okay? I must go now, but make sure he looks presentable. We're doing this for him. He needs some company. It's been too long. He's always focused on work."

"Who needs company?" Penelope Jade asks, fixing her baby blue tie. "I don't have any friends, and I'm the coolest kid on Katantia!"

"Of course, you have friends," Valentina quickly adds, blushing. Penelope Jade is the oldest in her generation, and she's struggling to fit in. She doesn't turn on the charm for strangers, preferring to be playful toward the people she knows by heart. We never had to have the talk with her. *Don't talk to strangers. Don't do that. Don't do this. No jumping into weird cars with people you don't know.* Penelope Jade understands the concept, but she takes it too far. That means she's lonely.

Like her mom was.

My heart grows heavy.

“Remember the boys from Karate class?” Valentina reminds Penelope Jade. “They can be considered your friends. You broke one of their noses. They respect you. Their moms always invite you to their birthday parties.”

“Boys suck,” my granddaughter grunts.

“They really do,” I agree.

“Mom!” V calls out. “We’re trying to make her socialize!”

Penelope Jade doesn’t like going out and spending time with kids her age. Like Valentina was her age, PJ is a daddy’s girl. She loves it when her dad reads comic books to her. Now, she even reads them herself. She still wants her dad there because she wants him to know that she can read now.

I’ve known Aris since he was in his early twenties. One thing I never thought he’d become was a good father. We don’t remind PJ that her dad wasn’t there a lot when she was a newborn. It’s counterproductive, and it only ruins the balance they’ve found as a family. Aside from her aversion to other humans her age, Penelope Jade is a family-loving child that aces each test her homeschool teacher gives her. PJ goes everywhere we go, and she behaves like she’s one of us, a member of the royal family that has endured all the necessary PR training. Sometimes I fear that she’s too mature for her young age.

“I think grandma is anxious to get to the party for grandpa. We should let her go,” Penelope Jade comments, sounding like the grownup in a room of three generations of Cross women.

“Baby, Jordan’s your uncle, okay?” Valentina approaches PJ, taking her tiny hands in hers. I see the trembling she attempts to hide, and I’m sure PJ notices as well. Nothing gets past the youngest in the room. “You have a grandpa.”

“Let her,” I tell my daughter. Travis wouldn’t mind. In fact, he’d be bothered if Jordan’s role as head of our family wasn’t recognized. “Jordan’s everything in one.”

“It bothers me,” V blurts out, and PJ flinches. My granddaughter seeks out my comforting gaze. “You’re too

clever, Penelope Jade. You know where your grandpas are. Uncle Jordan is your uncle only, okay?"

"But they're not here. Why does Kendrick get a grandpa and I don't?" My grandchild frowns.

Penelope Jade doesn't know, but her words rattle me. I didn't intend to think about Travis today. That's a goal I wake up with every day.

Every day, I fail.

Every aspect of my life reminds me of my deceased husband.

My *murdered* husband.

"Mom?" Valentina addresses me, and I find her curious gaze. Behind her, Penelope Jade fiddles with her tie, her cheeks rosy. "You're going to be late."

"Don't chastise her for wanting a grandfather," I urge my daughter. "There's nothing wrong with that."

Penelope Jade sneaks out of her mom's shadow, and she comes up to me, snaking her arms around me.

"Be careful! No creases on the dress!" Valentina gasps, but I hug Penelope Jade back, uncaring if I look like a mess for the party.

"I love you, grandma!" When Penelope Jade decides she wants a hug, she gets it, but I'm careful how I touch PJ. Too much affection has resulted in meltdowns in the past, so we tread carefully. We can't figure out why simple touches affect her so much, but we don't experiment much on her either. We have doctors observing her, and her homeschool teacher gives us reports. It's a delicate situation that I want to get to the bottom of. The only thing that calms me down is that every move my grandchild makes is recorded on camera. She hasn't been inappropriately touched by anyone, and that is what matters to us the most. If anybody dared to hurt one of my babies, I'd raise hell on earth. I'd put myself in the line of fire.

Again.

My daughter thinks I don't notice, but she turns away from us, pretending to be busy with the make-up on the marble countertop. I hear her faint sobs because they come from her soul.

"I love you, too. Help your mom clean up, all right? We'll make a strawberry cake tomorrow, and you can have the biggest piece," I tell her.

"Help me with my homework?" PJ pleads, but she doesn't need any help whatsoever. She soaks up knowledge.

I nod.

After a quick hug with my daughter, I make my way out.

The clutch carry is light, with no phone or purse inside. I don't need it. I'm on the palace compound, surrounded by family and... Friends? I don't have friends. Cross women aren't very sociable it seems.

I hold on to the clutch while I pass Kamila's house. Weston and Mandy are staying here with Amalia for a short vacation. They like Kamila's former home, but to me, it's torment. The palace has changed, but nobody touches the queen's former home. Everything inside of her home is as she left it, except for the newly added baby equipment.

Every morning when I used to go to the palace, I passed by Kamila's home, wondering about her whereabouts. We were fucked and tortured by Aram regularly, but we didn't see each other that often in scenes. Had she been hurt? Was she crying? Did she have anyone to comfort her?

Kamila despised me, and she had a right to.

I ruined her life.

Years ago, Aram Wraith gave me a choice between his daughter and mine. Who would I choose for him to torment? I protected my young child from this monster, and I chose Kamila. She was barely a teen anymore, but that was no excuse.

She didn't deserve what happened to her in the next decade.

I'll live with this guilt forever. It's why I can't blame my husband for stepping between Kamila and the bullets that were aimed at her that day. At last, Travis saved Kamila, as we had vowed to do.

I twist my face into a smile, a smirk. Something that won't betray what I feel inside.

The route to the palace is quiet. No guests are allowed to park here, giving us our peace during palace events.

While there's nothing going on out here, I can't help the memories I've made.

Aram would enjoy this outfit too much. I can feel his eyes on me, feasting on my body and making up scenarios in his head. *How am I going to humiliate Felicita today? What can I do to degrade her? Make her feel like she's worth nothing? Nobody likes you, Felicita. You can't even make your husband jealous because he doesn't love you.*

After years of training, I keep myself composed. Even if Jordan is watching me through the cameras, he can't see the turmoil inside.

The smirk on my face reveals that I planned a nasty party for my brother. That's all.

The smirk on my face hides my pain in plain sight.

The smirk on my face... It hasn't been real for a while.

Kendrick and Penelope Jade keep me going. Whenever I'm in the palace, whether it's refurbished or not, I'm flooded with pieces of my past. In this palace, I've endured it all. Aram might have let me wash my body before going home to my family, but he never cleansed my soul. Instead, he took and took until there was nothing left to give.

"Mrs. Cross, you're early," one of the guards at the doors greets me. Jordan hates the concept of the party, but he's made sure that our safety is on point. He's put his best guards at the palace's gates and entrance.

"Somebody has to run this party," I tell him, and he takes my palace ID card. He's bulky and stoic, a description fitting

most men and women working for Jordan in the palace. They're kind to us because we're part of the royal family, but I've seen how hostile they can get if they sense danger.

The new guards do their job well. My brother and the Queen of Katantia have organized a new gym for the palace's hardworking men and women. It's a project that my brother is very proud of, and his employees are excited to try out the new equipment. They even installed a cafeteria where they'll serve protein shakes and food, among other things.

"Enjoy the party, Mrs. Cross. You've outdone yourself," the guard says, handing me my card. I place it back inside my clutch, and I briefly remember a time when the guards would gladly watch as Aram Wraith raped me. Back then, they didn't talk to me in a friendly tone. I was scum. I was there to please their king. I had no voice or choice.

I was Aram Wraith's object, his whore.

As was Kamila.

And everyone was aware of it.

Of course, those guards were either killed in the riots that destroyed half the palace five years ago, or they were allegedly fired and deported by my brother. Jordan claims he removed them, but to this day, neither he nor Fylox are willing to explain exactly how they removed the cowardly guards who watched hundreds of women and men be tortured against their will.

The palace guards of today are vigilant, and they are model modern Katantian citizens. Their queen is their one true monarch, but the laws in place reject any torture of innocents on palace grounds.

The other guards remain silent as I'm patted down by the guard who scanned my ID card. They study the periphery. Some busy themselves on tablets. Others press on their earpieces, presumably talking to other guards through secure lines. Cameras are watching our every move, keeping records for later analysis. I look for my brother's favorite employee, but he's nowhere to be seen. Why would he be down here,

doing the trivial work of patting people down and checking their IDs? With his rank, he's probably in my brother's office, discussing things that nobody else is supposed to know.

We always had guards in the palace.

They were never as efficient.

Do I feel safe? Physically, yes. I can't be hurt anymore. Mentally, I'm a mess.

I enter the Main Hall. There's no need for further inspection. The areas are separated as I requested them to be. My brother won't kill me for throwing him a sex party, but he will consider killing me if I don't provide a safe space for him to sit and watch the *show*.

The dance floor is pristine, ready for the short list of guests to come and fill it up with their dancing shoes. Down the hall, I see the fully stocked bar. The staff is cleaning up, sorting bottles, and talking among each other.

I check in with the DJ, going over the playlist with him. Knowing my brother, he'll be upset by more than half the songs. Good. It'll motivate him to leave the party early with one of the female guests. I'm counting on it.

The entire island drools over my brother, but he's as chaste as a nun for some peculiar reason. It's not that peculiar when I consider that I haven't touched another man in years either.

At any point, I expect Aram to stomp toward me and force me to my knees. He'd hurt me in front of the staff to make them see how much I mattered to him. *Zero*. He'd rip my clothes from my body, and he'd make me crawl after him.

It's been five years, and the scars have faded.

I still can't shake the humiliation I endured.

Unable to stand still, I pace on the dance floor. I earn the staff's curious gazes. One or two girls come up to me, and they ask if I would like to have a drink. Kindly, I refuse. I need to have a clear mind for tonight.

It's Jordan's birthday, and while there aren't a lot of traditions we have as a family, birthdays used to be Travis's

favorite event. He made the children feel special on their birthdays. Every other day, he was on the phone with a friend from overseas because it was their birthday.

All these years later, I wonder where these people are. Do they know that Travis is no more? My deceased husband had a lot of sketchy friends. They didn't seem like the type to check gossip sites that report on Katantian news.

Perhaps the underground world has a way of communicating the passing of one of their own.

The guests begin to trickle in. Upon sight, they greet me with kisses and hugs. Most of them are new Katantians or people of Kamila's age. Jordan doesn't have any friends who would come to a party, so I had to improvise.

When Adonis walks in, he instantly meets my gaze. I shudder.

I never had an issue with my husband's... Boyfriend. Partner? Lover? I don't know how to define Adonis. He didn't set out to hurt me. That much is clear. Adonis is my daughter's age, and he works for the Katantian government now. He dated my husband for a couple of years before he was murdered.

He's a good-looking young man, but I'm sure Travis didn't fuck him solely because he's pretty.

Every day, Adonis and I spend time in the same building. The palace.

The guards, my brother, and Kamila urge me to have a conversation with Adonis. But I don't see the point. Why would I want to speak to the man that warmed my husband's bed when I couldn't?

Sure, I was used by Aram for years before Travis ever touched another person.

Still.

It hurt. It would always hurt. And a conversation with Adonis will only add more pain.

Adonis advances toward me, and I duck, hiding behind the guests. My heart explodes, and I lose control of my facial expressions. If I don't leave the party, everyone will see the tears on my face.

This is my brother's birthday party. I can't break it off with my silly tears over a husband who had warned me about his sexuality. It wasn't like I didn't know Travis was gay. I knew, and I still said yes when he asked to marry me for my protection.

I leave the Main Hall, mingling among the guests in the foyer. Perfumes from all over the world invade my senses, but I focus on my goal to reach the stairs. I take the staff's route to the cellar, and I explore how far I can go without scanning my palace ID card.

The staff ignores me, as they should. They have hundreds of guests to take care of upstairs now. The heels on my feet take me into the depths of the cold cellar, where I find a quiet corner to myself.

Once I land on my butt on the floor, I take a deep breath.

I don't hate Travis for falling in love with Adonis. I repeat that mantra, but it doesn't sink in. In a different world, I could've fallen for Aram Wraith. Why not? I could've seduced him into making me his new queen.

He was already knee-deep inside of me. Why not take advantage of it?

Those vile thoughts would get me nowhere. I never once felt an ounce of sympathy or appreciation for Aram. He continuously abused me, and he turned my son into a freak. He made everyone I love lose respect for me.

He did so much more. He hurt children. He wanted to hurt *my* child.

"Mrs. Cross, are you okay?" The voice is deep, almost a growl. Impatient.

Are the shadows speaking to me now? I sob, hiding away my face behind my knees. It's an inappropriate pose, revealing

my panties to anyone who wishes to see, but Katantians have seen me naked on one occasion or another.

I couldn't care less about my purity right now.

There isn't any left.

Out of the shadows, Måns Bengtsson steps forward. His stoic body is tense, and his fists are balled. He wears a suit, matching the party's theme. Officially, he's not on duty. Why is he down here checking on me?

He lingers by the door. We stare at each other for a moment, and I'm the first one to break eye contact. His cologne thickens the air, inviting urges I'd long forgotten to resurface. Now that Måns is here, I don't have to fear anything, do I?

The cameras caught me crying, and my brother sent his employee after me—his favorite, the one that does everything right. *Only the best for me.*

Måns is young, life and all his potential oozing from his pores. He's one year younger than Valentina. How do I know? Aside from the fact that he's my brother's favorite employee, I did my own little deep dive in the palace's data banks.

I did it because I was bored. Not because he's intense with steel-blue eyes that mesmerize me. I don't seek his eyes out again because I'm crying, and I can't see through the mist.

The man reaches me, towering above me with his height. He stands in front of me like a statue come alive. "Mrs. Cross..."

"Can you leave me alone?" I beg. All I see are his shiny leather shoes, and it's enough. I was looking for my brother's favorite employee earlier, and now that he's here, I just want to disappear.

"No." Måns crouches down next to me. I shudder. "Who hurt you?"

Where do I start?

"Do you find the question funny?" he inquires at my inappropriate snicker. He's far too earnest for my taste. It's a

party. Loosen up!

“You’re not working right now. Go back upstairs. I want to be alone,” I tell him, never showing my face. If I want to go back upstairs, I’ll have to freshen up. I can’t be seen crying in public.

“You’re obviously hurt.” He ponders his words for a moment. “Mr. Winters asked for you in the group chat, and... The party’s underway. The guests are having an amazing time. You should come and see it for yourself.”

“Thank you for informing me. I need some time alone,” I insist.

“Show me your face,” he demands, and I flinch at his sudden harshness. When I don’t move, he grips the arms that hide my face, and he pulls them out of the way. His fingers wrap around my jaw, and I let him.

I’m used to being pushed around, aren’t I?

Måns notices the moment I let go. He drops me like I’m a nasty fly, distancing himself from me.

After a moment of quiet, he finally asks, “Can I comfort you in any way? I don’t want to be intrusive.”

“You. Already. Are,” I say, gritting my teeth.

“Can I hug you?”

“What? No.” I shift in my seat on the floor, ruining my daughter’s dress.

“One hug, and I’ll leave you to it. We can see you through the cameras, you know. Give me one hug, and I’ll delete the footage. He won’t see you crying, and I’ll leave you alone if that’s your wish,” he offers gently.

“Is that all? One hug?” I can think of a bigger price, but I forget that I’m not a whore anymore. The king is dead, and I’m regular and plain Felicita now. Widow. Mother. Grandmother. Babysitter for the royal babies.

Måns nods firmly.

“I can do that.” Before I can position myself for a hug, Måns hoists me up from the floor. He’s in my private space, and I momentarily regret my consent to the hug. The cameras are watching. If I need to get out, I’ll shriek and knee him where it hurts. Jordan has practiced the move with me.

When he wraps his arms around me, it’s not sexual. It’s a platonic hug full of sorrow. He doesn’t press his cock against me. Carefully, he just holds me, and I whimper into his embrace.

“I delete the feeds when I see you crying,” Måns informs me. His cologne is musky, full of man. He’s a gentle soul inside, though. “I figure you would appreciate the privacy.”

“I do. Thank you,” I say against his shirt. We’re both breathing hard, overwhelmed with my breakdown. “I’m sorry for the extra work—”

Måns’ hand caresses my hair, cupping the back of my head. He massages the tense knots there, and I relax into the embrace.

All good things come to an end. The hug is over before I can fully grasp what’s happening.

“You need to get back out there,” Måns suggests. He tugs at the lapels of his suit jacket, stretching his neck. The sight is wonderful. His neck is thick and veiny, matching his strong shoulders. “It’s a beautiful world.”

“Not through these eyes,” I reply. His steel-blue eyes gleam in the night. Hope’s palpable for a young man like Måns, right there and ready.

For me, hope is a bitch that has been trying to kill me for decades.

One of these days, it might catch up to me.

I hope I’m strong enough to withstand it.

CHAPTER 4

JORDAN



“OH MY GOD,” VALENTINA CRIES OUT WHEN SHE SEES ME walk down the stairs of her childhood home. She’s not dressed to go out, but she’s as fashionable as ever in her comfy clothes of silk. She’s got my sister’s fierce attitude, height, and Travis’s dark hair paired with dark eyes. “I have the hottest uncle on earth. ARIS! Look at him.”

Aris is busy with Penelope Jade, fixing her green coat. She’s tall for her age, thanks to Aris. 24/7, this family looks like it’s ready to catwalk. He manages to spare me a glance. “Oh shit. You’ll get tons of pussy tonight, for sure.”

“Hey,” I warn him, and the fucker smirks, his gray eyes sparkling. “Not in front of the kids.”

“I don’t use that word,” Penelope Jade claims proudly. She’s a sweet little thing, always dressing up like the Joker, though. She’s obsessed with comic books. “Mom says it’s only for grownups.”

“And your mom’s right,” I tell my niece.

I approach the family of three. Kendrick’s asleep in his stroller, tucked away in a world of dreams. Fylox dropped him off about an hour ago, and he’s been peacefully sleeping ever since. Nothing disturbs our young king from his sleep. He’s a heavy sleeper like his daddy is.

“Damn,” Valentina says, checking my outfit out. I decided to go all out. I turn fifty-one only once in my life. If I have my own birthday bash, I might as well look like the flyest

motherfucker on this side of the earth. “Where did you find this outfit? Are you friends with Diddy?”

I chuckle. If she only knew. “Why are you two not joining us?”

“Somebody has to watch the kids,” Valentina says.

Aris adds, “You and Felicita always help out with Penelope Jade. That’s our birthday gift to you. One night of filthy... Debauchery.”

“What does de-bo-cherry mean, Daddy?” Penelope Jade asks her father, and we all melt at the sight.

“It’s a grownup word,” Aris quickly comments. He turns to me. “My mother-in-law’s already at the party. Go on. We’ll protect the babies for one night.”

I say goodbye to them, and on my way out, I run into Weston. He’s dressed up like me, but the younger version. He’s a just-hired professor, and I’m the guy that runs the school. He’s got Amalia on her carry bag, and her head’s pressed against her father. She’s asleep. Why are all the babies sleeping when Felicita and I aren’t in charge of them?

“Give me a second,” Weston urges me. I wait outside while he leaves his daughter to Aris and Valentina. Out of the Wraith siblings, Aris and Valentina are the most experienced parents. They’re trustworthy, and from what the family tells me, they behave more these days. They used to be two raunchy kids.

Weston returns, fiddling with his suit jacket. “I guess I’ve got drool on my clothes. Perks of being a parent, I guess.”

“Don’t let your sister see,” I tell him. Amused, we make our way to the palace.

“Are you excited about your party?” Weston asks. “It’s quite the fest. Felicita went all out. She had me calling up old friends. Mandy almost divorced me.”

“You’re joking?” I ask.

“Nah, Mandy doesn’t plan on divorcing me. She loves the ranch too much.” I glare at him. “She loves me, too. Just a

little bit... Felicita put a lot of effort into all of this. It's classic Katantia."

"I don't want any of it," I tell him. "I would've been fine with a family dinner."

"You're really not into the Katantian traditions, aren't you? That's a pity. Men your age—"

"What about them?" I lower my tone, giving him the Jordan my soldiers fear.

"Nothing," he quickly corrects himself. "Just saying. Katantia's for everyone to enjoy. You work so hard, man. You deserve a break."

"I can catch a break when I'm dead," I tell him, and the kid shudders. Weston's not really a kid, but, damn, he's easy to scare.

We arrive at the palace, and on the outside, it's business as usual. Our ID cards are scanned, and we're checked into the system. My soldiers at the door escort us inside, and immediately, I hear the music.

Next to me, Weston starts singing along. I'm this close to shutting this party down. I'm the boss tonight. It's my party. I don't want MC Hammer music at my party. Fuck this party!

"If you bust a move, I'm kicking your ass out of here," I warn Weston, and he nods cheekily.

It's a palace party, so the guest list is slim. Yet, once we're inside the Main Hall, my eyes are flooded with professors and schoolgirls. I can see why Aris and Valentina stepped out. Aris is a professor, and the two keep their sex lives private now, so this would've hit too close to home.

"The man of the hour is here!" the DJ announces. Yes, Felicita hired a DJ. Among the dancing bodies of the crowd, we venture inside the celebrations. More horrid nineties music plays, and I curse it out in my head. I've seen enough skirts, white shirts, and high heels in one minute to last me a lifetime.

This is a VIP party, but even a VIP palace party has a separate VIP section. Weston and I wander over there,

reuniting with the family. Kamila's sprawled all over Fylox's lap, wearing a skirt that I don't even want to look at. I fear that I'll get a glimpse of something I don't want to see if I do. Nope. Not this man. My daughter-in-law and my favorite soldier ever are making out like they're teenagers. I decide not to pay them any attention.

Mandy walks up to us. She's dressed more appropriately, and the buttons of her blouse aren't unopened. She even wears glasses, accentuating her big brown eyes. She's one of the curviest girls in the party, and she wears the title with pride. Five years ago, she didn't feel as comfortable in her skin.

"Happy Birthday!" She gives me a hug, and I reciprocate it. "You're looking good today."

"Thank you. Right back at you," I tell her. For the young women of the family, including Kamila, I'm a savior. I'm a guide. The wise man. They love looking at me like I have all the answers.

I would love to have all the answers.

If I did, I wouldn't be where I am, though. *3013 and counting.*

"How was your flight?" I ask to make conversation.

"Amalia struggled a bit. We might have to get her ears checked when we go back," Mandy says.

Agreeing with her, I nod, "You should. She's allowed to travel at this age, so she shouldn't be experiencing these types of problems—"

"This is a party," Weston reminds us. "The kids are fine. Have some fun, Jordan. Stop worrying for just a couple of minutes. You'll love it. This is a legendary party!"

We're overflowing with booze. Canons blast out confetti, scaring the shit out of me. I'm carrying, and I could shoot any motherfucker who dares to step onto my turf, but I don't have to defend anyone tonight.

They pour me drinks. I get pats on the back. *Happy Birthday, may I suck your dick?* It's not dark in the Main Hall

because Katantians celebrate sex in the light. They don't hide it.

There's everything in here. Every woman I could ask for, she's in this room. It's just a question away. For some, I don't even have to ask. They'll spread their legs with just a glance. I don't judge them. This is what Katantians do, after all. Am I too old for this? My body can keep up. I work out ten times harder than the average pricks with money on this dancefloor.

I could fuck their girlfriends. *Objects*. I hate that fucking word. I could fuck their *objects*, and they'd worship at my altar afterward.

At some point, Kamila and Fylox stop making out. They give us the time of day for five minutes before stepping out to the dance floor. I watch Fylox dance with the Queen of Katantia like it's the most normal thing to do.

Mandy and Weston excuse themselves, and I don't want to know what they'll be up to in the corridors of the palace. The men overseeing the camera footage today will have a lot of sex to delete from the tapes.

In the end, it's just me with a bottle of Hennessy. I pay attention to each sip. I don't want to fall victim to my old habits. I was never an alcoholic or a drug addict because I have always managed to control my body. With everything that's happened, I should be happy. Everyone in my life has their happy ending. I had mine, but I messed it up...

I let the kids have fun, and I make it a game to avoid the couples that are fucking in plain sight at my birthday party.

My sister is nowhere to be found, but I can guess that she's somewhere supervising the party.

Bodies move around me. Waitresses exchange bottles, servicing the VIPs of the VIPs in their skimpy clothes. They're doing this to get a rise out of me, but it's not working.

There's a woman at the corner of the dancefloor that reminds me of *her*. Her side-swept cornrows remind me of a time when I first met *her*. We danced in the club, and I went home with *her*. She was the most beautiful woman I had ever

seen, out of this world, a cosmopolitan. She spoke five different languages, and she charmed me with a bat of her thick eyelashes. We fucked in the back of that club. I took her to a hotel because I didn't have a *home* to show her. I fucked her all night, and the next day, she was gone. That was when my life finally started. I only found out almost a year later.

I fucked it up.

I've spent my life chasing after *her* ghost.

My phone rings, saving me from my misery. I pick up without checking the caller ID.

"Hello?" I yell through the noise in the background.

"Dad, it's me," Alex says. I must focus to hear him. I'm about to shut the fuckers up. My son's on the phone, and I want to have a normal conversation with him. "Happy Birthday."

"Thank you, son. Thank you for calling. Is everything okay?"

"Yes," he assures me. "I'm fine. Ready to win, as always. I had my breakfast, and I'm about to go shoot some hoops."

"Good. You're going to win tonight," I tell him. I'm so fucking proud of him.

"How's the party? Felicita asked me for a playlist, but I don't really know what dance music you like. I doubt they can play Pac at a party on Katantia," Alex says, and I fight the smile on my face. I don't need the girls to think I'm up for fucking. I keep my face tense. It protects me from the leeches.

"So, you told her to play Backstreet Boys?"

"I might have," Alex confesses, slightly amused. "She also has Boyz II Men, though. And 'Fantasy' with ODB. You love those songs. Don't lie to me."

"You could have missed me with that Backstreet shit."

I hear my son's laughter, and all this party nonsense becomes secondary. "How's Kamila? Is everything okay with the babies?"

“Kendrick is with Aris, Valentina, and his cousins. Kamila and the baby... They’re fine, I guess? She and Fylox are on the dance floor. They’ve been intimate for a while now,” I tell my son, tentative about the details I give him. I don’t want to upset their dynamics.

“They don’t need my permission. Just like I don’t need Fylox’s when I’m alone with Kamila. Nothing they do upsets me. I want them to be happy. I can’t wait for this season to be over. I want to be home while she’s pregnant this time,” my son reveals.

“Is it... Your kid?” I ask. We haven’t discussed this, and it’s been months. The baby is coming soon, and with Kamila’s belly showing now, we can’t avoid the subject much longer.

“Does it matter? It’s my child, whether it’s Fylox’s sperm or mine. These are our children.” I squint my eyes. I don’t want to know the details. “But, yeah, Dad. It’s my child, and she’s a girl. You’ll have another little girl with you soon.”

I can’t wait.

“Fylox likes being a parent with Kendrick... Don’t tell him I said this, but he doesn’t want to *impregnate* Kamila.” An Aaliyah song plays, and I feel like swaying for the first time tonight. “He needs a little more therapy for that.”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” I tell my son, rubbing my forehead. I feel naked without my beanie. I went to my barber downtown after work, and I got myself a fresh cut for the party. Nobody can say a thing about my hairline.

“I know you didn’t. Listen, I’m sorry that I couldn’t be there.”

“Don’t even think about it. I want you to get your next ring. That’s what matters most now.” I wait for my son to respond, but I hear him sigh instead. “What is it?”

“Happy Birthday, Dad.”

“Son, don’t bullshit me,” I warn him. “You’ve missed my birthday before. I’ve missed yours.”

“Kendrick is growing, and I’m so far away. I’m scared that I’m missing out,” he confesses.

“Win your fucking games. Stay on top of the scoreboards. If you start failing, and you can’t pick it back up, then I’m dragging you home. You worked hard for this, and you won’t let anything take this away from you. You’re not the first absent—”

“I know. I learned from the best,” Alex says, gutting me. It all goes back to *her*. “It’s okay. I still love you. I worry about Kendrick, that’s all.”

When I don’t say anything else, he continues, “I’m going to win. If I don’t, all of this was for nothing. Enjoy your party. Have some fun, and don’t sit around like a grumpy old man.”

“Hey, watch your mouth.”

A couple of chuckles later, the line goes dead.

I need something stronger than the Hennessy on the table in front of me. I want to spar with somebody and knock them out cold. I need to add a body to the 3013.

That’s why I do therapy. I’m messed up.

Neither my family nor my therapist knows, but I’m more than a little OCD. There’s something wrong with me, and it starts in my heart, that son of a bitch.

An hour or so passes, and I leave the party. I can’t take it any longer. The kids party among themselves, celebrating my birthday, but I feel out of place.

Summoning one of my men, I let him drive me to my favorite bar in the city center. The Gold Necklace is the most Westerner-friendly space on Katantia. In there, the world is the way I know it. Fucked up, but at least, it’s the fucked up I’m used to from the States. They have themed weeks, Hollywood. I Love New York. Country Diners. Cowboy Specials. They even had a Hood week where everyone dressed like 50 Cent and Lil Kim. I had to speak to the manager about it. As expected, he had never been to the *hood*. I warned him that if he ever did that shit again, I’d drown him in the ocean before he could say *beef jerky*.

“Ring me up when you’re done, boss,” my employee tells me as I exit the car. I feel a light buzz from the Hennessy, but it’ll fade soon. I didn’t drink enough to get trashed this early.

“You got it. Don’t let Måns take the car. Either you or Ren do it, all right?”

He nods, knowing his place. I watch as the car leaves, and then I enter the bar, flashing my smile at the bouncer at the door. They’re familiar with my face now, and I’m not afraid of it anymore. They know me, and they’re scared of me. I’m the head of palace security. I can fuck up their shit in an instant if the mood strikes me.

Once inside, I’m not surprised at the empty bar. There are only a few people here, the nostalgia driven Katantia residents. They dream of America or wherever they’re from. They come here to find a piece of it. Sports play on the television. There’s light music playing in the background, but I find myself reciting a Pac song in my head.

I’m still in my outfit from before, overdressed for the occasion. The other customers are in jeans. Nobody bats an eye because you don’t talk back to me. I don’t lose my temper often. I keep reminding myself of that.

But I wouldn’t mind losing my temper right about now.

I want to let out my anger on something. Somebody.

I need an outlet.

When you think of Pac, he appears. The music changes. Pac and Snoop bless my ears. I signal the bartender to turn up the music. I find my seat at the edge of the bar, where I don’t need a lot of effort to oversee the rest of the bar.

“What can I get you?” the bartender asks.

“Surprise me,” I challenge him.

I’m the lonely old grumpy man, bobbing his head to old school Hip Hop.

As I sip on the mystery drink my bartender served me, I hear commotion from the bar entrance. Giggles. Chatting. Heels clacking. Is smoking permitted here?

It's a group of women and a man. I don't bother looking. I stare at my empty glass instead, unable to stop thinking about what my son said earlier. *I learned from the best.* In my nightmares, it translates to "You fucked up. You left the family. I hate you."

He doesn't hate you. He loves you more than anyone. Travis always saw the good in people more than I ever did. I'd hate the fucker for how he did my sister, but I can't. He never promised to love her the way my sister wanted him to. He vowed to protect her. I promised, too. Yet, we failed, and I can't put the blame on him.

"Another one." I raise my glass to the bartender, giving him a quick nod.

I need to get rid of the gifts in my office. I can give the flowers to the ladies working in the palace. I'll keep the sneakers, but the cigars and the alcohol need to go.

The bartender approaches me, handing me a new drink. "This one's from the ladies to your right."

Lucky me. I down the drink in an instance. I should feel harassed, but I'm in a funny mood now. They like my type a little too much on Katantia. You can't escape that shit. Not even on Katantia, and it doesn't matter how Kamila attempts to sell it.

I look in the direction of the women who bought my drink, and the first thing I see is long fucking legs. She's not in heels. She wears black Mary Janes with white socks. As I lift my gaze, I finally meet the end of her tiny skirt. Skirts? I just ran away from skirts at my birthday party. Her curves are hidden beneath a pleated high-waist mini skirt. That's how Valentina describes these clothes. A crewneck sweatshirt tops her look. Straight jet-black hair falls off her shoulders. It's long, reaching the small of her back.

I inspect people regularly, but I don't see them. I'm too in my head for that. I see this... Girl? Young woman? Who is she? How old is she, dressing like this in a place for grownups? Why the fuck is she buying me drinks?

On my way over there, she turns around.

Fuck.

“Mr. Winters?”

“What are you doing here?” I ask my psychiatrist.

CHAPTER 5



BEFORE YOU JUDGE, YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT I DIDN'T PLAN this.

It's a coincidence.

It truly is.

"What are you doing here?" Mr. Winters asks me in his gruff voice. I swallow hard, seeking an explanation in my friends' entertained faces. Looking awfully cozy in their sexy schoolgirl outfits, Danai and Malena casually sip on their Cosmos. Smolyakov grins at me, fixing his tie. I squint my eyes at him, hoping to scare him. It doesn't work. His icy eyes are unaffected. He's been trained under the harshest conditions in *Matushka Rossiya*.

I take a deep breath, and I face my patient. Former patient? It's complicated. I blurt out, "Happy Birthday!"

His stern face doesn't falter, and my heart pounds heavily in my chest. He's not relaxed right now. I don't know him outside of my office in the Queen I hospital. He's a big man, and he looks mean. I'm a city girl, and I've always been too scared to do anything out of the ordinary. Whenever I've done something crazy, it backfired. Mr. Winters pushes all my buttons right now, and I don't even know why.

I've peeked into his brain. At least, I hope I have. I shouldn't feel this tension between my thighs right now.

"My birthday was yesterday," he tells me.

“Hey, it’s nice to see you again,” Danai says, offering Mr. Winters a handshake. That’s right. They all know each other. I’m hanging out with the Katantian doctors’ cream of the crop. We’ve all been essential for the royals in the last five years.

“What a lovely party! I want one just like that!” Malena adds, tucking a strain of her light hair behind her ear. “Although I doubt my brother would organize mine....”

My eyes follow the movements of hands, and I’m momentarily lost. Smolyakov is the last one to shake Mr. Winters’ hand. It’s a firm handshake, and when I lift my gaze, I see that Mr. Winters is staring right at me.

“What brings you to the Gold Necklace tonight?” Malena asks. “Måns said your party would be an all-nighter. He told me not to expect him back home for tonight.”

Mr. Winters nods. “I needed some fresh air.”

“Is it your first time here?” Danai asks. “We haven’t seen you around before. My husband usually joins us, but he had to work tonight.”

I can’t meet his eyes. I’m still embarrassed over the way we parted the other day. Fuck. I can’t cry right now, not in front of my friends and not in front of him. It was a moment of weakness. I’ve helped many people on this island, and I pride myself on my work ethic.

But I just can’t get through to Mr. Winters.

And it messes with me.

“I don’t discuss my habits,” Mr. Winters says, and my friends chuckle in amusement. Smolyakov isn’t amused. He senses something in Mr. Winters. Something we’ve discussed before. Mr. Winters is dangerous, and I shouldn’t bother opening that Pandora’s box. He is brutal, determined, and mysterious. In my five years of working with him, I know that his foster parents were murdered. I managed to get him to briefly touch upon his divorce. One day, he even talked about how much he loved his son.

That’s all.

“Will you excuse us? Ms. Lin and I have a private matter to discuss,” Mr. Winters says. I’m about to be beheaded. I did something horrible. What did I do? I’ve reached the end of my wits with Mr. Winters.

We even went to his birthday party. Felicita invited all the doctors that have worked intensely with the royals. Only the new batch of medics ended up attending the party, but that’s beside the point. My friends and I went like the loyal doctors that we are. We even dressed up for them.

I dressed up for *him*, but... That’s another day’s sob story.

My friends silently cheer me on while I turn to follow Mr. Winters wherever he wants to take me. When I welcome him into my office, he doesn’t seem as intimidating. He usually wears a sweatshirt or a hoodie, coupled with sweatpants. He comes to me after gym time, and he’s always in a mood, an eerie calm. I can work with that.

However, I can’t deal with him when he’s dressed up and broody. His clothes fit his toned body, accentuating every inch of his power. I’m familiar with how tall he is. I’ve just never seen his broad shoulders from this angle.

I try to keep up while he walks ahead of me. I don’t even notice where he’s taking us.

I rarely get to see his hair. Sometimes he has it braided, but in the last year, he’s gone from buzz cut to today’s shortcut. He always hides his hair under a beanie in my presence. He plays with the beanie quite often, too. It’s one of his coping mechanisms, adjusting his beanies. I study him whenever his fingers trace the number four or the Indianapolis stamps.

“I just wanted to tell you that you have a lovely family. Aris and Valentina invited us over to their house before we went to the party, and it was—”

I trip over my own foot, interrupting myself. We’re outside of Gold Necklace, and I’m positive that I’ll split the skin of my naked knees open on the cold asphalt. I didn’t want to wear a skirt. I haven’t worn one since high school. Malena

made me do it. She said it would be a good idea. Why did I listen to her?

Fuck.

I don't fall on my face, though. In time, Mr. Winters catches me. I don't even see him coming. He wraps his arm around me, hoisting me up. I'm in shock, panting. He smells like expensive liquor and well-seasoned steak. That last part is probably because Gold Necklace has Steak Sundays.

"I've got you," he says, and I feel his breath on my neck. It tantalizes me, making me pant harder. I'm pressed against him in the worst, most torturous way.

When I told him to leave my office a couple of days ago, I didn't expect to see him again. Sure, we were invited to his birthday party. Yet, it doesn't matter how often you visit the palace. Fylox and Mr. Winters are like ghosts. They come and go as they please. They'll show themselves when they want to be seen.

I've never seen Mr. Winters outside of my office, and in many ways, that's good.

We're in the middle of the sidewalk. There isn't anyone else out there. The Gold Necklace is unpopular with the locals. The only person I see is the bouncer, staring us down out of curiosity.

"You're shaking." At this statement, I start shaking harder. Mr. Winters makes me nervous. He always has, but when he's my patient, I maintain a level of authority over him. Out here? I have zero authority. Kamila and Fylox appreciate me as their therapist, but... I'm ordinary. *Unowned*. As the new Queen of Katantia, Kamila has had new laws written for the country, but if a random man decides that I shall be his *object*, unfortunately, I'm at a disadvantage.

"Are you cold?" he asks, and for the first time tonight, Mr. Winters' voice softens. I nod, and I feel needy, pressed so neatly against him.

"Can you stand on your own?"

“I-I think so.” I watch as he removes his lavish suit jacket. His long-sleeved dress shirt stretches deliciously as he moves. He helps me slide into the jacket, and I wrap it around me as if it’s an armor of protection. I clear my throat. “Thank you. What did you want to discuss?”

“Am I still your patient?” he asks abruptly.

I don’t know what to tell him. The right thing would be to ship him off to somebody else. The new doctors aren’t on the same level as I am in my field, but perhaps they have special talents that’ll come in handy when dealing with Mr. Winters.

He adds, “I asked you a question.”

“Yes, I’m sorry... I don’t know. The schedule hasn’t been updated yet.” That’s bullshit, and he sees right through it. His suit jacket is too big for me. I lose myself in its warm touch as if it’s Mr. Winters himself.

“I suppose I should thank you for the drink.”

“Excuse me?” What drink?

Mr. Winters tilts his head to the side, and once again, I’m cut out of whatever he’s thinking. His hazel eyes blaze at me. It’s the alcohol, I’m sure. He didn’t see me at his party, but I saw him drink a lot of Hennessy. It hurt me to see him sit there alone, but I didn’t want to disturb him either. There are some people in this world that you just don’t walk up to.

Jordan is one of them.

My lower lip trembles, and before I can make a bigger fool of myself in front of my patient, I open my mouth to speak like a proper lady. *Hilarious*. “It’s getting cold. My friends are probably wondering where I’m at. I should go back inside if that’s all.”

“You got a car?” I nod. “Do you see the bouncer over there?”

A shiver runs down my back. I twist to the side, and there he is. The bouncer is still studying the scene like it’s his business what we’re up to.

“Hand me your phone,” Mr. Winters demands, and I don’t think twice. I give him my phone. I flinch when our fingers connect. “Get on your knees.”

I gasp. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me.” Goosebumps haunt my skin.

I wouldn’t be on Katantia if I didn’t have a slight inclination toward their way of life. I take a deep breath, and I touch the ground with my knees. From down here, Katantia seems even more daunting. We came to Gold Necklace to have a fun time, away from the crazy Katantians. Yet here I am. Mr. Winters and I find ourselves in a compromising position in public. Anyone could walk by and watch whatever he’s planned with me.

“Did I do something? I apologize—”

“You picked the wrong night to mess with me,” Mr. Winters explains, and I feel like I’m about to take my last breath. Why are my panties drenched? “You ended our professional relationship.”

“Yes, but—”

“But you ended it,” he states.

I find myself staring at his shoes. They’re shiny and black. I haven’t seen such proper shoes in a while. He looks like a businessman in this outfit like he owns the country. Which he technically does. The Queen of Katantia loves her father-in-law very much, and she’d do him any favor.

“I ended it because I can’t stand being a failure. Seeing you reminds me of my failure to help you. Out of all my patients, you have made the least progress. I... I can’t handle it,” I blurt out. My entire body trembles, but I finally feel free, having confessed my issue. I lose my balance, and I almost crash into his legs.

“You can’t *fix* me.” He adds, “I’m not one of your projects.”

“I want to *fix* you.” So, fucking badly, it hurts. “I have to. You deserve closure. Peace. Whatever you want.”

“Whatever I want?” he asks, and his tone drops further.

“Don’t twist my words. Why am I on my knees?”

“I want to fuck your lying mouth. That’s why you’re on your knees in your skimpy skirt and your blushing cheeks.” My *blushing cheeks* turn feverish. “I’m debating whether I should be bad or worse. Have you ever sucked dick in public?”

My eyes widen at his absurd question. “No, I haven’t.”

“Part those pretty lips for me. Let’s give the thirsty bouncer a show.” I haven’t drunk tonight because I’m the designated driver of my bunch. My friends and I live in neighboring apartments near the Queen I hospital. I’m sober and clean. The proper side of me urges me to get up and leave. I drown it out, but I still feel drunk.

“Why?” I ask.

“In fifty meetings, you haven’t made any progress with me. In less than ten minutes, I have you on your knees in the cold and cruel night. I’ve won the lottery tonight, and you happen to be my prize.” His hand reaches my face. He moves the hair out of my face, and then he grips my jaw, tilting it so that I can’t escape his eyes. “It’s my birthday, isn’t it? I’m supposed to fuck a schoolgirl. That’s what my party was all about. Are you really going to make me look for another schoolgirl?”

I want to shake my head, but his grip on me doesn’t let me.

“May I?” Attentively, I lick my lips. No biggie. It’s not like I’ve been dreaming about this for years or anything. This is just a regular blowjob. I haven’t done this in I don’t know how long. I practically feel like a virgin. There’s no porn on Katantia. It’s been banned forever, and I don’t plan on becoming a VPN expert for porn access. I refuse to go to Hole Stores, Crack & Nut, Pussy Buffet, or COCKed&screwed. The latter is to women what Hole Stores are to men. That’s Queen Kamila’s handiwork.

What I mean to say is *I’m fucked*. Spontaneity isn’t my thing, and the smirk on Mr. Winters’ face tells me that he’s

enjoying this. He's put me on the spot, and I'm about to do the dance for him.

I get comfortable on my knees, glancing at the eager bouncer one last time. I take a deep breath, and I attempt to free him from his pants. Under different circumstances, I'd comment on the smooth fabric of his pants. I could stroke this fabric for ages. However, I'm here to stroke his cock and not the material.

Mr. Winters sees me struggle, and he guides my fingers where they need to go. What is this. What am I doing? Did Smolyakov give me molly again? Am I high? This can't be real. My entire body is on fire, and it's not because Mr. Winters' suit jacket suddenly keeps me warm.

I see his cock for the first time, and quite frankly, I'm overwhelmed. Before I can overthink it, I begin stroking his length. I apply more pressure to his shaft, and I get a reaction from him. He groans, and I'm stunned. I don't have a lot of time to stay stunned, so I use my mouth on the crown of his veiny cock.

It takes me a couple of moments until I'm out of my head. I get his shaft wet and glistening, using my hands to apply more friction. He responds when my fingers aren't soft on him, so I give him what he wants.

I tease him with my teeth, and Mr. Winters drips pre-cum into my needy mouth. I slurp it up. Then I stroke his shaft with one hand while I cup his balls. I study his reactions, and once again, Mr. Winters displays his masochistic tendencies. I apply a gentle tug at first, and he curses under his breath.

He doesn't push me away, though. In fact, his fists are balled. I fear that he's going to crush my phone.

Speaking of phones, mine starts ringing. I glance up at Mr. Winters, and the smirk on his face is priceless. I didn't think he could get any bigger in my hands, but he does.

"Ivy? Where are you?" I freeze. I've been caught in the act. No, it's just my fucking phone.

“I’m okay,” I respond to Danai, my hands still on Mr. Winters’ hard cock.

“Are you sure?” Danai is the group’s mom. She’s married, and they’re trying for a baby. We click because we both like order in our lives.

Before I can respond, Mr. Winters shoves himself between my lips. He doesn’t push himself deeper. However, he’s deep enough that I can’t utter a word to my worried friend. “Hmh.”

“Look, we’re going to do a couple of rounds, and then, we’re going home. Do you want to join us? He can come, too. I promise we won’t bother him. We’ll be on our best behavior for *Mr. Winters*.” Danai chuckles, giving away the special meaning behind why I call Mr. Winters by that name. Am I embarrassed? I’m on my knees, sucking my fantasy’s cock.

I don’t think so.

Mr. Winters’ hand directs my head, masterfully shoving himself further down my throat. I sit there, in the cold, and I take it. My panties are drenched, and I need something. A touch, anything. He could blow a puff of air on my pussy, and I would come for him. “Hmhm.”

“Actually,” Mr. Winters speaks up, and I can envision my friends’ faces paling. “Call up 091-735. They’ll send you a driver to take you home. It’s a palace line, so it’s safe.”

“But Ivy’s taking us home,” Danai argues. I gag on his cock, fighting for air. Tears spring out of my eyes. I burn up when he picks up one of my tears with his fingers, and he brings it to his lips.

“Ivy’s busy tonight.”

Danai isn’t the one to bullshit. “Ivy?”

I’m panting, and Mr. Winters has given me a moment to breathe. I sound shaky as fuck when I say, “Do as he says. I’m sorry. I’m... preoccupied tonight.”

“Bitch, your condoms have expired!” Smolyakov calls from down the line, and I fight back the urge to chuckle amid my panting attack.

I croak, “See you guys tomorrow.”

Mr. Winters hangs up on my friends. His cock finds its way back down my throat. This time, it’s more urgent. This time, it’s not just him being hurt by my grazing teeth. This time, he doesn’t let me up when I gag on him again.

He fills me up, and he waits for me to swallow.

I do, eagerly so.

What did I just do? The moment he removes his cock from my face, the doubts sink in. I’ve never done this before. It’s my first sexual act on Katantia in five years, and it checks half the boxes of my presumed kinks. What if it was the wrong thing to do?

Am I unprofessional? Did I just ruin my reputation by unveiling my secret obsession with Mr. Winters?

He’s tucked himself away, and he doesn’t appear like the mess I feel like.

Mr. Winters hoists me up like I weigh nothing.

And he kisses my mouth like it’s in his possession.

CHAPTER 6

JORDAN



IVY'S MAKING A MAJOR MISTAKE.

I can't help it, though. I let her hold my hand as she takes me to her tiny car. How do her three friends fit in here? I can barely squeeze half my thigh in the passenger's seat.

"Where do you want to go?" she asks once she's put on her seatbelt. She's so proper that I'm hard again thinking of what I made her do a moment ago.

"To your place." I know where it is. My eyes have detailed it, handing me images and contracts. My men almost bugged the place. This woman has regular meetings with the head of state, her boyfriend, and her most trusted security advisor. I decided against it. Bugging her home felt wrong to me at the time.

Ivy's home is close to the Queen I hospital, and it's housing for the medics of Katantia. I'm pretty sure the walls are made of sandpaper.

It doesn't bother me in the slightest.

She drives because I fear that if I take the wheel, I'll take her back to the palace. Felicita would probably cook us breakfast in the morning and congratulate me for being a fine Katantian citizen and fucking my eyeballs out all night, but... No. I have responsibilities, and I keep my affairs separate. Not that I ever had affairs.

Ivy's thighs tremble. I've put my hand between her thighs, and I'm teasing her. I can feel how hot she is for me. Her pussy is calling to me, but I ignore her.

I'm many things, but I won't risk another car accident to devastate my family.

"I-I don't h-have any alcohol. We should get some—"

"No stops. Take us to your place." I gaze at her and how she's wrapped my suit jacket around her body. I should've probably fucked her on the street and left her there. We're one fuck away from becoming a tragedy, but I'm in a funny mood.

And when I'm feeling funny, I don't care who I hurt.

Ivy Lin picked the wrong night to be in my presence.

I had a taste of her tears, and I want them more than anything now. I've forgotten my birthday, my party, my appointments tomorrow... If I manage to bottle up this woman's tears, I won't need the Hennessy.

A couple of minutes later, we're in her neighborhood. The multi-story apartment complex was funded by some billionaire fool from SoCal, and for the first time, I feel glad that we have such rich idiots in the world. Outside of being my fuck for the night, Ivy and her colleagues provide an essential service for my family and the country.

They deserve to live in secure and modernized homes.

Ivy parks her tiny electric car. Silence takes over, and I start browsing appropriate cars for my psychiatrist. She can't drive around in this old death trap.

What is Ivy waiting for? I glance at her, and I find her seeking my guidance. I'm used to being the boss of my employees, but she's seemingly enamored by the idea of Katantian *ownership*. I've never done this before, but unfortunately, I've experienced how Fylox and Kamila play their *games*. Katantian couples and their strange sex habits are hard to escape outside of the palace.

I get out of the car, and I open her door. She slides into place next to me. She's not short, but she's not Kamila's size either. Plus, she's not wearing heels. My schoolgirl for the night bats her eyelashes at me, enchanting me with her doe eyes.

She locks up her silly car, and then she guides me into her apartment building. I approve of its security measures already. There are cameras at the gates. She must scan her ID to enter the premises, and once we're inside, there's a reception where I must sign in. Of course, the man at the reception is a palace guard, vetted by me.

I'm surprisingly impressed when we reach the elevators, and she scans her thumb instead of pressing a button to call the elevator.

"The property-owner is experimenting with having no buttons on elevators. He wants to install a Siri of some sort, but so far, it hasn't worked out yet," Ivy explains. I make her uncomfortable when I don't continue the conversation. Instead, I keep thinking of ways to get her out of her clothes.

We arrive on her floor, and there are two other apartments here. She reads the question on my face. "Danai and her husband live over there." She gestures at the first door with flower arrangements. "That's Smolyakov's place." It's the middle door. The leather shoes near the doormat weird me out. It's like he's daring us to steal his shoes. "And I live here." The third door is hers, with no decorations. "The Bengtssons live above us. Måns and Malena can afford a bigger apartment because of Måns' palace pay."

"Is that a salary complaint?" I ask, slightly amused but also concerned. Doctors and teachers have a special place in my fucked-up heart.

Ivy pouts at me. Defiantly, she opens her door, letting me into her kingdom. I watch as she takes off her Mary Janes, sorting them into the shoe rack next to the door. I follow her example, and her eyes take in every movement I make. I feel inspected like we're in her office, and she's taking angry notes on her notepad.

"You know, if you want a raise, you could ask for it. The Queen of Katantia owes you," I tell Ivy.

"I don't want a handout," she responds, gripping my jacket tightly. It suits her. "And we didn't come here to discuss money."

“Tell me, what did we come here for?” I ask, and her face takes on a blush that I want to remember.

“Can I be your object?” she asks, and her eyes are full of expectations. I can smell her lust, her curiosity. I know that she doesn’t fuck on Katantia. My people have thoroughly researched her out-of-work activities. She’s enamored by me for some peculiar reason, or else she wouldn’t be taking these rapid steps forward.

She must think that her pussy can heal whatever’s wrong inside of me.

Ms. Lin’s mistaken.

“Are you sure?” I ask. Kamila has implemented a new rape policy, and every man or woman on this island must follow the guidelines. Oral consent is of uttermost importance.

“Yes, please. I want more of what we did earlier.”

I adjust the sleeves of my dress shirt. Her eyes fall on the diamond cuff links that my son got me for my last birthday. “Are you being a needy little doe?”

She squirms at what I said, but there’s terror in her eyes. Instantly, I ask, “What’s on your mind?”

“Smolyakov was right, you know. My condoms have expired. I... Smolyakov has some in storage. I should—”

I interrupt her mumbling by silencing her with my finger on her lips. I trace her bottom lip, and she parts for me. I let her suck on me some more. I say, “We’re both clean.” She nods cautiously. “And you’re on birth control because you get heavy periods.”

Her eyes widen, and she attempts to speak, but I don’t let her. “Every secret you have, little doe, I have uncovered it. I know every aspect of your life. I wouldn’t let my family near you if I didn’t.”

The questions in her eyes are endless, but she doesn’t ask for me to stop. I go on, “Take off my suit jacket and your sweatshirt.”

“But I’m cold,” she says, muffled by my finger in her mouth. She’s sucking on it like a good little doe, neat and proper. For newbie Katantians, we have adapted to the lifestyle quite fast.

“I’ll keep you warm. And hand me your panties, too. I want to see how wet you are for me.”

Reluctantly, I remove my glistening finger from her mouth.

Ivy hangs my suit jacket near the door. When her sweatshirt’s gone, I see her lacy pink bra covering her pert tits. She blushes a rosy red while she slides out of her panties.

She hands them to me like the goody two shoes that she is.

I inspect them, and she studies me intently.

“Drenched. These are drenched....” Momentarily, I’m at a loss for words. The lonely old grumpy man from the bar is lightyears away. It’s fun to embarrass her, to make her blush. She’s squeezing her thighs together like she can’t get enough of me inhaling her scent.

I haven’t felt this lighthearted in years. When Penelope Jade said my name as her third word, pronouncing it as Joh-dah... Perhaps when my grandson was born, and I had an hour or two of *relaxation*. Or when my son won his first championship. Nobody knows, but I cried that night. They were happy tears.

I’m done pretending like I haven’t studied the blueprint of her home. I let myself into her bedroom, and she follows me around. I’m comfortable here like nothing can wound me. That’s a rare sentiment for me, considering that I’m outside of the palace’s walls of protection.

The walls in her home are covered in paintings, her own, I presume. She’s tracking her progress. I know the painter type; my niece is just like that, always sketching and complaining about lines and curves.

Her bed is small for my size, but it’ll do. If I break it, I don’t have to make up an excuse to buy her a new one that doesn’t have me twist like a pretzel.

Without my instructions, she takes a seat on the side of her bed. She waits for me to come to her, not making a sound. Her eyes are on me the entire time, and I feel her notetaking in her brain.

“You’ve got a nice home,” I tell her. I mean it. It’s the aura that has me captivated. I don’t feel any foreign forces here, evil or devious. In every neat detail, her touch is everywhere, and her home welcomes me like I was meant to be here. There’s a chaos of emotions in her tidy room. I see it in the paintings on the wall.

I should’ve come here earlier. It would’ve saved me the fifty sessions of therapy.

“Thank you,” she responds. “It’s my safe space.”

“I can see that.” She’s let me into her *safe space*. It’s a mistake before it even happens. I can smell it in the air that there’s more than I’m willing to acknowledge, but I ignore it. For one night, for my fucking birthday, I can be irresponsible.

She dressed up. I put on my fancy clothes. We went to a party. And now, we’re about to fuck. There’s nothing more to it.

“Are you trying to fix me still?” I ask. She nods. “You think you’ve got magic in your pussy, huh?”

More eager nodding on Ivy’s part. I don’t want to say that I have a type, but I do. My type is my wife. Ex-wife. A beautiful black woman, she didn’t take any shit from me when we were married. That’s why our marriage lasted for so little. I don’t frequent women like my therapist, young and needy. I try not to overthink it and what it means. She’s my therapist. She’s got a degree and all. That’s the only problem I see.

I’m about to fuck up the one thing that tried to improve me as a person.

That’s all I do, isn’t it? Fuck up.

“I feel cold,” she says, pouting at me. Her doe eyes drive me nuts, and I hope that I don’t fall victim to them. I stalk toward her, feeling awfully protective of her naked skin. “Please, keep me warm?”

“Of course.” My hand grips her thigh, squeezing her creamy flesh. “Where do you want me to make you warm? Show me. Be a needy doe for me.”

Ivy lies back down on her bed, and I watch her chest rise and fall with deep breaths. I make her nervous. She’s afraid of me, and I’m hard, like she is the first human being ever to fear me. Biting her lip, she lifts her skirt for me.

I memorize her pretty pussy. There’s no traditional porn in this godforsaken country. The state forces its citizens to go to clubs and sex stores if they want sex. We’re allowed to sext, but it’s frowned upon. I could hand my number to some girls, and I’d get instant pussy pictures, but all those pussies have nothing on my therapist.

Her trembling excites me, and I give her what she wants. I touch her pussy, finding her wet and ready for me. I’d fuck her right away, but she’s been a good girl. She deserves a little attention. “You want me to fuck you warm?”

“Yes, please.”

“What do you call me?”

“Mr. Winters, please. Fuck me.” She writhes while my finger rubs her clit. I dip a finger into her, and she’s tighter than imagined. I prepare her tight little hole. I don’t want her to bleed. I’ve got *3013* on my mind, but I don’t like blood on my, or her, sheets. It irritates me. Fylox and Kamila may be up to some kinky shit with knives and whips in their free time; my men have told me horrid stories from the security cameras’ footage, but I’m not that guy. Knowing what they do in their private time makes it hard to face Fylox’s father whenever he brings the Castro family to Katantia for a vacation. “Mr. Winters?”

“Have you been imagining my dick in your pussy every time you’ve said that name to me?”

She nods shamelessly, and I’m thoroughly amused. Pressing into her harder, I make her come with my fingers.

I don’t bother undressing her further. I unbutton my shirt while her pussy glistens at me, openly inviting me to dive into

her. I leave my dress shirt on, and I undo my pants. One last time, I check her pussy with my fingers. Then I make her lick off her juices from my fingers.

Her folds welcome me as I adjust myself on top of her.

Ivy's doe eyes disturb me. I've been around her for years. Those eyes have always been there, but I only took notice tonight.

I bury myself into her, and she takes it. When her eyes produce my favorite tears, I drink them. I play with her clit, anything to get her to relax. She's tight like a vase, sucking the life out of my cock.

She shifts and squirms beneath me, trying to accustom herself to my length inside of her. Every movement she makes gets me one step closer to filling her up with the hot come she's after. At this moment, it's just us. This is risky. I can't allow myself to connect like this. I need to cut whatever urges are growing inside of me.

Everything about her is needy. I've got needy at home, in the palace. I don't want it, but I let her cling to me, hold me tight with her arms around me. She's still in her lacy bra. It scrapes my skin. I'd much rather have her tits pressed against my chest, but I can't find it in me to multitask right now.

We find a rhythm, and she gives me sweet moans for how my fingers play her. I make sure that she finishes first, and then I empty myself inside of her. Her face changes the moment it happens. She has her doubts, and I can read them from a mile away. I kiss her pretty lips to distract her.

She's just a fuck, but I'm not going to be mean about it. What do I get out of it if I have a grumpy therapist?

"Stay here," I instruct her. Relying on my memory, I guide myself to her bathroom. There's no disarray here, and I find what I came for instantly. The order she applies to everything in her life makes me feel at home. It's a treacherous feeling, and I shouldn't get used to it.

I clean up, take a piss and return to my doe. She's shaking again, but she hasn't moved from her spot. With a warm cloth

in hand, I approach her. She flinches at the sight. I kiss her just below her belly button. She can relax now. I've got it covered.

"That feels so good," she tells me. Her breathy tone is everything. "Thank you."

I discard the cloth, and I briefly contemplate what to do. The last time I did this, a couple of years ago, I left right away. It was purely physical at the time. I'm glued to this bed. Suddenly, I feel too heavy to move out of here.

"Can you hold me?" she asks, and her voice breaks. There are no tears on her pretty cheeks, and I'm grateful. Her tears are addictive, and if I consume them too often, I'll get hooked.

I help her out of her clothes. Pillows fly all over the place, landing on the floor next to the bed. I feel the urge to fold my dress shirt and pants, but instead, I just toss them away. It takes a moment until I can focus on something other than my compulsion.

She gets me under her covers, and she presses herself against me.

It's a strange sensation. I feel her radiating content. She falls asleep in my arms.

My brain can't shut off. I spend the night reciting my soldiers' names over and over again. Important numbers. How many visitors is the palace expecting?

Minutes drift into hours.

My son. Fuck! I didn't watch the game.

CHAPTER 7



I'M SHELLSHOCKED.

I walked to work today because I couldn't fathom driving my car after yesterday.

Of course, he wasn't there when I woke up. Mr. Winters is and will remain the ghost that I know he is.

Five cups of coffee later, I'm in my office. Unable to sit still, I shift in my chair. I feel him in every move that I make. With every reminder of my soreness, I realize that it wasn't a dream.

"Do you want to pop some molly this weekend?" Smolyakov bursts into my office, casually walking up to my desk. He plops into a seat. He runs a hand through his hair once, and it behaves.

"No," I say.

"Come on, you loved it the last time," he insists. "We felt it for days."

"I hate that we can do whatever we want. There are no regulations here for us. We can shoot up heroin, and they'll applaud us," I blurt out.

"Stop being so sensitive. A molly every five months is not an addiction. And they let us do as we please because our pay is shit, and we've saved their asses far too many times for them to put any restrictions on us," Smolyakov insists. He's bored out of his mind, and he doesn't have anything to live for. That's Katantia for us.

“Did you tap that last night?” he asks in a tone that feigns indifference.

Instead of responding, I frown.

“That bad?”

“Shut up,” I say.

“His son won the game, by the way. All the news reported it first thing in the morning,” Smolyakov informs me. “You must be his lucky charm.”

I don’t know many things about Mr. Winters, but I know that his son wins his games regardless of his father having a good luck charm.

Smolyakov grabs his phone, and he starts typing away. He spends his breaks with me because he hates the cafeteria. He has a delivery chef that cooks for him at home, and I’m pretty sure Smolyakov fucks him for the food, but I don’t say a thing. We’ve all got our quirks, and Smolyakov happens to be quirkiest than others. He’s the oldest in my friend group, but he doesn’t look the part. He’s fit, tall, and handsome. There’s a timelessness about him like he’s not from this world.

He’s got dick and pussy lined up for days. All that bores him, though. He’s a calm man, and we’ve become best friends ever since he moved in next to me.

“I’ve got Ignas coming in soon,” I inform Smolyakov. I’m in no way relaxed. My mind keeps drifting off to Mr. Winters fondling my pussy, and I hate myself for it. “You should go.”

“Oh, he is?” Smolyakov puts aside his phone. He sits back on the chair, and he grins at the door.

“What did you do?” I ask my friend. He keeps grinning. I exhale in frustration. “OLEG! Please, why are you messing with my patients?”

“What?” He feigns innocence, shrugging. He hates being Oleg, so he’s forced everyone to refer to him as Smolyakov, which is his last name. “I went to COCKed&screwed after you so lewdly abandoned us at Gold Necklace. Ignas was there.”

“COCKed&screwed? Isn’t that for women?” I ask, momentarily distracted.

Smolyakov rolls his eyes at me. “There are women at Hole Stores, too. Do you see me complaining?”

I sigh. “Anyway. Why? Ignas is still struggling. I wish he’d just take a desk job—”

“Desk jobs don’t pay as well in this country,” Smolyakov interrupts me. He rolls his lips, and his icy eyes sparkle with mischief. “I gave him a little extra afterward. He was a good boy.”

“You didn’t,” I blurt out.

“Sure did. Might even do it again. He’s got a fine—”

The polite knock on my door interrupts our obscene conversation. “Ms. Lin? May I come in?”

“Get out!” I hiss at Smolyakov, who chuckles at my desk.

“Yes, of course!” I yell at the door. I touch my uncontrolled hair, pushing it aside. I strive to make a professional impression on the people I meet, but I’ve been a mess today.

Ignas walks into my office, and he blushes when he sees Smolyakov. It takes the men a couple of minutes until they notice that I’m there, too. “Oh, hey, Ms. Lin. How are you doing today?”

“I’m fine. Take your seat, please. Smolyakov. Go. Now.”

“Bye,” my friend says. He winks at Ignas, and I’m horrified. My patient’s eyes stalk Smolyakov as he exits my office.

“Ms. Lin, you’re different today,” Ignas comments as I take my seat across from him. “What did you do?”

“Nothing.” I smile at him. I open my notepad, placing it on my lap. “Nothing special.”

“No, you didn’t!” Ignas gasps. “Ms. Lin, come on. You said that this was a space of honesty.”

I don't know why, but I start sobbing. Coffee and the constant recollection of what happened ruined my day.

"Hey, now. I didn't mean to make you cry. Did somebody hurt you? I'm sure Smolyakov has some shooters on speed dial," Ignas comments. He approaches me, and I let him. With a similar story as Fylox, Kamila's boyfriend, Ignas comes with a lot of baggage. He's more than ten years younger than me. I've been treating him for years now, but I open up to him on some days.

Unprofessional. I know.

"I'm sorry. I'm having a bad day," I tell my patient. I'm positively losing it.

"Role reversal? You know I love it when we do that!"

"We said we wanted to discuss your new job at COCKed&screwed," I remind him, picking up the tears on my cheeks. I can't shake the image of Mr. Winters accosting my tears.

"I want to know who made you cry!" Ignas had to mature too early in his life. I've had a lot of patients in the past five years with his background. He's been recovering, steadily getting better. I disagree with his decision to start sex work, but Smolyakov is right. Ignas has no parents to support him. He's not married. He must make ends meet somehow. I'd want him to leave Katantia, but he has no education. He's been going to night school to get his high school diploma.

"I told you that I like this one guy, right?" I start. We take a seat on the couch. I sit cross-legged, gazing at my cuticles. Ignas observes me. He's resilient. I want to protect him because I keep seeing the old him, the fragile boy who'd come to me for help. Ignas has evolved, though. Unlike *him*. "Well, long story short, I had sex with him over the weekend."

"Sex as in... Sex? The way the rest of us understand it?" Ignas asks with curious eyes.

I nod. He lets out a shriek of excitement that rattles me. "OH MY GOD! YOU WENT AND DID IT! FINALLY! Oh

my god. How was the dick? Please, tell me it was worth pining over for FIVE years.”

I sniffle. Unfortunately, the *dick* is my patient. “Never had it like that before. It felt like the first time, the glorified one we see in porn? You know what I mean? Fuck... You were born here. You don’t know any porn!”

“Oh, shit! I live porn. I don’t need to see it.” Ignas is genuinely happy for me, and I consume his positive energy, hoping that it will push out all the doubts. “Details. I want details! When’s the repeat? I’ll get Smolyakov, my popcorn, and my masturbator.”

I giggle at his joke, finding relief at his humor. “I don’t think there’ll be a repeat. He was drunk. It was his birthday. We had our fun. I... He made me blow him in the middle of the street.”

“HE DID WHAT,” Ignas gasps. “I need some of that dick. What the fuck? I’m sure he’ll come around. Did you tell him that you’ve been fantasizing about him for years?”

He drags out that last word to the max. “No, I didn’t. He’s not stupid. He picks up on the details.”

“Why are you sad then? I’m sure it wasn’t one-sided.”

“I shouldn’t have done it,” I confess, quietly heaving. “It’s wrong. I made an oath. I have a reputation. Others have broken on Katantia, but I don’t... I didn’t want to break. I feel like I’m about to get fired.”

“Fired? You are the busiest doctor on Katantia. Nobody’s taking your place.” Ignas’ face turns serious. “I want to be happy for you, but if he hurt you, I’m not shipping it. So, I suggest that you come to COCKed&screwed. You’ll see how I’m doing at my new job. Perhaps you’ll find a new boo.”

I clear my throat, and I straighten my posture. We both have better things to do than to discuss my love life. “He didn’t hurt me. Now, let’s get back to our session.”

I return to my seat on the other side, grabbing my notepad.



“YOU’RE SUCH A MAJOR COCKBLOCKER,” SMOLYAKOV UTTERS. He’s a grown man, and he uses terms frequented by the teens. He’s weird and moody, but he’s my friend, and I accept him. Even when he hates me for being a *cockblocker*.

One day after Ignas invited me, we went to COCKed&screwed. The palace has given us special coupons for shops. Therefore, we don’t have to pay entrance fees anywhere we go. Smolyakov insists on paying his, but I take advantage of my coupon block because I never use it.

As expected, Ignas was working while we visited. It’s promoted as a reverse Hole Store where men stand behind holes, and women pick a stick to fuck. Ever since Kamila took over, Hole Stores and the other franchise stores have become more unisex. Yes, only women work there, but now, it’s accepted to go there as a woman. The COCKed&screwed near our home has a reputation for all the men that frequent it, Smolyakov being one of them.

I had my notepad with me, ready to take notes, but I couldn’t cope once I saw Ignas at *work*. His superiors will notify him that I visited, and I must come up with an excuse on why we didn’t stay.

Smolyakov is brooding in my living room, chatting with somebody on his phone. He hates me for dragging us out of there so soon.

“How can you think of Ignas that way when you know his history?” I ask Smolyakov. He shrugs, and I want to attack him with a pillow.

I let Mr. Winters into my safe space, my home. Now, it doesn’t feel the same anymore.

“Easy,” Smolyakov responds. “I’m a cruel piece of shit that doesn’t care about the details.”

“That’s not even funny.” He’s not being remotely funny. Smolyakov doesn’t lie. It’s not in his nature. He hides things,

but he means what he says.

“I fucked Ignas of today, not his past self.” He takes a screenshot on his phone, squinting his eyes at the image. “Want to see a botched dick pic?”

I decline the kind offer by shaking my head.

Smolyakov goes on, “Live in the now. You can’t keep bringing up old shit.”

“An abusive past... An entire childhood of abuse isn’t old shit. I’m wary because I know him. Ignas is sensitive even if he doesn’t outright show it.” I take a deep breath. “Please, be careful.”

“Whatever.” He puts aside his phone for me. “Can you draw me like one of your French—”

Before he can finish his sentence, I’m out of the room. I grab my utensils, sketching book, and pencils. Hurrying back into the living room, I drop half of my stuff. Meanwhile, Smolyakov positions himself in front of the window. He’s looking outside, trying to find a sophisticated pose.

With my sketching book in hand, I get comfortable on the floor.

“Can you hold that position for a little while?” I ask Smolyakov. He’s glancing outside, and I have the perfect view of his thin and straight nose. His face is full of angles, and they’re perfect for sketching.

“Of course, bitch,” he responds, glaring at me. He takes his final position, and I start outlining.

I lose myself while I sketch, forgetting time and place. It’s just Smolyakov and me. He’s vain enough to endure my hobby without complaints.

It gets dark very late on Katantia, and I use every bit of sunray.

We’re both beat from work and our COCKed&screwed visit. Smolyakov doesn’t show a sign of fatigue, but I feel my hand grow heavy. My eyelids flutter lazily.

When it gets so dark that I can't see the sketch on my paper, I rise from the floor, yawning. While I shut the blinds and turn the lights on, Smolyakov does one of his contemporary dance stretches. He's a flexible man, and sometimes, he scares the shit out of me.

The city girl in me is easily intimidated by monsters.

And I surround myself with tons of them.

"Good sesh. Let me know if you want the molly. I'm seeing my guy tomorrow. There's a rave downtown on Saturday if you're interested," Smolyakov offers. He picks up his keys, his phone, and his shoes. Barefoot, he leaves my home.

I take a deep breath. I can do this.

After a quick shower, I grab my new drawing of Smolyakov, my hammer, and two nails. Whistling to myself, I enter my bedroom. There's one empty spot on the wall near the door. It takes less than two minutes to secure my new wall decoration.

When I finish, I take a couple of steps back to admire my work.

I take another step back, and I crash into a warm body behind me. I let out a shriek that *he* numbs out by covering my mouth with his hand. He drops the hand when he sees that I've calmed down. The shock doesn't pass, though.

I wasn't expecting Mr. Winters to show up. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to see my pet," he says matter-of-factly.

"A pet? What pet?" I ask, drawing my eyebrows together.

"Are you jealous, needy doe?" I roll my eyes, and he chuckles. "I've installed the American channels on your television. You're going to be a good little doe and watch my son's game with me."

"I'm exhausted, and I have work tomorrow," I inform him. I'm still recovering from his birthday party's aftermath. Plus, I'm bitter that he left without saying goodbye.

“You’re exhausted.”

“I am. Very much so,” I confirm.

“Good thing that the game’s in...” He checks his watch. “Five hours. Hop on the bed and rest for a little while.”

“What are you going to do in the meantime?” I ask.

“Oh, I’m going to play with your pussy until you fall asleep, and then, I’m inspecting every detail of your home.” It should alert me that he knows everything about me, but it doesn’t. It’s no secret that Katantia is a state like so many others. Privacy is minimal here. It works in favor of the exhibitionists.

“So, this is a thing now?” The pressure between my thighs turns hot.

“No, this is an *object*. You wanted to be my *object*, remember, little doe?” Mr. Winters says. “As your owner, I will let you sleep. Then you’ll watch the game with me.”

“But... I don’t know anything about the game!” I pout. “And this is my home. You don’t have to *let* me do anything.”

Mr. Winters picks me up, and he drops me on my bed while I kick him. To him, it seems playful, but I’m trying to get him away from my body. He’s dangerous for my sanity. I’ll agree to just about anything to feel the high he gave me when he slept over the other day.

“Sleep now. Be a good doe for me.”

I sigh. He joins me on the bed, and we settle into the position from last time. I feel his hardness against me, and I grow even fonder of this position. As promised, he holds me. His fingers dig below my panties, finding my wet spot.

“You’re such an eager and needy doe. Don’t rub yourself against me now....” I do just that. I’m hungry for his cock. “You’re going to rest now. If you’re a good doe, I’ll let you sit on my cock later. You can play as much as you want.”

My groan of frustration amuses him. He fondles me in a rhythm that doesn’t allow me to relax. I’m on edge, and when

he starts fingerfucking me, I writhe underneath his touch. I come for him, and then his fingers graze my pussy lazily.

“Dream of something you’ll never have, needy doe. You know what I mean.”

Why does he have to make me so happy and sad at the same time?

CHAPTER 8

JORDAN



IVY'S EYES FLUTTER OPEN, AND SHE NEEDS A MOMENT.

“You're still here?” she asks incredulously. She was restless in her sleep, and she changed positions quite often. She's on her back now, and her head's tilted in my direction.

“If we miss the national anthem, I'm going to have to fuck your ass,” I tell her, smirking. Her eyes widen, still confused as to what's going on. I wasn't here when she woke up the last time. Her morning habits are new to me. I leave her be in her bedroom so that she can wake up in peace.

I've got plans for her.

Every time my son calls me before a playoff game, he loses the game. This time, he called me on my birthday, and he fucking won the game. Coincidence? I don't think so.

Ivy's television is set up. I check the connection again before I make myself comfortable on her couch. The channel is on, and I can see the players on the court.

“Are you starting without me?” she asks, yawning. She wears an oversized white T-Shirt. I see the shape of her nipples and her breasts through its thin fabric. She takes a seat next to me, and I can tell that she's a slow riser. Her energy is low, and she's not fully with me.

“How many tears did you cry the other morning when you saw that I'd left?” I tease her. It works. She twitches, and fury flickers in her body. “Be a good little doe and tell me. I want to know.”

“Zero.”

“Good little does don’t lie.”

“Well, this doe does!” She pouts, and she crosses her arms in front of her chest. Her frustration turns me on. Her shirt’s stretched, revealing the triangle of her pretty pussy. She’s not wearing any panties.

I reach between her thighs, and there’s no resistance. She parts for me eagerly. I give her pretty pussy a lesson on who makes her wet, and then I remove my fingers from her as she’s about to finish. She’s breathing hard, and she’s looking at me like she wants to murder me for taking away her pleasure.

I’d fuck her, but my son’s about to win his fourth championship, and I don’t want to miss a beat. My cock hates me for it, but we’ll survive.

“Fine!” she mutters. “Five tears.”

“Five measly tears?” I add, “Is that all Mr. Winters is worth to you?”

Ivy’s hand tries to sneak its way between her thighs, but I stop her. She’s fully awake now, but I work out, and I beat people up for a living. She doesn’t stand a chance against me. If the mood strikes me, I can do monstrous things, but my therapist is special. She doesn’t get that treatment. That’s reserved for traitors and bitches.

The national anthem plays. I know they’ll show my son’s face. He’s the star of the franchise. He helped Indianapolis become a massive player in his conference. Tonight, this bores me. It’s always the same procedure. I turn to my shiny new *object*. “Five tears aren’t enough.”

She flares her nostrils at me. “Can I make myself some coffee?”

“Tell me how many tears I missed, and you can make yourself all the coffee you need.”

Ivy contemplates for a moment. “I cried for a couple of minutes when I woke up. I didn’t drive to work because I couldn’t see clearly from all the tears in my eyes. I walked all

the way to the Queen I hospital. I dried my tears before I arrived because I didn't want to have to explain myself. I went through the motions at work. I saw six patients. Then I had my first break. I shed some tears there. The rest of the day was quiet until my final patient came in, and I broke down in front of him. That was the last time I cried. Adding it all together, you missed a gallon of tears."

By the end of her monologue, Ivy's out of breath. She's glancing at me with her needy eyes. I shouldn't pity her. She's just a fuck that might align all the stars together for my son's fourth ring. But I can't resist her doe eyes.

I pull her close to me, and she wraps her arms around me like the needy doe that she is. I say, "For every tear you shed, I'll reward you. Keep crying for me like a good needy doe."

"How much is enough?" she asks, her voice a bittersweet tremble.

"It's never enough." I pick her up, and I take us to her tiny kitchen. "Make your coffee. Be quick."

She sobers up, pacing around her kitchen in record time. I keep my eyes on her and on the television. On any other day, I'd watch this game with the family. They're all assembled in the palace, throwing a private party out of my son's fifth chance at a ring. The babies are sleeping in their strollers while the grownups make bets on who will top the scoreboard. *My son, of course.*

"I'm ready," Ivy announces. She holds two steaming cups of coffee. There's a little stain of coffee on her shirt now. I let her lead the way back to the couch. We've missed the tip-off, and the ball's in the other team's hands.

"That's for you," she says once we take our seats. She hands me one of the cups with black coffee. "I didn't know if you drank it with milk or sugar. I can—"

"I don't drink coffee," I tell her. She places the cup on the coffee table, and she starts sipping on her own. She gulps it down like it's water, and I don't like it. "I'm a tea person. It's better for my vocal cords since I yell at people all day."

She blushes into her cup, and I hear a faint giggle.

“Take off your shirt. It’s dirty,” I tell her casually. I keep an eye on the score. It’s nothing my son hasn’t been able to salvage, yet the finals are always nerve-wracking.

She takes a sip of her coffee, savoring the taste with her eyes shut. She fucking moans at this cup like it’s the most pleasurable thing she’s ever experienced. I want to smash it. She says, “I’ll freeze.”

“As your *owner*, I won’t allow you to freeze.” She sighs. The coffee addiction seeps through as she gulps down some more of her hot drink. Once her coffee cup’s on the table, she meets my eyes. I should be watching the screen. My son’s about to dunk on the other team’s big guy. My gaze is fixated on my new favorite *object*. She teases me with her sinful white shirt. She grinds on nothing, working her hips while every inch she removes of her shirt reveals more of her skin.

“Better?” she asks, dropping the shirt on the floor.

I nod, taking in the sight. I can’t think of anything other than how much I’d like to fuck her, knowing that all her friends are in their homes. I want them to hear her screams while they get ready for work.

Unlike me, her eyes wander toward the screen. I study her naked body next to me. I’ve seen more of her in two days than I’ve seen in five years of therapy. She held back all those years. She kept her needy little secrets.

“What happened?” Ivy gasps, pointing at the screen. I force myself to stop staring at her, and I scan the scene. One of the players suffered an injury, and they’re removing him from the court.

“Come here,” I tell her, inviting her to get comfortable with me. She can sit on my face for all I care. Suddenly, the game has lost its importance. I’ve been missing out all these years.

Ivy shifts, her breasts bouncing with her swift movements. She climbs over me, setting up pillows next to me. At one point, her wet pussy meets my thigh, and she rubs herself

against me. I'm distracted, hard, and horny. I don't look at the game once. By the end of it, she's got her head on pillows, her ass on my crotch, and her long legs spread across me.

She glances at me with her doe eyes, batting her eyelashes like a needy good girl.

"The game. We have to focus on it," I tell her, but I'm dying to convince myself.

"Hm." She nods with a wicked smirk.

I play with her pussy just because I can. It comes naturally to me. I'm making up for all the lost time. She writhes and moans for me. I let her come as often as she pleases. Halftime comes and goes. Meanwhile, Ivy doesn't even try to look like she's invested in the game.

"These are the finals. It's a special occasion," I explain. "You should watch."

She shakes her head playfully. "Alex won't mind. He likes me because I help his wife and his best friend feel better."

Fuck. I nod, and I focus on the rest of the game. Ivy Lin isn't a random girl I'm fucking. This is a woman that is intricately connected to my family. What am I doing?

I like how this place makes me feel. My dick's harder than it's been in years when in Ivy's presence. I can pause and live my life while I'm with my *object* of two days.

"When can I sit on your cock?" she asks, rubbing herself against my crotch. She feels my erection, and she leans into it. She's a feisty little tease. "I want to play. I've been good."

"Debatable," I say, keeping my eyes on the screen. It's the final quarter, and I finally grow some sense. Ivy's pussy is good, and she almost managed to get me to fuck her while my son played one of the most important games of his career.

My phone rings. It's Kamila. I pick up instantly.

"What's happening?" she asks before I can talk. I hear the babies in the background. They're not sleeping. I see the image in my head, and I yearn for it. I chose to come to Ivy's because here, I have the illusion of less responsibility. It's

easy, being an *owner*. These four walls contain our little kingdom. I give her pleasure, and she swallows my come. That's that.

Out there in the palace?

How did Travis pull it off for a decade? I've been in his role for five years, and I'm almost at the end of my energy. I tell Kamila, "Nothing. Everything's as it should be. It's a strategy. Don't worry about it. He's going to win."

"If he doesn't win, it's going to be an awful summer," Kamila whines dramatically. "You should be here with us. I don't know what's more important to you right now."

Ivy can't hear what Kamila's saying. I glance at Ivy, and she's gazing at me. She knows.

"Give the babies a squeeze from their favorite grandpa. I'm going to be there once I'm done with my work," I tell Kamila. Ivy flinches at my words. I put the phone away. I feel the shame Kamila casts upon me for missing the game.

On the screen, my son has picked up his game, and he's shooting back to back threes.

"If you want to cry for me some more, little doe, now's a perfect time." I inhale sharply. I stop playing with her pussy, and she removes herself from my lap. She sits down next to me, hugging a pillow to her chest. Her pretty pussy is still visible to me, but I force myself to look away.

She doesn't cry.

I clench and unclench my fists. My fingers smell like her, her scent dominating my senses. The game is on my mind. I know my son's coach and all his strategies. Alex discusses them with me every other week.

Our defense is lacking today. I want to pick up my phone and fuck that bitch of a coach up. They're losing rebounds that should be theirs.

"Relax," Ivy says. She's naked, blushing, and pouty. Yet, her voice is professional. "It's a game. You can't control it. It's not your job to micromanage Alex's life."

I'm projecting my failures upon my son. I can't let go of him. Kamila thinks I'm hurting because I'm far away from my son, stuck on an island with sexed-up people. The truth is, I never left my son. I'm involved in all aspects of his life. I won't abandon him. I did it before. He must hate me for it. *I learned from the best.*

It's the guilt that drives me.

Only three seconds are left on the clock. The sun's out, and I've got a beautiful woman next to me, but I've got tunnel vision on the game. I feel nauseated and exhausted. My lack of sleep creeps up on me. I'm counting and scheming, trying to think of the outcome.

It's a tie right now.

Ivy grabs my hand, and I finally look at her. Can she hear my treacherous heart? I feel like it's me on that court, fighting for my dream to come true.

She yelps, jumping up from the couch. The pillow drops from her body.

And I'm momentarily lost.

What happened?

I look at the score.

Indianapolis won.

I've never felt number. I can't process it. My phone starts ringing, but I ignore it. Ivy moves around. She's talking. Excitement coats her tone. I don't register a word.

After a deep inhale, I get up from the couch. Ivy jumps me, hugging me tight. "Get off of me."

My tone scares her, and she backs off immediately. I don't look at her as I grab my shit. I'm out of Ivy's home in an instant.

I get into my car, and I drive to the gym.



“Boss?”

“Hello?”

“He’s not responding.”

“Jordan? What’s wrong?” My sister’s voice caps all the other noises. The numbness fades, and I take deep and frantic breaths. I’m a sweaty mess, and my throat is dry. I can’t feel my legs, and my brain buzzes. “Hey, come on. Speak to me.”

I gaze at my sister, and I can’t utter a word.

Her teal eyes are damp with worry. Her hair’s a mess, and her robe outfit makes me think she jumped out of bed.

“Guys, please, leave us alone,” my sister demands. There are five of my soldiers surrounding the scene. There’s worry in the room, but I can’t bring myself to care.

“We should take him to the hospital. He doesn’t look well,” Måns suggests. His tone is sterner than I’m used to from him. The other soldiers, or employees, agree with him. Their nods make me dizzy.

I clear my throat. “Get out.”

My sister’s eyes widen, and I shake my head at her, unable to bring out more words past my lips.

“Måns, can you get me a car, please? Make sure it’s fully fueled,” Felicita demands. Måns doesn’t look happy at my sister’s requests. What has transpired? Måns doesn’t glare at people above his paygrade.

I don’t have much time to contemplate. My men leave, and my sister starts bombarding me with questions. I can’t give her the answers she wants because I’m not listening. All the words she throws at me overwhelm me.

“Jordan, please. Talk to me!” she urges me. “What do you need? I’m worried. I’ll take you to the hospital if you don’t speak up!”

Needy doe eyes haunt me, and I force myself to cough out a response. “I’m fine.”

“You’re not!” she cries out. “We’ve all been worried sick. We haven’t been able to reach you for hours! We thought something happened to you. Where were you during the game?”

“Nowhere,” I lie.

“Is something wrong? Is somebody threatening you?” she asks, and I attempt to laugh at her ridiculous suggestion. I cough instead, exhausting myself.

“You couldn’t handle it if I were being threatened. Stop this shit,” I say to her. Gradually, it all comes back to me. Nausea overcomes me, and I need to take a piss, too. Fuck, what did I do? I rub my forehead, and I still smell Ivy on my fingers.

While I compose myself, my sister moves away from me. She’s keeping it together, but she’s still in shock.

“What is all of this?” she asks, gesturing around us.

We’re in the gym of the new training facilities for my men. They haven’t been officially opened yet, and after what I did, it’ll take a month until they are ready for my soldiers. I’m unharmed, but the gym is devastated.

I don’t remember the exact details. I must have blacked out. The last thing I remember is Ivy in her home, scared and distant.

“Alex called. He couldn’t reach you on your phone,” Felicita explains. I don’t know where my phone is. “He won. They’re coming home.”

“What?”

“He won.”

“I know that,” I bite back. “Who’s coming home?”

“Alex. He’s bringing his mom, too,” Felicita tells me, and I feel the numbness make a return. I fight hard to keep my focus. The pounding in my chest distracts me.

“Why is she coming? Doesn’t she have a life?”

Felicita sighs. “She’s coming to visit her grandchild. She wants to spend some time with us. She’s going through a messy divorce. Leave the woman alone.”

I left her alone. I just don’t fucking understand why she can’t give me the same courtesy.

Måns’ heavy steps announce his return. He doesn’t look us in the eyes. I’ll have a word with my men once my head is clear. I need to strategize and reconsider my behavior.

Once again, I fucked up. This gym costs too much money for me to destroy it the way I did. I’ve left it in shambles.

Måns hands my sister a set of keys, and he quietly departs the room.

“What are you planning?” I ask her.

She suggests, “Let’s go somewhere together. Away from all of this.”

CHAPTER 9



IT'S LIKE THE FOURTH OF JULY, BUT THE KATANTIAN VERSION, out there.

I'm hiding under Smolyakov's covers.

"Bitch, get out of my bed! Danai and Malena are already downstairs waiting for us," Smolyakov informs me. He's pacing around the room, making final adjustments to his outfit. I didn't even bother with a concept. I put on a pair of jeans and a random blouse. My hair's a mess again.

"Do we really want to go? It'll be another snob event," I tell my friend.

He groans in frustration. "Stop lying to yourself. It's a celebration. Free food, free drinks, and free dick. What else can I ask for? Get the fuck out of my bed. Now."

I drag myself into an upright position. "Fine."

"Damn it. Fix your hair. Fix your look. Where are you going like this? I know you treat the Queen of Katantia herself, but you can't go out like this! They'll think you're homeless or worse, a prude!" Smolyakov leaves his bedroom. When he returns a couple of minutes later, Danai and Malena appear by his side. Astounded, they go to work on me. Danai disappears for a couple of minutes only to return with a dress like what she's wearing.

They help me into the clothes, sorting out my shoes as well.

In ten minutes, I look like a revamped version of myself with my thigh-length tight dress and heels. My insides still feel like trash, so my frown remains the same.

“Now, this is a look!” Malena comments. “Hotter than the IG thots!”

I sigh. My head hurts from all the coffee I’ve had.

“Bitch, fix your face. Whatever’s going on in there....” He points a finger at my brain. “Isn’t worth it. You live in the best country in the world. You work however you please. You owe zero money. You’re the shit. Get that in your little brain, and let’s go. I’m tired of your moping around!”

The women agree with him.

I grab my bag, and I follow them downstairs, where our car is waiting. Danai’s husband doesn’t seem the least bit irritated at the delay. He greets Smolyakov and me with his usual warm smile.

The ride to the palace is endless. My toes hurt already, and I haven’t even walked them properly.

Danai and Malena gawk outside of the car’s windows, squirming in excitement at the fireworks. There are drunks everywhere, and I feel like I’m back home on St. Patrick’s Day. Green is everywhere since it’s the color of Alex’s team. There’s no music in our car since Smolyakov despises the sound of anything other than his Tchaikovsky. The noises coming from the outside fill our ears with chaos. American music blasts, frantic Katantians chant along. There’s sex all over the place. Of course, there would be. It’s Katantia, after all.

They’re celebrating Alex like he’s their hero.

In many ways, he is. Alex Winters makes their queen happy, and he keeps their country in the news. Despite all the superficial attention he earns daily, he is a good man. In the few times that I’ve met him, he was inquisitive about his family’s progress in my care.

Kamila and Fylox are doing great. They have each other, and they want to be better for themselves and for Alex. Jordan,

on the other hand?

I'm not sure he wants to get better. He's been torturing himself for years, coming to therapy. He doesn't open up, and you can't help someone that doesn't want your help.

I know Jordan's not well. I've been aware of it for a while now. He doesn't give away much, but it doesn't take a genius to figure out why he is the way he is. He's in his best spirits after the gym, after letting out all the pent-up anger and tension inside of him.

There's a lot of responsibility weighing heavy on his shoulders. They're strong, his shoulders. Nonstop, Jordan has been carrying that weight for five years and more. There's one reoccurring statement in our sessions. He claims he's more relaxed now that he's on Katantia, traveling less and worrying about fewer people. It's a lie. Katantia can bring out claustrophobia in people, and I'm starting to think that the small space of Katantia hasn't helped him.

It's made things worse.

In America, he had a vast country at his feet. From my interpretation of what Fylox has told me about their life in the States, they traveled a lot. They didn't see a lot of people. Fylox was one of Jordan's higher-ups in a long line-up of men that worked for Jordan. They did all the *street work*. Fylox says that he and Jordan came out as the star act of the show, rarely and only if it was worth the strain. On any other day, you'd find them stuck in front of computer screens. They haven't told me what they did exactly. It involved a lot of secrecy and running from the law. On Katantia, I don't have to obey *laws*. Nobody forces me to report a crime I detect in my sessions.

Still, I've asked Fylox to sugarcoat the grimy details.

Jordan has been stretching his limits for a long time.

He's in denial, and so am I. A lot of my patients are. It rubs off on you. Professional or not, I have grown attached to Jordan over the past five years. It didn't happen overnight. What eventually occurred this past week shouldn't have.

I chase Smolyakov away from my patients, but I went and did what I accused my friend of.

And the worst thing is that I believed I was helping him. For the first time in our acquaintance, Jordan seemed carefree. I was all that mattered to him.

I should've known that he would reach his breaking point in my presence. That's just my luck.

I've been in a bad mood ever since he ran out of my apartment. All around me, people keep bringing up Alex's win like it's supposed to make me happy. It doesn't, but I pretend like everything's fine to avoid the questions. Smolyakov knows that something is wrong, but he doesn't push me.

My bad mood translates to tons of coffee. I've been staying at Smolyakov's because my home doesn't feel like my home anymore because of *him*. I'm constantly drawing, breaking pencils, and wrinkling paper out of frustration. Smolyakov has taken the liberty of transferring my patients to the newbies until the next week.

I feel like I've betrayed them by agreeing to this royal party. I should be at home, doing my routine of illness.

Once we're at the palace, it takes another half an hour until we're finally allowed inside the compound. I sense *his* gaze on me, although he's nowhere to be seen. This sentiment isn't new to me. Even before he fucked me and called me names, I couldn't escape him.

We've been here before. Danai and her husband steal kisses from each other. Malena's on the lookout for her brother. Smolyakov's checking out all the guests. This party is more official than last week's birthday party. The women wear gowns, and the men are in their finest suits. I could gag on all the expensive jewelry. I stare at my fingers, devoid of any rings. My heart grows heavy.

The violins in the back add to a tranquil ambiance.

My friends and I find our table in the Main Hall. At these events, it's usually just us. The rest of the doctors the family invites never comes. We get a reputation at the hospital for

attending, but Smolyakov always comes up with a clever comeback when they shame us, but mostly Malena, for her brother's palace job.

As always, the royals make their grand entrance after everyone's seated. Their table is next to ours. I don't know why the other doctors despise the royals. Kamila had hoped to mellow their relations, but she hasn't managed to accomplish that. After everything Kamila has done for me, I can't ignore her invitations. Smolyakov's right. We get free food, a nice party. They treat us like we're part of the royals.

"Ivy!" Penelope Jade sneaks away from her parents. Aris keeps an eye on her as she rushes over to greet me. "Hello!"

She's wearing a blue suede suit with pink sneakers. I've watched this child grow up. The first time I met her, she was a little bean in the newborn intensive care unit. I was new at the time, frightened and intimidated by Katantia.

Danai helped me out in the early days, and I'll be forever grateful.

When Penelope Jade was born, the entire island stood still. The little girl doesn't know it, but she was part of a special moment in her country's history.

Penelope Jade doesn't cease to amaze me. I don't specialize in child therapy, but I've seen her once or twice over the years. Valentina doesn't let anyone she doesn't trust meet her daughter. Danai is Valentina's obstetrician-gynecologist, and since I'm Danai's best friend, I'm trustworthy by association.

Penelope Jade doesn't like touching people or being touched. It was one of the reasons why her parents wanted me to see her. Instead of a hug, we shake hands like she's a grownup. With her little suit, she might as well be. There's glitter on her face. She's a walking contradiction, but she's one of the most fun kids I know, even if she's a bit quiet.

"How are you?" she asks like she's reading the line from a script. Fylox does it, too. I'm sure her mom told her that asking this question is small talk.

“I’m great, how are you? Have you been reading any new comic books?”

Penelope Jade nods in excitement. She’s had her dad read them to her for years, and now, she’s slowly picking up the habit herself at age five. “I’ve just discovered Aquaman. He’s a bit weird in some of the comics, but I really liked the movie, so I’m going to read them all!”

The rest of the table remains quiet while Penelope Jade is with me. They’re watching us, curious as to what’s going to happen next. Will the crazy single lady harm one of the palace’s most precious kids?

“You weren’t at the hospital,” Penelope Jade remarks. “My daddy took me there for my yearly examination, but you weren’t there. We knocked on your door. I made Daddy bring you coffee, and he ended up drinking it.”

“I’ve been a little under the weather, but I’ll be back in top form soon,” I say.

“My uncle’s been sad, too,” she says, and I bite my tongue to keep from showing a reaction. “But he still goes to work. My mom says he’s *grumpy*. I agree.”

“Oh, really?” Smolyakov grins, and I’m about to kick him when Aris joins us. He approaches his daughter, and he gently takes her away.

Before the queen enters the event with her men, Jordan walks out. He doesn’t like the attention. He’s dressed up again. Expensive fabrics cover his toned body. His broad shoulders are strong and proud. His posture is confident. I’d salivate over him if I weren’t mad at him. He presents himself as a content man, but there’s a dullness in his eyes.

His looks distract me so much that I don’t immediately notice the woman that accompanies him. My soul leaves my body, and I’m sat there like I’ve been stabbed. I know. I know. I KNOW. I have no right to claim exclusivity. My five-year emotional attachment doesn’t grant me the sole keys to his dick. I’ve only ridden it once, after all. The woman by his side

is comfortable with him. They don't hold hands. If they did, I would puke all the coffee I've consumed today.

She's almost as tall as he is. Granted, she wears heels, but even without them, she's massive. She's a stunning woman. Her gown is by far the most expensive in the room, and her hair is braided to perfection. She doesn't pretend to be happy. She actually is. Her perfect smile is genuine.

It takes a moment, but I grasp who she is.

She's Alex's mom. Of course, she's happy. Her son's just achieved what he worked hard for. Suddenly, my jealous rage feels vicious. I'm not that person. I suppress my resentment, and I focus on the average sentiment in the room. Pride. Joy.

When Alex and Kamila appear, the room erupts in cheers. Everyone around me is clapping. They've risen from their seats out of respect, and I do the same. Kamila waves at the crowd with gratitude. Alex acknowledges the endless love he's receiving.

I'm shaking all over, but nobody notices. The tears are there, but I bite them back. I won't be that woman, never. I might have let him fuck me on the first night he showed interest, but I won't let him fuck me over. I'm taking back my tears, and he can go fuck himself.

Of course, he could just come over and fuck me, but... I'm trying. It's not easy to detach myself from a client of five years. I've committed one of the worst crimes that strip me of my professionalism.

I've grown too fond of Jordan Winters.

The royals love us, but I'm grateful when they don't come to our table. We eat their food and drink their alcohol. Other guests swing by our table. Most of them know Danai and Smolyakov. Our male diva is a hero in Katantia. He was one of Aris's main doctors after the car accident slash attempted assassination. I'm left alone because people don't like to flaunt their therapist. I'm fine with that.

I really am.

It's not like I need affirmation from others or anything.

At some point, Malena's brother joins us. Måns is as kind as Malena is, greeting everyone at the table with a smile on his face. He takes the empty seat next to me, and he grabs a bite of the food. He seems starved and overworked, but he enjoys it. He blurts out, "It's been an endless party all week! I can't take it anymore."

"You signed up for the craziness," Malena reminds her brother. They don't have anyone else in the world other than each other. "Just make sure you get enough sleep. Tell him, Ivy."

I nod. My eyes keep drifting toward Jordan and his ex-wife, who are entertaining the upper class of Katantia at their table. They are in sync, complimenting each other in every way. They own the night. They're the proud parents of Katantia's most loved husband. Okay, ownership of that title is a battle between Alex and Aris.

Malena playfully shoves me in the direction of her brother. Sure, I'm a little older than him, but Malena insists that he's into older women. She wants us to hook up. In all the years I've known the Bengtssons, I've never had a full conversation with Måns. He seems nice, but I haven't been able to divert my attention from Måns's boss.

One of Malena's patients approaches her, a husband who's all but kissing Malena's feet for her accomplishments as a doctor.

"Staring isn't polite, you know," Måns says to me.

Quickly, I respond, "I know."

"What did you do to him?" my friend's brother asks me in an accusatory tone. I don't appreciate it. I choose not to engage. I'm already at a loss. I don't need to trip over the edge and make a scene. "All of us know that he was with you. We're keeping it from his family, but every employee knows where he was. Did you harm him? Is that why he had a meltdown?"

"Are you being serious right now?" I ask. I struggle to keep my voice from breaking. I meditate every day, trying to

convince myself that I haven't done anything wrong. It's been five years, and Jordan Winters is my least successful patient. I'm not getting through to him, but we've chewed on this enough, haven't we?

"He trashed two million dollars' worth of equipment. He almost crashed his car, and he doesn't remember what happened," Måns claims. Why is he doing this to me? I'm in my head already, working on possible reasons why Jordan did what he did. He seemed fine at the end of the game, and then, when his son won, something snapped in him.

I can't be mad at him, although I truly am. He all but shoved me from his body, like I was filthy and not worthy of being near him. It was a humiliating wake-up call. I would've preferred not being naked in the process, but that's Katantia for you.

"Jordan isn't my patient anymore," I tell his eager soldier. I know that Måns is at the top of the palace employee hierarchy. He's doing this to uphold his perfect score with the boss. "I don't know what happened to him, and I don't care. I'm here with my friends. If you have a concern, call my office and ask for an appointment. I don't need your harassment right now."

Måns scowls at me behind his sister's back. I understand his dedication to his boss. Quite frankly, I'm an embarrassment. I don't want to harm Mr... Jordan. I want to be his needy little doe, but that's wrong, and I need to get a grip.

The rest of the night is uneventful. Eventually, we return to our building, exhausted, well-fed, and drunk. Smolyakov doesn't even flinch when I follow him into his home.

I try hard, but the tears can't bear it anymore. They flood my cheeks once I'm under the covers.

Smolyakov joins me on his bed, and he lets me cry it out on his shoulders. He was warming up a hot couple all night long, but he ended up coming home with us in the end. I appreciate that he decided to keep me company for the night.

“You should listen to your own advice sometimes,” Smolyakov tells me. He adds a Russian phrase to his statement. I’ve heard him say it to me before, but I’ve never asked what it means. When he speaks his mother tongue, it all clicks. Smolyakov’s image is complete, raw, and real. I wish I spoke my mother tongue, but I was never allowed to learn Mandarin. When I was finally able to decide on my own, I didn’t have the time for it anymore. My work consumed my life.

“You’re worth more than you know. We’ve all done horrid things in our lives. You’re not the first one to feel ashamed.” I sigh. My past is the least of my worries right now, but if I open my mouth and tell him about Jordan, he’s going to throw a fit. “You are loved, and you are badass. I can’t listen to any bitch for as long as you do. I’d rather stuff their mouth with my dick.”

I chuckle into his embrace. I croak out, “Thank you for letting me stay here. Spaziva.”

Smolyakov grimaces at my botched Russian. “Oh my god, stop. Don’t ever say that again. My ears are bleeding!”

My tears dry by the time I’m asleep.

CHAPTER 10

JORDAN



FELICITA'S IN A GOOD MOOD TODAY.

She woke up far too early, and she prepared breakfast for champions. She proudly explains each dish to my *ex-wife*. We sit at a dinner table for ten people, but it's just the three of us. The palace is full these days, all the houses occupied. Mandy and Weston are taking an extended vacation from Texas, staying in Kamila's former home.

"I have to make everything myself," Felicita explains to Aretta. "Kamila has started banning more processed foods. It's a lifestyle change."

The women discuss their eating habits. My sister listens with awe as my *ex-wife* explains her venture into vegan food. They haven't met very often, although they're both women who have altered my life. Felicita insisted on having Aretta sleep in our home for the duration of her stay.

The prospect of proximity should excite me.

I'm sitting next to my *ex-wife*, one of the most gorgeous women in my world. I hate reducing her to her appearance since she's so much more than that. Age becomes her. I met her when we were kids. We knew nothing.

Thirty-something years later, and our lives have changed.

If I wanted my *ex-wife's* demise, I'd be happy. She's single again, and I can shoot my shot. We could have another try at our tragic love story.

We've grown apart, undeniably so. She's known as my son's mother. She doesn't shy away from the spotlight. She always wanted that life. Who am I to deny her?

I can't help seeing a former version of myself when I'm in Aretta's presence. It makes me anxious to think of everything that could've been. I've been avoiding the sentiment in the years before my grandson was born. I never had to contact her before that. I could reminisce on my ex-wife without facing her. She'd remarried after me, and I had no place in her life. She'd made that very clear.

Now, the baby has forced us to communicate. We send each other messages every now and then. Kamila dutifully records almost everything Kendrick does, and she sends it out to the family overseas.

Nostalgia and guilt govern my everyday life. There are many things that I could've done better. An honest job would have helped my relationship. Who wants to be married to a murderer? Aretta didn't.

My son grew up with a stepfather he loathed because of my *job*. 3013. I run my hand over my beanie, and Felicita picks up on the movement. She doesn't comment on it. She keeps up the lively conversation with my Aretta.

"I have to go to work now," I tell the women.

"But I thought you took the day off?" Aretta asks. Her voice is like smooth silk. It swathes me. This voice was her career. She never made it to the front of the stage, but you know what they say about background singers. They're the most talented of the bunch. I loved many things about this woman, but her voice was one of the first things I cherished. She'd won me over with one string of sentences.

Something that I loved so profoundly turned against me a couple of years later.

Four years into our relationship, this voice that I loved wanted out of the cage that I'd built. Our baby was growing more every day. He had needs. I did everything I could so that they didn't want for anything.

Everything.

Aretta stayed at home after she gave birth, but our home wasn't what she deserved. I'd confined her to a space so far below her that she'd started withering away. I was never there, and she was alone in a foreign country, away from her family, friends, and career. She had to go to the doctor because she'd started losing the voice that made her who she was.

The moment she regained her strength, the fights started.

For a year, Aretta and I couldn't speak without an argument. Alex grew restless, throwing tantrums and begging for our attention. She didn't know about the work I'd started. Travis and I kept it under wraps.

In the final days of our marriage, I had enough. I'd called her every name on earth. She'd cursed me out to the max already. We wore ourselves out with the emotional pain we caused each other.

I broke, and I told her about what I'd been doing.

I'm a fucking murderer.

That was the end. She never looked at me the same way. The awe and love in her eyes dissolved. I could've stopped. It was early, and Travis was my friend. He would've let me leave peacefully. He didn't need my help. He offered me a job to pay my bills. That was all.

But I didn't.

The damage had been done, and I had chosen my path.

For the next five years, I disappeared from the surface of the earth. While my son grew up with another man, I worked hard with Travis. He had his family in Chicago, so I did most of the traveling. Big corporations like Spencer's had a lot of loose ends.

It was my job to cut them off.

When in the zone, it's straining to keep up with real life. The less baggage I carry, the easier it is to disappear.

Eventually, the whispers got to us. My son's best friend, the son of my ex-wife's best friend from work, had been abducted in broad daylight. His father was a big-time lawyer that had messed with the wrong people.

I returned to my son's life, but the damage was already done.

Being a father is a full-time job. I felt ashamed that I had been reduced to seeing my son on the weekends.

Our divorce hadn't been the result of cheating. I never hit her. She didn't want my money. In the end, it came down to a difference in character. If we'd been older and if I had grown up under different circumstances, we would've worked it out.

My son is a constant reminder of my failures. I despise what I put him through. His mother is a good woman, and I shouldn't have lost her.

I've grieved this relationship. I see *her* everywhere, the options we could've had. All the stages of grief, I've passed them. I'm stuck on that final one, though. I can't accept my fate. Doe eyes flicker in my memory...

I ruined it.

"I take that as a no," Aretta comments.

"Excuse me?" I remark.

Felicita clears her throat while Aretta asks, "Aren't you going to show me around the island?"

Looking at my watch, I frown. It's already late. I respond, "I don't think so. You wouldn't like it anyway. I have to go to work."

"Wouldn't it be nicer if you took a day off? It's her first time here," Felicita reminded me. She was gawking at me intently, trying to steer me toward my ex-wife. "You should take it easy after—"

"You ladies should do something together," I proposed. "I can't take a day off. I'll see you later."

I don't bother with niceties. We're civil. We're not best friends. I don't owe her anything anymore.

My brain knows, but I simply must convince the rest of me.



I CAN'T STOP FIDGETING WITH MY BEANIE.

For a week, a crew has been trying to salvage whatever's possible from the ruins of the gym I trashed. I haven't been able to sleep properly, but my workload has magically decreased after the incident.

I balance it out.

My Escalade is parked right outside the gym, and I've got the perfect view of the working men. I've got so much shit to do, things to clear, calls to make. Every decision made concerning my employees passes through me first.

I'm not the *murderer* I once was, but on some days, I want to go back to that time. I traveled more, but I had fewer responsibilities.

Every day on Katantia, the walls are caving in on me.

And I can't escape it.

I'm not supposed to feel this way. It's abnormal. I disgust myself. I can't tell anyone because I'm supposed to have all the answers. Perhaps I deserve this. I've done so much shit in my life that I must feel this weak to ground myself.

Nobody has said a word to me about my outburst other than my sister.

The rest of my men don't look me in the eye on other occasions; now, they've closed off even further.

I watch them repair the gym from afar, and it fills me with shame. This was supposed to be their project. They'd come here to bond and work out, having a sense of normalcy outside of the palace.

My life is a puzzle of agony. I can't wait to find the next piece that will send me even further into the abyss.

Måns catches me spying on my men, and he approaches the car. He knocks on the window, gesturing for me to pull it down.

"Go back to your job," I tell him.

"If you're going to be here, the least you could do is help out with the mess you've made," Måns says. There's a bite to his tone, and I let it fuel me.

"Watch it," I warn him.

"You should explain yourself."

"I don't have anything to explain to you," I counter.

Måns shakes his head incredulously. "I can't believe you. How are we supposed to take you seriously when you behave this way? You've been off for months."

"Shut the fuck up and get back to work. We're paying you, and you need to do your fucking job before you pass judgment," I tell him. "If I want to, I can have you checking IDs at the gates. So, shut the fuck up, and get out of my fucking face."

"What did she do to you?" Måns dares to ask.

"Who?" I've raised my voice, and some of the men going in and out of the gym notice.

"Ivy Lin. You've been spending lots of time with her. What did she do? I've seen her files. She won't admit to anything, but I'm sure—"

In a rage, I get out of the car, and I slam Måns against it. He fights back, but I'm his boss. I taught him his tricks. He can't fight me off. I could knock him out in an instant if I felt like it. "Don't speak of her fucking name."

I shove him out of my way, and I step back into my car. Turning on the engine, I get the fuck out of there. I do a lot of unhealthy shit, but that just topped it off. I'm not this insolent toward my men unless they deserve it.

Måns doesn't deserve my wrath. He was just trying to get some answers out of me.

It's the middle of the day, and I should go back to the office. My work pile is endless, and I never manage to finish. Working overtime is an engraved part of my life. Worrying about things that I can't change is my routine.

Heat floods my face at the thought of having to go back to the palace right now. I don't want to face my men, my family.

I can't answer their questions like they expect me to.

I go to the one person that doesn't expect anything from me but is satisfied with every scrap of myself I decide to offer her.



APART FROM BEARING RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE SAFETY OF half a million people, I can do whatever the fuck I want. I call Ivy's office, and I have her schedule cleared. She's in a break right now, and she'll be informed of her new schedule in... three minutes and ten seconds, to be exact.

I wait outside of the Queen I hospital. Despite hiding in my car, I get recognized. Tinted windows are illegal in Katantia. If you want to fuck and drive, you better make a show out of it. Absurd doesn't even begin to cover what this country is.

"Congratulations, Jordan!"

"We're so proud of Alex!" As if they had anything to do with my son's success...

"What a man!"

"He's a legend!"

Their faces fade as soon as they disappear from my window. Royal etiquette requires me to greet them and thank them for their kind words. I do that, but it steals a piece of my soul that I'll never get back. I don't understand the magnitude of my son's fame on Katantia. It was already fucked up to

share my son with Americans. The media couldn't wait to tear him a new one if he only said one thing wrong. If he scratches his arm, they call him a junkie. If Alex raises his voice, they call him an entitled kid from the projects. Every move he makes is scrutinized.

Katantians don't give a shit about any of that. Half of them are immigrants in this country, escaping the West's conformities. They were a part of the bullying, the constant harassment. Yet, once you land on Katantia, you become an entirely different person.

There's a new pussy on a gossip magazine every other week, and I'm not talking about cats or Playboy. They're absolutely crazy in this country, and I hate that they love us so much. Kamila thrives in it. She was born to be the Queen of Katantia, although her family tried their hardest to keep her from the position.

The love she gets from her people energizes her. I don't feel the same way. It drains me. I didn't set out to be loved by anyone. I didn't even want my face to be recognizable. In America, nobody knows who I am. We work very hard to keep my face out of the international news.

I can't afford to fail when Katantia and my family look up to me. The pressure I'm under is crushing me, and I fear that I'm being too sensitive. Fylox has adapted. Fylox's in his own orbit, and his nucleus is Kamila and everything that comes with her.

We've got hostile neighbors, foreign research vessels, bomb threats, and domestic terrorists. Half a million people require a robust intelligence system. We've been building upon Travis' work, expanding his ideas of border control. I had a look into some of the protocols he kept, and almost ninety percent of them were documenting threats to Aram, Kamila, and various sex stores.

Religious groups aren't happy about Katantia, and they make sure we know that.

The three minutes pass, and I make my way into the Queen I hospital. Undisturbed, I waltz into the department of mental

health. I'm intimately familiar with the route to Ivy's office, but today, I'm not as tranquil as I usually am when I go to therapy.

My insides are twisting, and my head isn't in the right space for a calm discussion about what's bothering me. I can hear my heart breaking apart inside of my chest, and I have no fucking clue how to calm myself.

This isn't me. I don't know what's happening to me.

I knock on the door because I'm a polite asshole.

"Come in." Having been inside of her *safe space* and her body, I recognize two sides of her. I've never considered it, but I should've known better. I'm the same. Her voice is soft as honey when it's just the two of us in her *safe space*. In her office, she remains stern and professional. She's warm, but she's not hot like she was when she sucked my dick in public. She's curious but discreet.

Ivy's been asking me questions for years, and I've never answered them honestly.

Her merciful posture at her desk freezes when she detects me.

Now that I've *felt* her insides, Ivy's doe eyes convert me into a believer.

"Our therapy sessions are over," she tells me after an uncomfortable moment of silence. The soft voice from her *safe space* is gone. She's professional now, and I'm just another lousy patient. "Please, exit my office. I'm expecting another patient soon."

"Your schedule has been cleared," I inform her, taking my usual seat on the couch. I still hate this setting, and I wish that we could do this in her home.

Ivy's about to object, but then she clicks her mouse. Her doe eyes scan the screen in front of her, and she groans in frustration. I'm amused, and I feel lighter already. It's been a week and a couple of days since we've been alone.

“I haven’t consented to have you as my patient again,” she states. There’s no smile on her face, no kindness. I’ve hardened her shell, and I’m here for it. Good little doe.

“Well, here I am. I don’t need your consent to bother you at work. I need help, and you’re my therapist,” I tell Ivy. She’s momentarily stunned, but then she exhales. Her delicate fingers grab her white notepad and pen. She makes her way over to where I sit.

“This is inappropriate, and I will file a complaint,” she announces. “I understand your rank, but you can’t do this to me.”

“Mr. Winters,” I add.

“Fuck. Off,” she blurts out, surprising herself. She covers her mouth with the hands that so expertly wrapped around my cock on my birthday. I let her have her moment of shock. She doesn’t move to apologize to me for her rude remark, and I won’t ask for an apology either. She’s been a good little doe, and I’m in the wrong here.

The door to her office opens, and her neighbor bursts into the room. He seems out of breath, and his usually perfect hair is a mess. “Is everything okay here?”

If he wasn’t Ivy’s friend and fucking half of Katantia, I would’ve had him deported already. I don’t like his background. He’s a sketchy motherfucker, and I can’t have his drama in my country. Still, he’s a national hero.

And Katantians love their heroes.

“Yes, Ms. Lin. Is everything okay?” I ask. I would adjust my beanie, but I opted out of wearing one today. She needs to see that I’m making small steps of progress, although I have no idea what mess I’m in.

“No, it’s not,” Ivy says, and I feel pain in my chest.

“You want me to kick him out?” Smolyakov’s fishing for my wrath.

Ivy glances at me, meeting my eyes. I don’t say a word. I let her *see* me like she always has. She takes a deep breath,

opening her white notepad. “I’ll be okay. Thank you for checking in on me. I think I can manage.”

Smolyakov stares at me with threats in his eyes. For some strange reason, he’s protecting my little doe. She’s my *object*, meaning she’s under *my* jurisdiction. That piece of shit has no claim on her. I inhale, counting like Ivy taught me in the past. I don’t see an enemy in Smolyakov. He’s an additional set of eyes on my little doe, and she can use all the protection in the world.

Wordlessly, he exits the office. The door shuts with a bang. My little doe flinches, and I want nothing but to take her into my arms. I crave to keep her warm and shield her from her lunatic overprotective friends.

“What do you want?” she asks with a sigh.

“You.”

She winces. “If you’re not here for a therapy session, I’d suggest you leave. I will file a complaint. I mean it. This is my workplace, and I have boundaries that I’m not willing to cross.”

I’m hard already, but I’m not here for that. “I need help.”

“I’m aware,” she responds while taking a note on her notepad.

CHAPTER II



PAPERWORK IS MY LEAST FAVORITE PART OF THE JOB. IT consumes most of my time when there are no appointments.

I scribble down something random on my notepad to make him think I'm not listening. Fuck. Of course, he knows I'm listening. It's my job to take notes and listen simultaneously. He's only been here for less than five minutes, and I'm already torn inside.

"Can you ask your questions?" he asks with an urgency I've never heard from him. He's come to me in his usual gear, sweatpants that don't hide what's been inside of me. His hoodie lacks the usual basketball symbols. He's dressed in black from top to bottom. I want to crawl over to his side and cuddle with him. The lovesick part of me sees him as a giant teddy bear, hard surface but a gentle heart.

I can't think of him that way right now. "What type of questions do you want to be asked? You barged in here without my permission. Since you think you don't need my consent to be my patient, go ahead. Lead this session. I haven't prepared anything."

"I want to become your patient again," he announces, and I make a note of his pursuit of help. He does not deny that there's something wrong with him. That's a step in the right direction. "And I want to apologize."

"For what, exactly?" I respond with more ferocity than I intended.

"Did I make you cry?"

“This is not about me. It’s your session, and we’re talking about you,” I remind him. I won’t tell him about my tears. He doesn’t deserve them right now.

“I left abruptly, and I headed to the new training facilities. I demolished whatever stood in my way.” He confirms the story Måns told me the other day. “I don’t remember what I did. The last thing I remember is your face. I don’t know a lot about what you do, but I think I had an episode.”

“An episode? What kind of an episode?”

“Alex winning his championship had an unexpected effect on me. I don’t know what bothered me about it at that moment, but I exploded. I left so that you wouldn’t get hurt. I’d never intentionally physically hurt a woman, but I knew that I had to leave your home. I don’t remember driving or anything that happened after I stepped out of your building. I blacked out,” he explains.

I keep taking notes. His honesty is refreshing. He’s baring himself to me, and I fight to control my yearning heart. “Are you jealous of your son?”

“I’m sorry, what?”

I repeat my question that I’m sure he heard the first time.

He firmly states, “I love my son.”

“Everyone knows that you love him, but are you jealous of his achievements? Did you want to be in his place when you were young?” I ask. He doesn’t outright scowl at my question, but I see his face tightening. “He’s chasing after his dreams, and he’s succeeding.”

“I know that,” he clips back.

“So?”

Jordan’s gaze is on the table that separates us. Something is bubbling inside of him, threatening to erupt. I’ve pushed his buttons, bruising his ego. He needs to deal with this. I continue, “You work harder than anyone I know. We meet once a month because you can’t find the time to see me more often. You have hundreds of employees. You’re in charge of a

country that you don't feel any connection to. You're not a proud Katantian, yet you spend every minute of every day protecting their shores, their queen, and their livelihoods."

"It's a job. What else?" he sneers.

"It's consumed your life," I argue. "And there's no way out for you. If you step away from your responsibilities, you appear weak. What would you be doing if you weren't in Katantia, protecting your family?"

His silence doesn't fool me.

"Would you leave Katantia now?" The past week washes away. I'm back in my role of authority, and I feel comfortable here. This is my turf, and he's trespassing. "You don't have any friends. What's keeping you here?"

Jordan doesn't respond.

"Would you step down as the Head of Intelligence? Palace Security Advisor? Father? Grandfather? Uncle?"

In an instant, he gets up from the couch, ready to leave.

"Sit down. If you leave now, I won't allow you to come back." I add, "Please."

Jordan stands in the middle of my office, dominating the room with his presence. I can't take my eyes off him. He's breathing hard, and I want to comfort him, but in this space, I sit on my seat peacefully. It's irresponsible to put my needs over his. He doesn't need my infatuation right now.

He needs somebody to talk to openly, and there's no shame in that.

Jordan returns to the couch, but he's still avoiding my gaze. I take a deep breath and open my mouth, hoping that I won't alienate him even further. "Look, I've heard a lot of things in this office. Sometimes, silence roars, too. You don't want to share your struggles. I understand that. You think that I can't grasp what you've gone through in your life?"

He doesn't respond. I continue, "You're right about that. I have no idea how you've lived. We've grown up in two different countries with different experiences."

“You were adopted. I grew up in foster care,” he tells me. His knowledge of my past doesn’t scare me. It’s one of the least intimidating aspects of this man.

“You know what I mean,” I say.

“Yeah, you’re the chubby little Asian kid that went to King’s College London on a scholarship, although your adopted parents were filthy rich.” This is an image I don’t want to court at work. He’s pressing my buttons now, responding to my attack. “I never finished high school. I almost sold dope, you know. I barely missed out on the crack epidemic.”

I stop him before he ventures into further details. “You don’t have to share that with me. What you did doesn’t matter as much as what you felt like back then and how it affects you right now.”

“I don’t remember having any dreams or aspirations,” he reveals. He’s sitting back on the couch, and it almost seems disrespectful since he never loosens up his posture in this office. “I lived to survive. It was Travis and me and this little girl that was in our protection.”

“This started when you were fourteen?” I know the answer, but I’m trying to make a point.

“Felicita came to that house when she was four.”

“And you were eight? Is that correct?”

He finally nods.

“Later, you found out that she was raped by your foster father.” I can’t shake the feeling of unease. I hear these stories daily, and I can’t leave them in here. They follow me everywhere I go.

What have I done?

“I’ve failed my sister,” Jordan blurts out. “I—”

“Stop right there,” I interject. I shut my notepad. “You haven’t failed your sister. You’ve failed yourself.”

“I can’t do this right now,” he says, and I hold on to my thought. A couple of minutes pass, and we sit there, unmoving and silent. A lifetime flashes in my eyes. There are no images of a young Jordan. I’ve snooped around in the palace or in Felicita’s home when I was invited. In fact, there are barely any images of Jordan. The only one I’ve ever seen is him holding Kendrick. He’s shown it to me, carrying that image in his wallet.

“What are you trying to say?” he finally asks.

“What have you done in your life that’s solely satisfied you? Something that nobody else can have a piece of.” He contemplates. He travels far in his thoughts, and I wish I could accompany him. Then I remember that what’s in that skull of his is more than I can ever imagine bearing. I cry at him for being rude to me. I doubt I’d be able to withstand the monsters that plague him.

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know,” I repeat. “What gives you pleasure these days? When are you the happiest? What do you do to unwind?”

He responds, “I don’t *unwind*. There’s no time for that.”

“Are you happy with the results of your work? Do you feel proud of *your* achievements?”

“It’s an ever-changing process. I can’t sit back and enjoy it. Every day, there’s a new fire,” Jordan explains.

“You’ve lived like that for how long?”

“What do you mean? I’ve been on Katantia for five years now,” he says.

I seek his eyes out. “Four decades. Try to visualize that baggage. That’s almost the entire span of your lifetime. You haven’t had a break in four decades.”

His gaze is distant.

“You love your family,” I assert. There’s no doubt about it. “And they love you. You’ve given them the right to rely on you all this time. Five years ago, it was your son and your

organization. Now, you have an entire family to take care of. A country relies on your expertise to protect them. You've doubled your responsibilities instead of dialing them down."

I emphasize, "Four decades, Jordan."

"Don't call me that."

"Well, I'm done calling you by the other name," I instantly reply. "Can you see what four decades have done to you?"

"Yes."

"How does that make you feel?"

"Don't bullshit me. You know exactly how it makes me feel." He's absolutely right. I know, and I want to comfort him, but I won't.

"What are you going to do about it?" I ask.

He responds, "There's no answer to that question."

"As your psychiatrist, I'm telling you that there's an answer. You refuse to acknowledge it, though."

He scoffs at me. "And what's that brilliant answer all about?"

"You need a break, a clean break from everything and everyone that's weighing you down."

"That's not going to happen," he says. A dry laugh escapes him, and I flinch at the ugly sound.

"How will you proceed then?"

Jordan doesn't reflect for too long. "I'll dial it down."

I grab my notepad and leave the space I share with him to return to my desk on the other side of the room. He follows me, and I sense his eyes on my body.

"I won't be responsible if you fall into a depression," I say as I take a seat on my chair. I roll forward awkwardly, and I start typing on my laptop. He doesn't want medication, and I don't think he needs medication. It's a psychosomatic issue, and I must get him on board with the break. I'll take this to Kamila herself if he doesn't start seeing reason.

“Why are you so angry about this? It’s my life,” he says. “I know what’s best for me. Neither you nor any other *psychiatrist* can tell me what to do or how I’m supposed to feel. You have no idea what it’s like to be in my shoes.”

I don’t look at him. Instead, I stare at my screen. There are thousands of unopened emails on my account, and I should start going through them if I want to have a clean slate one day.

“Did you hear what I said?”

“Yes, I heard you,” I respond in a clipped tone.

“Good. Then I’ll see you again in a month,” he says. I can’t fathom not seeing him for another month, especially after last week’s events. How did I manage before?

“No, you won’t,” I state. I take a deep breath. *I’m in trouble*. “I’m not seeing you as a patient anymore. We established that last week.”

“What about today?”

“What about it?” I say. “I had a moment of weakness.”

No, don’t do it.

“You’re going to come to my home every week.” *Don’t. Do. It.* “That’s where we can talk without barriers.”

“Are you being funny?” he asks, thoroughly confused. Katantia has affected me in the most torturous way. I shake my head.

“No, I’m not. This doesn’t mean we’ll do what we did last week,” I clarify. “We’ll change the scenery, and I won’t consider you my patient anymore.”

“And who will I be to you? Mr. Winters?”

“No, that ship has sailed,” I quickly say. But I can swim, though. I can catch up to it if he only lets me. “We’ll be friends. You need a friend right now, and I can be that for you.”

Jordan Winters leaves my office, and I shudder at his absence. I must start doing my job if I want him to get better.



I COULDN'T BRING ALL MY BOOKS FROM HOME, SO I'VE resorted to an electronic device. Since my schedule was *cleared* by a smothering Jordan, I have nothing to do. My patients are down the hall, seeing my colleagues. I'd take them back for the day, but they've already endured one change in their day. I don't want to add any further stress.

A couple of years ago, Jordan confessed that he self-medicates with weed. I've been researching it ever since. I'm opposed to it as a concept, but recent studies, or lack of them, continue to trouble me. There aren't enough clinical trials for a definite answer.

The research keeps my mind off *things*.

On my way out of the hospital, I plug in my headphones. I've been walking from and to the office for a couple of days now. It's good exercise, and I get to spend time out in the open.

I'm almost out of the winding doors when a hand on my shoulders halts me.

I hear my name. "Ivy?"

"What's up?" I respond, taking off my headphones.

One of the newbies is gawking at me a little too close. He gets himself together enough to clear his throat. "Ignas has asked you to call him. He's had an accident. He didn't come to the session today."

"Thank you for letting me know," I say, and I rush out of the hospital. I dial Ignas' number, but he doesn't pick up.

IGNAS

I fractured my knee.

WHAT HAPPENED! Should I come by your place?

IGNAS

Yes, please. Bring me bitter choc strawberries.

I chuckle at my phone. He's never had an accident like that before, but I'm not surprised that it finally happened. He's very athletic, and he's been practicing tons of sex moves for his job at COCKED&screwed.

Hopping into my car, I go to a grocery store to grab ingredients for a fresh soup, and then I swing by the Fuck Me French store. My purchase of four deluxe boxes has the store owner gifting me an additional box of milk chocolate-covered strawberries.

With my gifts in the passenger seat, I drive to Ignas' home. He still lives in one of the abandoned youth facilities because he can't afford his own place just yet. I park my car outside, and I make sure it's locked. Crime is low on Katantia, but Ignas' youth facility is surrounded by sketchy abandoned homes and ruins. The South Side is still struggling to recover from the destructive tsunami five years ago.

I knock on Ignas' door, but it's open, so I let myself in without a worry in the world. My hands are full, and I can't stand around for long without dropping everything. Ignas is probably holed up in his bed watching romantic comedies.

Unfortunately for me, he's not watching romcoms. I reach his bedroom, and I find him in a compromising position. Ignas is on the bed, and his knee is in a cast. However, a man is shoving his cock down Ignas' throat. He's above Ignas, fucking his face. I can't stand to see this, so I remove myself from the scene.

Ignas' home is a one-bedroom apartment. Escaping the groans of filth from the other room isn't easy.

With my bags and boxes in hand, I pace around the room. Eventually, I hear a commotion inside the bedroom. A couple of moments later, the man who face-fucked my friend slash patient leaves the bedroom. He's zipping his pants on his way out. He doesn't pay me any attention, and I don't look at him too closely.

Katantians scare me even after all this time.

I shut the door to Ignas' apartment, and I stomp toward his bedroom.

"You came," Ignas says, faking enthusiasm. He's breathing hard, and his nose is bleeding. What the fuck happened? I put my boxes on one of the cupboards, and I inspect his face.

"What did that man do to you?" I ask. Instantly, I make him sit upright. He winces at the pain in various areas of his body. I instruct him to lean his head forward just a little bit. He doesn't want to cooperate because he's confused, but I enforce my will by promising him the chocolate he asked for.

I clean up his face with a cloth. Surprisingly, there are no remnants of come near his lips, only blood.

"Don't worry about it. I'm high right now, so I can't feel shit!" he blurts out.

"What is this?" I gesture at his bruised face. There are bruises all over his body. I'm unsure whether I want to know about what transpired.

"He's a customer at COCKED&screwed. He likes it a little rough. He pays girls to punch them in the face while he comes. One day, he came up to me and asked if I was down... I guess the girls weren't enough. I agreed because it's good money," he explains. He's in a haze from the painkillers for his knee, and I don't understand half the things he says to me.

"I can't go to work now," he blurts out. His eyes are red, and I pity him. I wish he had friends or family to help him out, but he's one of the loners. He doesn't trust easily, so he's attached himself to me. "I'm out of work for two months! Maybe... More."

“Perhaps you can focus on your studies. Finish your schoolwork early,” I tell him.

“How did you hurt yourself?” I ask him.

“I don’t know...” He swallows. His eyes are glossy, and he shrugs, shifting away from me. “It happened abruptly... I was walking home, and I slipped. It’ll be okay.”

When I bring him one of the boxes, he opens them up right away.

Ignas grins at the candy, seemingly forgetting his sorrows for only a little while. “Rich friends. You are the best!”

“Hey, I’m not rich,” I tell him, taking a seat on the edge of the bed. I smell the other man’s expensive perfume in the room, and I feel like gagging. I’m not against sex work, but Ignas shouldn’t be in this industry. From my years of therapy with him, I don’t find him compatible.

“You used to be, though. You act soooooo rich!” Ignas finishes the candy box in five minutes, stuffing himself with calories for days. He sucks on the fruit with the bitter chocolate coating like he hasn’t consumed them in years. He’s a mess by the end of it, but he’s a cute mess. His freckles point out an innocence that’s not yet fully lost.

“Why was he here, Ignas?” I finally ask.

“What do you mean?” Ignas rubs his belly. I’m positive that even if he stuffs himself with chocolate for the next three months, he’ll still keep his model figure. There’s barely any fat on this man.

It’s not a question I like to ask. “Do you need money?”

Ignas sighs. “You *were* rich. Now, you’re one of us. Don’t go offering charity to the likes of me... He came because I need the money, yes. I’ve got plenty of clients where that came from.”

“You’re vulnerable,” I remind him. He squints his eyes, not liking the bite of his past. “Right now, you’re vulnerable, and you can’t defend yourself if need be. Please, don’t

endanger yourself for... How much are you even earning with... blowjobs?"

"*That* blowjob cost him one week's rent," Ignas reveals. The underage in the abandoned youth facility don't pay rent. They're safely tucked away in the upper floors of this home, away from the legal-aged teens. Once you reach a certain age in this home, they start charging bills and move you to the lower floors. Kamila has negotiated low rents, but the children that grow up here have few prospects. She's granting them free education, but it's a slow process out of this despair.

"You were hurt, though," I tell him.

"Don't pout at me, Ms. Lin," he says with a ton of charm. "I like it that way."

"You can't tell me that you liked being punched in the face. That's a stretch, even for your standards."

"I do what I have to do," Ignas insists. "Make sure you remember that, Ms. Lin. You had it all once, but now that you're one of us mere mortals, anything can happen."

What have I done?

CHAPTER 12

JORDAN



KATANTIA DOESN'T SEEM LIKE HELL FROM UP HERE.

My ex-wife and I are having a drink at EVOLve. It's a vegan bar serving produce that's been brewed locally. I can't touch my drink because it tastes like utter shit mixed with coffee, but my ex-wife loves her fresh fruit cocktail.

"I'm sorry for intruding," Aretta says. Her eyes wander around the bar, curiously taking in the guests. The vegan scene is less on the nose about their sexual affinities, so I decided to bring Aretta here on her last night. She's flying home tomorrow. "I wanted to see Kendrick and Kamila. It's been so long."

"I understand." She's got her natural hair in an afro today. It's a look she often wore during her pregnancy with Alex. I sit close to my ex-wife, but it's not because I seek intimacy. Katantia is a fucked up place at times, and even national heroes, like my ex-wife and I, can get targeted.

Tonight, is the first time that I've managed to make time for her. I could tell that she took offense throughout the week. I kept postponing, blaming work.

"How are you doing with the divorce? Do you need any help?" I ask her.

Aretta shakes her head. Her fingers trace lines on the table. "I've hired the best legal team for me."

"Are you going to decimate Howard?" I ask with amusement in my voice. I never liked the man that replaced me. What else is new?

She chuckles. “I don’t have to.”

If Fylox’s dad is involved in her divorce, it’s over for Mr. Howard. She’s got her own money from her singing days. She can afford to drag Mr. Howard through the mud if he overestimates himself. Plus, she’s taken to being a baller’s mom. She’s at every game, showing up for Alex when the rest of us can’t. The kids make memes out of her because she shows up to the games like she owns the league.

All the gossip sites are reporting Aretta’s divorce. She’s on social media a lot, singing and showing eager fans what her life looks like. On most days, she’s cooking vegan food or teaching warm-up techniques for singers. I’m not on the internet unless it’s for work, but I occasionally see people share their opinion on how my ex-wife ages like *fine wine*. Brands eat it up, and they’re sending her items to promote. She’s a smart businesswoman, and I wouldn’t put it past her if she started making her own millions on the side.

“He’s already begging me to take him back, but I’m not going to. I have other options. It was meant to fail from the get-go, and I don’t know why I stayed with him for almost thirty years. He talked too much. I couldn’t stand his bitching about Alex and Kamila. He can’t get over it. It’s been five years! They’re in love, and Fylox is a good man. Kendrick has three people that would do anything for him... I don’t want his energy around me anymore.” She exhales. “What about you? What’s your fling of the week got to say about our family?”

“I don’t have a fling,” I tell my ex-wife.

She smiles at me, seeing right through my bullshit. “Jordan, please. There’s not one woman that hasn’t stared at you in longing ever since I stepped foot on Katantia.”

“I’m serious. It’s not a fling,” I insist, sitting back on the uncomfortable chair.

My ex-wife’s eyes sparkle. “Do tell. Your sister doesn’t know, does she? Felicita’s been trying to make me *date* you for this past week.”

I shake my head in disbelief. I must talk to Felicita about this. “You know that I’ve experienced some issues getting over what we had.”

Aretta nods. It doesn’t make me nervous to talk to her about this. In fact, I’m almost as calm as I am in my little doe’s home. Aretta’s mischievous smirk is a piece of the past I never want to let go of. “I’m irresistible. It’s not my fault.”

“You’ve given me the greatest gift of all,” I tell her. I can feel my pulse rising. “You made our kid. It wasn’t me.”

“I’d gladly take all the glory, but he’s got you inside of him. Your good side. Don’t ever forget that,” she claims, and I’m tempted to believe her. I can’t, though. There’s something inside of me that blocks the thought. “Stop with the flattery. Give me all the details!”

“I’ve been seeing a therapist for five years,” I tell her. She’s not surprised by this. We don’t hide it from anyone.

“And? Has she made you see Jesus?” Aretta asks, giggling into her glass. She downs the rest of her drink elegantly. The waiter comes by and promises to bring her a new one.

“Almost,” I comment.

“Jordan. Have you found my replacement? Tell me!”

“It’s like nothing else exists when she’s in the room.” I watch as my ex-wife turns stunned at my words. This is a woman I haven’t been able to let go of for years. I’ve always been in the corner, waiting for an opportunity to whine about our failed marriage.

My little doe invites me to her home once, and I’m already catching feelings.

I continue, “She wants to fix me.”

Aretta’s amused. “Good luck to her. I didn’t even try because I know what a—”

“She’s my therapist.”

She gasps. “I’ve seen her. Kamila has introduced me to her on a video call! Ivy Lin’s her name, right? She was pretty. I

remember that. It was years ago! Quiet little thing. She wants to fix *you*?”

“Adamantly so.”

“You want her to fix you?”

Silence.

The waiter brings my ex-wife her new drink, and she makes him melt with her beautiful smile. She turns to me, fanning herself. “You do. You want her to fix you! Honestly, I never thought you’d move on. I’m so happy for you. Alex will be delighted....”

I let it sink in for a moment. Aretta can’t stop grinning, and it’s like a switch has flipped inside of me. I’m not over what we had as a family. I’ll always miss it, but it’s not the only thing I crave now.

Ivy wants to be my *friend*. I’ll show her that I can be more than that.

“Nobody knows,” I inform Aretta. She nods enthusiastically. “You’re the first one to find out. The thing with Ivy isn’t set in stone yet. We’re still in the early phases, but I’m working on it. I messed up, but I’ll win her back.”

“We always say that I’m the catch in this scenario.” Aretta gestures between the two of us. I grin. I’ve always loved her confidence. “You’ve got to take a look at yourself, Daddy. You’re a killer, a fine motherfucker.”

“If I didn’t know you any better, I’d say you were flirting with me,” I reply, not the least bit uncomfortable. It’s taken her some time to be comfortable with the *killer* part. We’ve had our moments, but Aretta and I have fought hard to be friends for Alex’s sake.

“I’m not,” Aretta says. “You’re not mine. You weren’t meant to be, and that’s fine. Spread your wings. We know you got big wings. Give it a chance. You’ve never mentioned a woman in my presence before. You’ve been alone for so long. I hope she’s the one for you.”

I hope so, too.



I DRIVE FELICITA AND I BACK TO THE PALACE AFTER WE'VE dropped off Aretta at the airport. She embarked on her long flight home twenty minutes ago.

We're still in line, waiting to pass security at the palace's gates.

"What did you two discuss last night?" Felicita casually asks. She's fiddling with her dress, stretching it over her knee. "You came home very late. Did you do anything fun?"

"I didn't fuck my ex-wife," I inform my sister, and she's flabbergasted at my honesty. "We had a couple of drinks at that hideous vegan place. Aretta loved it, so it was worth the visit. We talked about the old days and how everything's changed, no funny business."

"But you seem relaxed," Felicita insists. "More so than usual."

I know why, but if I tell my sister, it becomes real. Until I earn my little doe back, I must keep it quiet. Ivy might get wet while we play owner and object, but I doubt that she wants me to claim her in front of others before we've settled our issues privately.

"I feel good," I admit to my sister. "Things are going great, aren't they?"

"I guess," she says. There's a but in that statement, but I never manage to question her. We're searched by security. My men take additional time to do their job when I'm present.

Måns is around, talking to the guard by the fence. I haven't spoken to my favorite employee in a while. He's been giving me the cold shoulder for days, and I don't know how to approach him to make amends.

We pass security, and I drop my sister off at the house. The babies are all accounted for. At the palace, Penelope Jade is with her private teacher and Kendrick's with his parents.

Mandy and Weston have taken Amalia to Euphoria, a café-bar on the hill overlooking Katantia.

I go to work, taking it slow for the week. It's a promise that I've made to myself. I still work the same hours. I simply do less, taking more breaks in between. I've given coffee a try to see why my little doe likes it so much, but coffee isn't for me at all. I despise the taste.

The bills for the gym's damages have finally arrived, and I sort it out with my private finances. I have enough to repair what I've done. My men don't look at me the same ever since they found me unconscious in that gym. It messes with my brain, so I avoid overthinking it.

I spend my entire day at the desk, avoiding contact with other people.

My eyes tell me that my little doe's at work, doing her thing as per usual. I try not to obsess over her whereabouts too much. She's in my country, and I keep us safe. There's no need for additional measures.

The day comes to an end, and I head for my car. I've got plans that have had me buzzing all day.

"Dad!" Alex calls from afar. He's holding Kendrick, who's cuddling his stuffed animal. Ever since his dad brought him this little hedgehog, he hasn't parted with it. Kamila walks beside her husband, and Fylox's right behind them, keeping an eye on everything.

"Where are you headed?" I ask them.

"We just came back from the beach," Kamila tells me. She can't take her eyes off her son in her husband's arms, and I don't blame her. My grandson's the spitting image of his father, an overload of cuteness for the entire family. "We're about to have dinner. Do you want to join us?"

I shake my head. "I have plans."

"Plans?" Fylox asks.

"You got an issue with that?" I ask, a little too defensively.

Fylox shrugs in response.

“I feel like I haven’t seen you at all,” Alex claims. He hasn’t changed. He’s still my son. All the rings in the world won’t change that. He’s incredibly grounded, and I don’t know where he got it from. His mom and I have immense egos. “We should talk at some point. Kamila told me what happened.”

“It’s nothing for you to worry about,” I say. “Everything’s okay. When are you seeing Danai for the next ultrasound?”

Fylox raises his eyebrows at me, judging me for my distraction tactics. Alex and Kamila lead the conversation as always. They don’t need us to confirm or deny anything. The next baby check’s in a couple of weeks. Alex is staying for the entire summer. Fylox doesn’t plan on leaving at all because Kamila’s about to enter her third trimester.

Worry flickers in Kamila’s eyes, but she doesn’t comment on it. I’d say she’s got female instinct, but I’m not sure if that’s problematic in this day and age.

“Let’s talk tomorrow,” Alex suggests as they are about to depart for the palace. My car’s unlocked and ready to go. My young king gazes at me with big eyes. “We could do a workout together for an hour, perhaps? I’m sure you can find the time.”

“I don’t think—”

Fylox interrupts me, “We’ll be there.”

I roll my eyes at Fylox, but he doesn’t talk back to me about it. Instead, he turns and leaves us in the parking lot. The baby makes funny noises, watching Fylox leave.

“Take care of yourself.” My daughter-in-law pulls me in for a hug. She whispers, “Wrap it up, will you? We have enough babies as it is. Unless you want a baby. Then, go ahead. We’ll open up a palace kindergarten!”

Alex draws his eyebrows together in curiosity, watching his wife chuckle as they return to the palace.

They say that the big sister is watching on Katantia. That might be true.

I hop into my Escalade, one out of ten big cars in the Katantian streets. Cars that eat a lot are frowned upon in this country. The palace is the sole owner of such cars. We can't have Kamila driving around in a tiny college kid vehicle.

Before driving to Ivy's for my *friendly* appointment, I go into one of the gift shops downtown. It's outside of my route, but it's worth it. My ex-wife always insisted on bringing gifts to friends, in this case, the Castros, since we didn't have a lot of friends back then. Perks of having an anti-social husband that doesn't want to be seen. Alex and Fylox grew up together in a sense because of our relationship with the Castros. They're like brothers, unrelated, but their bonds are strong.

It's the first time I'm at this shop, and the employees widen their eyes at the sight of me. They think they've done something wrong to have me on their turf. They help me out with my gift, and I give them a little undocumented extra cash.

I speed over to Ivy's home, and I park my car near hers. My SUV would swallow her death trap of a car. Do friends buy each other cars? I shrug.

This time around, I sign in at the reception properly. I'm permitted entrance into their high-tech elevator. I reach Ivy's floor, and it looks the same as always. Flowers. Shoes. Nothing. With my gift basket in hand, I ring the bell. Smolyakov's out and about. I've checked with my eyes. My little doe and I won't be disturbed tonight.

A couple of moments later, Ivy opens the door. Her hair's up in a messy bun, and her face is dirty with fingerprints in various colors. Her clothes are wrinkled and painted on. She welcomes me inside, warily eyeing my gift basket.

"What's that?" she asks, pointing at what I hold in my arms.

As I kick off my Off-Whites, I say, "That's for you. It's coffee stuff."

"Coffee stuff?" She fights her smirk, but I see a hint of it. "Let me clean up. You're early. I'll be out in five. Make

yourself at home. And... Thank you for not barging in without permission.”

“Friends don’t do that,” I say, but I don’t really believe it. My type of *friends* do a lot of bad things. Stalkers have nothing on us.

There’s a light bounce in her step, and I like that she’s in a good mood. I place my gift basket on the coffee table, and I explore the room. On top of a rug, there’s a watercolor box on the floor with ten different brushes on the side. Ivy’s abstract painting’s in the middle. Dots of red are on one side, but there’s a flood of blue waiting to swarm the innocent dots. It seems easy to me since I have no clue about art. My ex-wife had paintings like these in her home over the years. She paid a lot of money for them. Is my little doe an artist in the making?

“Oh! I’m sorry. I didn’t have the time to put that away,” Ivy says, brushing by me. She kneels on the floor, swiftly picking up the brushes.

“I like looking at it. You don’t have to put it away because of me,” I tell her, and she stares up at me. I could get used to her kneeling in front of me, and my dick certainly agrees. However, I put my game face on.

We can be civil adults for the night. I brought her a gift basket to sweeten the deal.

“Alright then.” She leaves her brushes on the floor. She’s messed up her fingers again, and she curses under her breath. She disappears into her kitchen, and then she hurries back to me.

I take a seat on her couch, and she joins me. I point at the gift basket. “That’s for you. I apologize for being a needy patient.”

Her face relaxes, and I want nothing but to kiss her. She’s in a red shirt and grey sweats, looking plush. There’s a hint of watercolors on her pretty face. I can see that she tried her hardest to rub it off on certain spots where her skin’s red.

Ivy leans forward, grabbing the basket for herself. She undoes the elegant gift wrapping in its shiny glory. She

glimpses inside, and she smiles. I told them to put everything coffee in there, a cup, coffee dessert, rare coffee beans from South America...

“Thank you,” she says to me.

“The ladies at the store said the dessert needs to be refrigerated if you don’t eat it now,” I tell her. Ivy picks it out, a see-through box with the gift shop’s brand stamped on it.

“I love Tiramisu!” she blurts out. The ladies at the store need a raise. “Did you know that?”

In all honesty, I shake my head. I know many things about her, but her love for Italian dessert is new to me. “I didn’t. I know you like coffee. That’s all.”

She squeals like an excited schoolgirl, and I sit back on her couch, watching her. I’m content with today even if I go home by the end of the night.

Ivy produces two spoons from her kitchen, and she opens up the box of Tiramisu. She hands it to me. “Here, have some.”

“I got it for you,” I say gently. “You like it so much.”

“Please, have some. It’s my favorite dessert. I’m sure you’ll love it.” I shake my head. “Come on. Do you want me to feed you?”

She chuckles, staring at the Tiramisu.

I remain silent until she realizes what she’s suggested doesn’t seem like a bad idea at all.

CHAPTER 13



I GRAB A SPOONFUL OF THE CREAMY TIRAMISU.

There's intrigue in his face and a hint of amusement. I scoot closer to him, and I let him have a taste. "Have you ever had Tiramisu before?"

He nods while chewing. I study him as he eats, and I can't find anything more fascinating in the room. Days have passed since we last saw each other in my office, and I've been doing great. I read a lot, and I painted Smolyakov in the strangest poses.

"It's good," he says, and I can't wait to have my own bite. "What are you waiting for?"

"You're my guest. You go first." I'm blushing.

"I got it for you, so you better eat it."

I nod, not needing any further confirmation. I go to town on the Tiramisu. Its rich taste dominates my mouth. I've had enough coffee for the day, but more coffee doesn't hurt. Besides, it's not like Tiramisu is solely coffee-based. There are other factors, too. Biscuits. Mascarpone... And I'm rambling because I can't focus while he watches me eat.

The Tiramisu is gone in the next minute. I set the empty box on the coffee table, taking a comfortable seat on the couch. "How have you been? Did you suffer any episodes this week?"

Jordan shakes his head. He's in his sweatpants again, and I must look away. "I managed to work less."

“You did? I’m so proud of you!” I exclaim. I didn’t think he’d succeed in slimming his workload this soon.

“Not so fast.” I worry about what he’ll say next. “I didn’t feel comfortable leaving the office earlier, so I’ve been sleeping the same, irregularly and less than I should. My men have stopped coming to me to solve their problems. I have one less source of stress.”

“Small steps are important, too,” I state, secretly grateful that his episode had at least one benefit. His men have distanced themselves from him. Måns has been asking questions in my circle of friends, and Malena’s been trying to interrogate me. Luckily, I’ve been too busy with work to talk to them about Jordan.

He stares at my lips. It doesn’t bother me because I can’t keep my eyes off his body. He says, “You’ve got a little cream on your upper lip.”

“Huh?”

Jordan’s finger traces my lip, picking up the residue cream. In a moment of weakness, I wrap my lips around his finger, and I lick the cream off. He groans, and he tells me, “Are you coming back to me already, pet? I thought I’d have to work harder for it.”

I shift in my seat, moving away from him. “I’m sorry. That was unprofessional.”

“Good thing that you’re my *friend* and not my therapist anymore,” he says. I swallow thin air. I’ve been drawing all evening to calm myself but sitting here next to him, I’m dumbfounded by his presence. “Do you accept my apology?”

“You brought me *coffee stuff*,” I remind him. I’ve put on my comfy clothes that are soft and loose, but there’s a tension inside of me. “I think you’re on the right path.”

I take a deep breath, and I take over the conversation before I start rubbing myself all over his body just because he sits there like he’s my *owner*.

“Look, I think we should make a schedule,” I tell him.

His eyes wander over my body briefly. Jordan responds, “Wouldn’t a schedule defeat the purpose of me relaxing more?”

“We’ll make a schedule that’s appropriate for your needs,” I explain. I reach for my white notepad on the coffee table. With my pen, I write on a blank page. *Jordan’s schedule*.

“What do you know about my needs?” he asks, and his voice is too low, too close. I can feel vibrations inside of me, an aftershock of his statement.

“I know a lot about them since I’ve been your therapist for five years,” I claim, drawing a thick line under *Jordan’s schedule* on my notepad. “Plus, we’ve been intimate. I’ve sucked your dick in public. We’ve had our moments, so, yes, I’m intricately familiar with your needs.”

“Tell me. What do I need then?” He sits still, and he watches me, ready to attack at any moment. I’m like a deer in headlights, *his needy little doe*. I can’t find the strength to pick up my pen and write something of substance on the notepad. He’s paralyzing me with a glance.

“When do you wake up?” I quickly ask before the silence overwhelms me.

“Five. Sometimes four,” he responds casually.

“You live next door to your workplace. Why do you need to wake up so early?”

He answers, “I can’t sleep for longer.”

“6 AM. Jordan wakes up,” I say while writing it on my notepad. My muddled letters embarrass me. “How long do you need for breakfast?”

“I don’t eat breakfast unless it’s a family event,” Jordan reveals.

“7 AM. Jordan eats breakfast.” I scribble it down, and he scowls at me. “If you can’t cook something for yourself, ask the staff. Kamila’s told me that there are tons of cooks in the palace. It’s their job to feed you if you let them. When do you start work?”

“Jordan typically starts work at 6:30 AM,” he says, mocking me with a grin on his face. I pout, but I don’t let it deter me.

“8 AM. Jordan starts work,” I say, enunciating each word proudly. “When do you take your first break?”

“I don’t do breaks unless the family wants something from me. I prefer to get things done and rest later,” he says. I’m scribbling notes, but I know it’ll take more than my notes to get him to stick to the schedule. If I’m honest, not having a schedule would be best, but I must compromise.

“From now on, you rest for ten minutes every two hours. At 1 PM, you take an hour off, and you leave the palace.”

“I can’t leave the palace for an hour,” he argues. If he’s furious, he doesn’t show it. He remains calm.

I insist, “You can, and you will.”

“What do I get out of it? I lose an hour and a half of work,” Jordan claims.

“You can visit me, and we can have a break together *as friends*,” I offer. He shifts in his seat. His thighs part even further, and I want to take my eyes away from his dick print, but I can’t. He’s inviting me to sit on his lap, and my insides urge me to take the leap.

I don’t, though. “We can eat lunch, and then you’ll go about your day. When do you get off work?”

“It depends on the day.”

“Tell me about your longest and shortest day in the past month.” Gradually, my fingers stop trembling. I grip the pen tight, confident in my role here.

“I left work to come here at six. That must be the earliest I’ve been out of the palace in weeks,” he confesses. It fascinates me that he doesn’t see the issue with this. “My longest day was nineteen hours. I went home at 1 AM. That happens quite often when there’s an emergency.”

Reflecting on his long days, I shiver at what his body endures. Half of his work is physical, and the rest is desk

work. No wonder his body is acting out.

“What is it?” he asks when I don’t say anything.

“I don’t like your job,” I admit.

“Don’t pout like that. You’re going to make me reward your needy pussy. I do what I must do, and you don’t have to pity me. I’ve programmed myself to endure it,” he argues. I clench my thighs in anticipation of his promise. Yet, I’m conflicted on the rest of his statement.

“You keep telling me that you can’t sleep,” I remind him. “You smoke because you can’t sleep. When you smoke, you’ve mentioned that you sleep lighter.”

“Are you going to give me some more hints at how to live my life?”

I shake my head. “I’m giving you my honest opinion. In my professional opinion, you’re vulnerable, and you shouldn’t be smoking. If you ask—”

“What does my needy little doe say?”

I inhale deeply, letting his words sink in. “I say you should do as you please since it helps you sleep.”

“Good little doe.”

Gripping my pen, I start at a new line on the notepad. “You should give yourself two hours a day after work where you don’t do anything for anyone. Pick something that you like doing and go through with it.”

“I like doing you. Does that count?” he asks cheekily.

I ignore his question. “Do you masturbate?”

“Sometimes.”

“How often?”

“Spend a day with me, and you’ll find out.”

“Try it twice a day daily. It should straighten up your broody face,” I say while making a note. *Masturbate twice a day.*

“I know what can fix my face, little doe. It’s not my hand.”

My heart pounds heavily in my chest, robbing me of my concentration. I'm breaking out in sweats, and I haven't even moved. Briefly, I contemplate what I'm about to do, but there's no saving me. I've been lost in limbo for five years.

The first time I saw Mr. Winters, he didn't want to be in my office. He came in, took a seat, stated his name, and then he left. I had already endured hours of work practice, and fragile personalities weren't a new concept to me.

For the first five times we met, he kept a routine. He answered my first question, and then he left my office.

Five months passed, and one-sentence responses were all I received from him.

Meanwhile, Kamila painted a clear picture of who Jordan was to the entire family. She was the Queen of Katantia, but he was the family's leader. Fylox needed more time to open up, but he shared similar notions with me once he did. His stories were more intense than Kamila's. He had lived under Jordan's leadership ever since he was rescued at eighteen years old.

Fylox confessed to suffering anxiety attacks that threatened the lives of his closest family and friends. Jordan took it upon himself to train Fylox so that he could channel his energy elsewhere.

Jordan's been taking in broken birds all his life. He's dedicated his life to making up for something. I don't understand what he's trying to prove. I can't comprehend the guilt he carries around. Is it guilt?

"You have killed," I state. I don't shake, and I don't hesitate.

"I have." *I'm not afraid of him.*

"Have you killed innocents?"

"I've attempted to spare them."

"Do you feel any remorse?"

"I do. Most of all, I feel paranoid, like I'm next." His voice gives me chills. I put away my pen because I know that I'm

not supposed to record this. If this were any other country, I would have to report his confession.

I wouldn't want to report him, though. It feels wrong.

Jordan continues, "But I know that I can't be next. I can't be killed, you see. You can't put me in handcuffs. You can't confine me to a cell."

"That's good," I blurt out.

"Is it, my little doe?"

I nod eagerly. "Nobody rules over you."

"And nobody ever will. Do you want to know why?"

I must have my doe eyes on because his face softens. "You think you're invincible."

"I don't think so, little doe. I am. If you come for me, I'll end you. It can be quick, or I can take my time. Patience is my virtue." He takes one of my hands, grabbing it tightly. My heart explodes. "You see, imagine four decades. Can you visualize the baggage? That's almost my entire life." *He actually listens.* "I created a monster in those four decades, and that's my advantage. I've been on the run for as long as I can remember, and I don't recall what it's like to be the victim anymore."

"When will you stop running?" I ask, a little too breathless for my liking. "When will you finally rest?"

"Now that's an unfathomable question."

"I've been meaning to tell you that I've found a new psychiatrist for you," I inform him. I've been selfish, wanting him to myself. I can study all I want, but there are things that I don't understand about his life, and I never will. I grew up adopted, removed from my culture, an outsider. I went to good schools, graduated early, and with honors. I wore designer clothes, and I took trips with my girlfriends to places like Zante or Rome. Outside of the obvious difference in looks between my British friends and me, I had a life of joy.

Until I didn't...

“Who would that be?” he asks.

“Mr. Bradley. He and his wife are new additions to the team. They’re Howard University graduates, fresh out of school. They like the concept of Katantia, so they applied for jobs here,” I inform him. I fidget with my fingers, and he grabs hold of my other hand as well.

“What is it?”

“I should’ve done this earlier. I have a voice on the board... This is my fault,” I blurt out. He doesn’t move to comfort me, and I’m glad that he doesn’t. It’s not about me. I’m fine. He’s the one who came to me for help, and I gave him none.

“I’ll have to look into *Mr. Bradley*,” Jordan says. His intense gaze makes me shudder. “Have they moved in yet?”

“Yes, they live upstairs,” I reveal.

“So, they’ll hear when I fuck you tonight?”

“I don’t think anyone can actually *hear*—”

He interrupts me, “They can.”

“But we’re friends now, aren’t we?” I ask. My body wants this, but I’m conflicted. He’s calm now, and I don’t want to disrupt his inner peace. If I start being needy again, he might get overwhelmed.

“Look, I’m too old to play games.” He shifts in his seat, leaning forward. I don’t move from my spot. His closeness tantalizes me. It’s physical, but I feel his energy in my soul. I don’t want it to ever fade. “What are we doing here? Do you want to be friends, or do you want to fuck?”

I blush, craving him. “We can do both. I like multi-tasking.”

He’s got an appetite for me. His gaze runs over me, leaving me in a frenzy. “Do you want to be my object for real?”

“Can you ask me to be your girlfriend first?” I plead, delirious.

“There’s my needy little doe. Do you want to be my girlfriend?” His fingers rub over the top of my hand. It’s not erotic per se, but when he does it, it’s titillating.

I ask, “What does that entail exactly?”

“You get to suck my cock as often you want,” he says, and his corrupt smirk drenches me.

“Oh, really? Something tells me that I already have that privilege if I want it,” I reply with wandering eyes. His sweatpants leave nothing to my imagination, and I want to reach out and rub him. I hold back.

“If you become my girlfriend, I’ll send you a message for every break I take. I’ll pick you up from work during the lunch break, and we’ll have lunch for exactly fifty minutes. We need ten for the ride. After work, I’ll spend a little time with my family. The little ones grow quickly these days, and I don’t want to miss a thing. At nine, I’ll come here, and I’ll stay for the night. Does that sound like a plan?” Jordan says.

I nod shyly. It’s scary when he makes promises. Jordan isn’t one to break them. Days ago, he was telling me to dream of something I’ll never have. It seems like my dream has come true.

“Climb on my lap, needy little doe. You’ve stared at my cock long enough tonight. It’s time to ride it.” I hang on to his every word, licking my lips. I take my rightful place on his lap, and I rub myself against him over the fabric of our clothes. “Do you want me to play with your needy pussy before I let you fuck me?”

Swallowing down my pride, I nod again. He lifts a finger between my lips, and I suck on his finger like a woman possessed. Once his finger is wet enough, he removes it, and I have five seconds to remove my comfy pants.

I leave my panties on.

Sitting back on him, I dip my hand below the waistband of his sweatpants. He’s not wearing anything underneath. I’m aching to take him inside already, throbbing between my thighs.

“Slide your panties aside and fuck your lips with my tip. Get me ready to fuck your tight little hole.” His fierce tone gets to me, setting me ablaze. It’s intense, and I want nothing but to fuck him already. Yet, I guide his tip through my wet folds, agonizing over how thick he feels in my hand. He’s heavy and swollen, nearly uncontainable with one hand.

I ride his length with my wet folds, writhing on top of him.

My eyes find him, and Jordan draws me closer. Before I can stop it, his mouth covers mine. I bite his lip, and he groans for me. We taste like mascarpone and biscuit, and I can’t get enough. Wrestling with my insatiable hunger to finally fuck him, I’m tired of being a good needy doe.

I want to be bad.

It’s pure bliss when I push Jordan inside of me. He stretches me deliciously, and the tears escape me once again. He picks them up with his fingers, drinking them away. He holds a piece of me that way, more so than when he fucks me.

“Give me your tears. They quench my thirst, little doe. They’re all I need to get by.” His cock doesn’t produce harsh pain inside of my walls. I’m soaked for him. I suffer an initial shock when he’s inside like it’s the first time all over again.

I produce more tears for him, and he drinks them for me.

Jordan’s solid, and I’m soft, teased in all the right places. His hand reaches beneath my shirt, and he kneads my breasts, playing with my nipples. I hold on to him while I ride him, but I rub my clit, chasing delight.

I’m taken aback by my abrupt orgasm, and Jordan takes over, gripping my hips tightly. He leaves me in a state of elation on top of him while he thrusts inside of me, unwavering. I love his face when he’s about to come. It’s carnal. It’s an image I can’t shake because you never see this man let go.

He’s always tense, always busy. It’s the highest reward to be present when he’s in a different space. I wish I could keep him here. He could come inside of me as often as he liked. He

fills me up, driving inside of me until there's nothing left for him to reach.

“I lied. I prefer your tight pussy over your tears,” he says. We're out of breath, panting on top of each other. He embraces me, and I settle into his arms. “Good little doe.”

“Mr. Winters, can you take me out tonight? These four walls can't contain my cravings. I'm going to explode,” I confess.

“When you say it like that, I could take you to the moon, my needy little doe. All you have to do is ask.”

We sit there for an hour, being too lazy to get the night going.

Good thing Katantia never sleeps.

CHAPTER 14

JORDAN



AROUND MY COLLEAGUES AND EMPLOYEES, I FORGET TO listen to my body.

I'm not aware of fatigue when I work. I've programmed myself to ignore such trivialities. I know how far I can stretch myself and where my limits are.

Standing in a sex candy shop at midnight, I'm rearranging my priorities. My limbs are heavy, and my thoughts are spinning. Ivy's a thrill that tests my endurance. She's talking to one of the girls at the counter, discussing holes and infections.

Ivy's being a doctor right now. She's not my needy little doe, but I still watch her with predatory need.

"Are you sure this works?"

"Yes, of course. It's a Katantian patent. You won't have an infection, and you can eat the candy, too. Or make him eat it." The girl points at me with a blush on her face. Ivy's eyes land on me, and I see a fit of plundering jealousy in her eyes.

"Ms. Storm, is it?" Ivy addresses the girl. My little doe's still glancing at me. The employee girl nods. "Don't look at *him*. Don't tell me what to do with *him*. Pretend he doesn't exist. He's not yours to look at."

I want to take her home when she says shit like that. She's a fiery little doe, and I'm buzzing with contentment at her boldness.

"I'm sorry! I apologize. I wasn't insinuating anything. Here, look." The girl fiddles with the sleeves of her shirt to

show off her tattoo. “Look! I’m owned. I have an owner. Please, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything by it! It’s the store’s policy to sell the product like this.”

Stepping out of the shadows, I approach my needy little doe. She’s a beast that needs taming right now. I’m an official palace representative, and I can’t have my subjects trembling at the sight of me. I say, “My girlfriend’s new to this. We’ll take it all. Wrap it up nicely, will you? We appreciate your effort.”

The girl disappears from our sight, presumably preparing our order.

“You can’t go scaring people like that,” I tell her, wrapping an arm around her torso. We’re in public, and for some peculiar reason, I don’t give a fuck who sees us.

She pouts into my arms, and I fight the urge to drag her home. We’re better than that. We can go an hour without fucking. I’m old now, as they say.

“I don’t like it when people look at you that way,” she whispers.

“Little doe, welcome to my life. I’ve been getting strange looks all along,” I tell her.

“Not like that. I know *those* looks.” I bet she does. She grew up with *posh* kids. “I mean the look of sex. She wanted you. She can’t have you! I finally have you to myself. I’m not sharing.”

I nod. My needy little doe lives up to her name. She’ll have to get used to the looks, all of them. I don’t go by unnoticed. Whether it’s lust or fear, people notice me, unfortunately. I haven’t been able to fly under the radar for five years now.

The sex candy shop employee reappears at the counter. She’s carrying five paper bags. She hands them to us, and just as I’m about to reach for my wallet, the girl stops me. She says, “Please, it’s on the house. I didn’t mean to offend you. I’m truly sorry.”

My little doe softens. She holds the sex candy in one hand, and in the other, she grips my hand. “I apologize for overreacting. I was mean and rude. You’re only doing your job.”

There’s a discussion on whether we should pay or not. My little doe doesn’t manage to convince the girl who’s adamant about paying our purchase from her bank account. I end their little chat by handing the girl double the cash that we owe her.

She thanks me, and we leave the store.

“I don’t know what got into me,” Ivy says, clicking in her seatbelt next to me in the Cadillac Escalade. Our new sex candy’s in the backseat, filling the car with cotton candy and marshmallow aroma. “I apologize for embarrassing you. I’m not like that. I swear.”

“I know,” I tell her. I pull out of the parking lot, and I take a right to drive further downtown, where the night never ends. “You’re shy and proper, but I bring out the little beast in you. It’s quite amusing, actually. I feel honored.”

“That’s not funny!” she exclaims, crossing her arms in front of her chest. I put her in my hoodie before we left her apartment. I would’ve liked her to wear only that for our nightly Katantia adventure, but she’s insisted on adding a pair of leggings. “I treat people who have been traumatized. I can’t go out and traumatize people!”

“I say you’re a smart businesswoman,” I joke.

She pouts, and I wish I could touch her, but I focus on the road. I can’t turn off being alert all the time. While she sits next to me, content at our spontaneous Katantian date, I must think of the possible dangers.

“Where do you want to go?” I ask her.

“I thought you were deciding tonight,” she says. Her fingers trace lines on the hoodie absent-mindedly.

“I say we go home, so you better come up with a better idea.”

“Have you ever been to Crack & Nut?” Whoever came up with that name should be jailed. I shake my head. “We could go there. We could play a little bit.”

“Play or fuck?”

“I’m not sure I can stretch enough to... You know. You’re quite big. It hurts when you—”

“When I *what?*” She shifts in her seat, pressing her thighs together. A drop in my tone, and she’s already hot for it. I had no idea I could be into this sort of thing. Is this my delayed midlife crisis? I don’t think so. I had that when I was forty, and I burned down the mayor’s house for being a piece of shit to the communities he was supposed to protect. They’re still looking for me.

“It aches when you fuck me. I feel it for days.”

“You like the pain?”

“Only because it reminds me that you did it to me.”

“I can’t make myself smaller, you know,” I tell her.

“I know that.” She pouts. “You’re the second man I’ve ever had sex with. It might be me, too. My pussy—”

“Your pussy is tight as fuck and mine. I’ll be gentler because I don’t want to break you. I’ve only just found you.” I’m already being gentle with her. She’s my delicate little doe, and I want to protect her. My family gets my protection. That’s standard practice. Ivy’s wired herself into that program. I can’t fathom having her hurt.

I don’t want to hurt her when she’s willing to give me all her tears.

“We can try the anal. It’ll definitely hurt, but I trust you. We should go with the flow, right?” she asks, gazing at me. I stare at the road. Hard, horny, and on the way to Crack & Nut, I want somebody to pinch me because I think I’m losing it.

How the hell did I end up here?

“If you’re too tired, we could go home. I don’t mind,” Ivy says.

I let out a low chuckle.



CRACK & NUT IS A PECULIAR PLACE THAT I'VE NEVER STEPPED in.

It's less neon than the Hole Stores of Katantia. For an exclusively anal sex club that you must pay an inflated amount of money to enter, it takes itself too seriously.

The employees at the reception are dressed like secretaries with pencil skirts and suits. They document our names, our kinks. *When's the last time you were tested?* Once again, I'm a national hero, and I could get in for free, but I still pay the fee for Ivy and me.

I feel like I'm about to do a job interview, and I'm underdressed with a paper bag of candy in my hands.

Ivy and I agreed to explore the public spaces. We didn't book a private room.

We take a seat by the bar at the entrance, and we're served cocktails. I don't touch it, but Ivy sips on her drink right away. She's nervous, and she's hugging my hoodie too tightly.

"We can still leave," I tell her.

"No, I want to do it." By it, she means the anal cleansing procedure that's included in tonight's experience at Crack & Nut. I'm going to wait at the bar full of horny fucks while my *girlfriend* gets a special ass massage. That just sounds wrong. "I'm new. That's all."

"You never had anal before, little doe?" She shakes her head, taking another sip of her drink.

"I never wanted to," she admits. "Katantia brings out the strangest desires."

"Indeed."

I kiss the top of her head before she's taken away by one of the secretary-like employees. My little doe asks questions in

her professional voice, craving to know each detail of the strange procedure. I watch as they walk away, my eyes fixating on Ivy. She looks good in my clothes, even better when she's naked.

“Fancy seeing you here.”

After one last glance at Ivy, I turn to face the man that addressed me. He fits into the setting with his polished suit and leather shoes. My shoes are leather, too. We're just different beasts.

The ashy hair on his head reveals that this man is as old as me, even older perhaps. There's no ring on his finger, and his watch is European. His accent is a faded Queen's English as if he's been around too many *Yankees*.

He sounds an awful lot like my Ivy.

“And you are?” I ask.

“Hugh Abbott. I believe you've done your research on me,” he says, taking the seat that was occupied by Ivy not so long ago. I research a lot of people. Unfortunately, I remember every single face.

“Welcome to Katantia.” I don't really feel the words that leave my mouth, but we're in public. I can't give my loyal fans a reason to distrust their national hero. “What brings you to our shores? Is California not sunny enough for you anymore?”

“California's nice. The pussy there isn't. You know what I mean, I'm sure,” Hugh says. He doesn't want to be my friend, and I never would entertain the idea anyway. We stare at each other, stretching my patience.

“I don't,” I state. “Why are you here?”

“This and that.” His eyes wander to the secretary-like receptionists picking up more women for their special anal cleansing slash massage. “I came to check on my properties, see if they're well taken care of.”

“I'm sure they are,” I reply.

“I think they need a reminder on who their owner is.”

How long is this cleansing procedure going to take? I reply, “If you *think* so, it might be true. How’s your wife doing?”

“My wife? Or my fiancée?” I plaster a smile on my face. He goes on, “My wife’s doing great, I hear. I still pay for her rehab, so she’s alive and kicking. My fiancée, on the other hand, is a tricky subject. She’s being very bad, refusing to tie the knot. I haven’t heard from her in so long.”

“I’m sure she has her reasons,” I reply, contemplating whether I should drink the fucking cocktail I was served earlier.

“Whatever they are, on Katantia, her opinion’s irrelevant,” Hugh states. He rises from his seat, and I am nothing but relieved to be rid of the bitch. Time’s ticking, and Ivy’s bound to return soon. I’m tired and only here because she wants to try anal. I don’t have time for billionaire fools.

Hugh notices my silence. “What? Don’t you agree?”

“I’m not a Katantian. You do well to remember that,” I tell him. I sit back in my chair. “Leave. I’m not here in an official capacity. Therefore, I don’t have to listen to your bullshit.”

Hugh Abbott’s intense gaze of fury doesn’t mar me in the slightest. He’s wasting his energy while I sit here, unbothered and waiting for my *girlfriend* to come back to me. I’ve got my priorities set right.

A full minute passes until he finally leaves me alone.

I haven’t touched my drink, and I feel proud about it.

The bar isn’t full because everyone’s inside already, fucking each other’s brains out. Our visit here was spontaneous and a little late. Instead of checking my phone, I study the employees and the few other men in here.

Katantians aren’t born. They’re made. It’s one of the country’s slogans, and I can see why. People from all over the world come here for an escape, a place to hide. Katantia has half a million inhabitants, and it battles massive cities like Singapore, Hong Kong, London, and New York City for the top spot on cultural diversity.

Not one man in this room has the same background.

I still stand out because they all know who I am. Meanwhile, I know who they are because I'm good with faces. Kamila entertains a lot of people in the palace, more people than I prefer. My men and I research backgrounds far more often than I'd like.

Before she even appears in my sight, I hear Ivy's steps. She rushes over to me, jumping on my lap. Her face is blushed, and her body sweaty. She begs me, "Please, let's go inside now. I can't wait any longer!"

"What did they do to you?" I ask. I pick her up from my lap. I would carry her inside like that, but she politely asks me to put her down. When she flashes her needy eyes at me, all I can do is listen.

With my hand in hers, we head for the inside of the club.

"They rubbed cream on me, and I think it makes me horny! I feel wetter than I've ever felt. I don't know how to contain myself? They cleaned me up with a douche or an enema or whatever, and I almost came. Like, what the hell?" she mumbles away, terrified and amused at the same time. "And the massage... I feel loose. You can put it in me. I'll take it!"

"Slow down, little doe. We're not even inside yet. You might be appalled at the sight of other people fucking," I tell her, kissing the back of her hand. She blushes some more, and I memorize the image.

Chuckles and giggles aside, they let us into the club. Instantly, lounge music is muffled by moans and groans. People are scattered around the space, some in groups and some in pairs. They occupy booths, and there's even a small open space for dancing. Of course, nobody's dancing on the dancefloor. They're fucking, as per usual, on Katantia.

Club employees are checking whether the couples are doing anal.

You get kicked out if you put it in the other hole for too long. It's manic, and it's certainly something I never thought

I'd be a part of. I can hear people fucking, and it is disturbing to some extent. I'm a private person, and I don't share the details of my personal life with anyone. Katantians know I'm Jordan, Alex's father. That's all.

They don't know I spent years trying to get over my ex-wife. They have no fucking idea that I'm nervous walking into this place and trying to keep a straight face.

I've never been in handcuffs, but I've been held at gunpoint by men worse than the entire society of Katantia and their foreign rich investors put together. I've agitated men who wouldn't hesitate to behead me if I weren't of use to them. I've murdered in cold blood, and I've disposed of the bodies as if they were old shoes in the back of my closet. 3013 times.

This isn't the worst anxiety I've suffered, but who's ranking this shit anyway.

Perhaps I should've had a drink earlier.

I work in the darkness, and all this light, the open sexual energy, is getting to my head.

"What's wrong?" Ivy asks, halting mid-step. She turns around, and she places a flat hand on my chest.

"I'll get used to it," I tell her, gesturing around us. There's too much naked skin. In a way, it's a reprise of my birthday party. Men in suits are busy with girls that look innocent but aren't once their legs are spread.

"Take a deep breath," she advises me, gently massaging my chest over my clothes. She's shut her eyes in the midst of the packed club. There are hundreds of people here, and she's zoning off. "Breathe, Mr. Winters. We're here to have sex. I don't want you to have a heart attack before you get to fuck my ass tonight."

"Is that all I'm worth to you?" I ask playfully. There's thunder in my chest, an uncomfortable vibration.

Ivy gasps and the massage stops. She wraps her arms around me, tugging me close. Her head's pressed against my chest. She's listening in on my heart. "Take a deep breath now and forget about the fucking. If you're not into it, we leave."

You said so yourself. There's no threat here. People are just having fun. Listen to your heart. It makes such beautiful sounds."

My heart, that son of a bitch, is acutely trying to impress Ivy.

Her public show of affection is incredibly foreign to me. I can't escape the thought of betrayal. There must be a set of eyes on me that I'm not aware of. I entertain Ivy's neediness, but I don't believe in coincidences.

I fear that something's going on.

"Take your hands off of me." She twitches. I hate that my outburst from the other day has traumatized her, but I must do this. She likes it when I tell her what to do.

Ivy removes herself from me. Her eyes are wide and big when I glance at them. Her lower lip trembles deliciously.

"You want to be my object, little doe?"

She nods instantly.

CHAPTER 15



HIS EYES CONSUME MY LIPS, AND I DON'T KNOW WHY IT makes me feel so insecure about myself. He's been seeing me for years now. It's not the first time that he has seen my lips.

I wanted the experiment, the random date. I'm horny and loose because of the cream that was applied to my skin. Yet, I can't shake the uneasiness. Jordan hasn't noticed because he's contemplating what's happening himself. He's close to a panic attack, and the unprofessional side of me thinks I can cure him with my love.

My neediness doesn't scare him away. Dangerously so, he takes ownership of me in public. His mouth claims mine, and it's like there's no music playing. My perception of the world starts and ends with Jordan at this moment. He tastes like mint and cherry, a mixture from the candy we've snuck into the club. His hand nestles on the back of my neck, and I press myself against him like he's planning to leave me.

I don't recall when this became my dream, but it happened sometime in the past five years of my new life in Katantia. I enjoy every second of our public kiss. We should know better than to make out in public like we're teens, but we don't. Spontaneously, I make it a part of our routine. *Jordan does something unexpected.*

A flicker of applause reaches my ears, and I chuckle. I feel Jordan cursing under his breath as he removes himself from me. There's a glare in his eyes, but I decide that it's playful.

"Mr. Winters, is she your object?"

“Who is this woman?”

“When’s the next wedding?”

“How’s the queen?”

I embrace Jordan, keeping him by my side. I can hear his wild heart spewing schemes of anger. Before he can say anything, I speak up. “We kindly ask for privacy. He’s not here as a public person. We’re new to this, and we would like to be treated like any other Katantian.”

“Oh, of course!” A man in black jeans steps forward. In addition to a perfectly trimmed beard, he’s got a ring on his finger, and he’s the age of Jordan. Unlike Jordan, he looks like it. “That was quite the show. That’s all we wanted to express.”

The man gestures at the small crowd that has assembled around us. I clutch onto Jordan. He might be fuming, but if something were to happen right now, he’d have my back. Once Jordan believes in you, he will do anything to protect you.

Do I deserve his protection? His affection?

I don’t think I do.

“Are you here alone?” the man asks. The upper buttons of his green shirt are unopened, and I can see a hint of his chest hair. If anything, I’m faintly disgusted. The only chest I want to see is Jordan’s.

“We’re new, like I said before,” I tell him. Jordan’s quiet. I like it when he lets me do the talking.

“Would you like to join us? We’ve got a private section by the bar. You can have your own table if you want. It’s not included in the standard membership. We’re VIPs.” The man seeks Jordan’s approval, but he isn’t getting it thus far. “The queen... She’s friends with my daughter. Kamila helped her out in her time of need... When I didn’t want to listen. I’ll forever be grateful....”

“What happened?” Jordan asks.

“My daughter’s an addict,” the man with the beard says. “When she became eighteen, and nobody propositioned her, I

kicked her out. My object's heart broke. She hasn't forgiven me. It was my worst mistake. Aram was still king, and I got caught up... My daughter ended up on the streets. There's a hierarchy of sex work, and she was at the bottom of it. She took drugs to get through her life, and Kamila befriended her. If it weren't for Kamila and her help, I would've never reunited with my daughter."

"What's your daughter's name?" I ask. Unfortunately, this type of story isn't rare on Katantia. It breaks my heart, but Katantia has historically been a shitty place for women.

"Mary Velasquez." Mary's image flickers in my thoughts. She's one of my better patients, willing to make progress.

"She comes to my office every other week," I tell the man, and his eyes widen. I'm not like the other doctors of Katantia. People don't like admitting that I help them. There's a stigma in seeking help from the likes of me.

"Thank you for your service. Then, you must be... My daughter says your name is Ms. Lin? You are Ms. Lin? I'm sorry that I didn't recognize you...."

I grab Jordan's hand, and I let Mr. Velasquez lead us toward his VIP section.

Mr. Velasquez introduces us to his friends, his wife. She's shy, blushing at the sight of me in embarrassment. Mrs. Velasquez knows who I am without an introduction. *Moms.*

How does it feel, baby girl? You like Daddy's big fat cock in your tiny pussy?

"Ivy?" Jordan's voice removes me from my trance. I stand there like a deer in headlights. With my eyes wide open, I glance up at Jordan. "What happened? Is something wrong?"

"What would you like to drink—" one of Velasquez's friends starts.

"Shut up," Jordan interrupts him.

I can't move. It's part of my trauma, the sudden flush of paralysis. The only thing that's giving away a sign of life in

my body is my heart. It pounds heavily, reminding me of a time I'm most ashamed of.

Jordan says something to Mr. Velasquez, but I don't hear what he says. There is a gesture of hands, here and there. My vision goes blurry, and I feel like emptying my stomach all over the nasty floor I stand on.

"Come back to me, Ivy. Come on, now...." I'm lost in my thoughts, endless rambling about sweet nothings that turned bitter. I can taste it on my tongue. My entire life... a lie. I'm a fraud. Jordan shouldn't be taking care of me. "Ivy, please. Don't make me shut these bitches down. I will. If you say nothing, I'll assume they put something in that lotion that drugged you. I don't stand for date rape. Kamila doesn't stand for it. If there's non-consent, it's consensual non-consent. What the fuck is going on? Talk to me, little doe."

I hiccup, and the tears spill out of my eyes. "I don't deserve you."

"What?" The surprise in his tone catches me off guard.

Jordan lets me cry against his chest while the party goes on around us. Insignificant music plays, a bass thumping loudly in my ears. I can barely hear it. My heart steals the show. With every beat, I'm reminded of everything I left behind five years ago.

I sought refuge on Katantia back when the old king was still head of state. I would've done right about anything to escape. It was just my luck that at my one chance of escape, Kamila had taken over the throne, and she welcomed me with open arms. Doctors like me were needed back then...

"Ivy, speak." The demand is urgent, but I'm too fussy. My arms are wrapped around Jordan's torso because I know he won't look at me the same way if he finds out what I've done. He doesn't have a lot of values, but the ones he has, I've crushed.

"I didn't have a good relationship with my *mom*," I reveal, finally. For an anal sex club, this place smells like peaches and Tom Ford cologne. I wish I could say I was disgusted by it, but

I'm not. I've been on Katantia for five years now, and nothing these people do surprises me anymore—not even a dad that abandons his daughter because she didn't bag a husband at eighteen.

“Welcome to the club, little doe. Is that what had you riled up? You lost it at the sight of Mrs. Velasquez,” he says. Jordan's voice sounds great in anger. His heavy baritone initiates an indescribable thrill when he's furious. However, when he's soft and caring, I want to cry at how soothing he sounds.

“Mrs. Velasquez reminded me of somebody I thought I had forgotten.”

Jordan brings the top of my hand to his lips, giving it a gentle kiss. “I know the feeling very well. Elaborate.”

“There's nothing to say....” Oh, there is. “I haven't spoken to my *mom* in over ten years. Fifteen maybe.”

“Why do you say it like that? *Mom*? Did she hurt you?” Jordan gives me what I crave, a sense of safety and longing. Money doesn't break this man, and that's exactly what I need.

But I don't deserve it.

“She's not my real mom, as we have established. I never knew my real mom. I was adopted before I turned one, shipped off to London,” I tell. I don't want to sob. Please, don't let me sob. I'm too old to break down like this. Right? We play our little games, but I can't go sobbing like that in public. I'll embarrass him. Why is the cream not making me horny anymore? Fuck! “My *mom* never once hurt me.”

“Oh,” Jordan responds. His shoulders relax, and he sits back. I look around, and I notice that I sit across Jordan's lap in the VIP section. We're secluded from the Velasquez family and their friends, but I catch their curious eyes on us. Jordan's arm holds me steady around my waist. His other arm lazily traces my kneecaps. He's all man, and he's big. People don't dare look him in the eye. He could be doing more serious things right this moment, but we're in an anal sex club because

we wanted a spontaneous date. *I don't deserve him.* “Good for her. I like hearing that.”

“You—” You don't know the least of it, I want to say. But he doesn't let me.

“I like hearing that she treated you well, little doe.” Jordan clarifies, “If she hadn't, I would make sure to find her. You know what I would do?”

I shake my head, more tears and hiccups following.

“I'd kill her for hurting my little doe,” he says. Goosebumps torture my skin, and my heart goes numb. “Next time you think you don't deserve me, think about all the blood I've got on my hands. Innocent and well-deserved.”

Removing myself from his embrace, I stand on wobbly feet. The world is spinning, and eyes are watching. I'm positive that I've ruined my reputation. The Velasquez family will surely take their daughter to see a new doctor since I'm such a mess.

I rub my eyes, wiping away the tears.

Jordan watches me without making a sound. He doesn't move. *He doesn't understand.* Before the sobs can return, I escape the VIP section. I head for the bathrooms, hoping to wash off the silly cream. I don't want to be horny right now.

It makes it all worse.

None of my friends are parents. I don't know why I felt triggered at the sight of Mrs. Velasquez. Perhaps it was the fact that she's an obedient object, loyal to her man, her owner. She'd do anything for him. She doesn't have a choice. Mary, their daughter, has told me all about their dynamics. They live the Katantian life. *Till death do us part.*

Back in London, that sentence doesn't mean much.

Honor? I have none.

I can't find my way to the bathrooms. I must have missed the sign. I'm trapped in a dark corner of the dance floor, surrounded by couples that are fucking. I can hear the amount

of lube used in this room, and it frightens me. I didn't think that things would turn out like this. I'm scared to breathe.

What is happening to me?

It's an episode. I don't have them often because I manage to compartmentalize quite well. Nothing on Katantia reminds me of my childhood, how I grew up. Apart from my work, there is no connection to London. Not even my name is real. Kamila granted me a new name when I received my work visa five years ago.

My stomach flips, and I feel the need to sit down. There are no chairs near me, just a sticky wall that I don't want to touch. I don't want to imagine the come stains that dirty it. My breathing's shallow, and I doubt that I can stand on my feet for much longer. I lean against the wall, and I slide to the floor.

The people around me don't let me distract them. They keep up the fucking, the urgent thrusts. I can hear their skin connect and clash. I heave and retch, emptying my stomach on the cold floor.

The bitter taste in my mouth is an old friend of mine. We used to do this back in London. I'd be stuffed full, and then I'd empty the contents all over a perfect and polished porcelain sink. I lick my lips, relishing in the memories. It's absurd to celebrate this moment. It's my downfall. I know that.

It's abnormal to feel this content when you've just spilled your guts. It's also the reason why all of this stopped. I haven't thrown up in five years. It became addictive to a point where I was about to hire a nutritionist for myself. It wasn't about the food or the come... It was me thinking I had control over my body.

"Ivy?"

My eyes find Jordan's feet, covered by his impeccable Off-White shoes. They're almost twice the size of my foot, and they're real leather. I can smell it. There is not a single spot of dirt on them. How does he manage to keep his white shoes so clean?

I feel like I've shrunk into a corn of sand. I can't muster the strength to move.

"Get up from the floor," he demands. I shake my head. "What's wrong with you?"

I hide my face behind my hands because I don't want to see anything. I've licked away the remnants of the awful taste in my mouth. There's a puddle of puke right next to me. I stink. I'm not shaking, but my insides are twisting into knots.

"We're leaving. I'm going to pick you up, and I'll drag you out of here by your hair if I have to," he warns me, stepping closer. I flinch in response, and he curses under his breath. Jordan takes a moment to himself. Then he grabs me, hoisting me up with my back against the wall. His hands grip my hips, holding me hostage.

I feel watched again. Jordan attracts attention because of his status and his physique. I want to touch his every surface, sink into his soul. Grab a piece of his heart and make it mine. I hope there's space for me there.

"Speak. Now." He's never used that voice on me. It's menacing. It forecasts dire consequences. It's deep, and it penetrates your being. I've seen nothing compared to this man, yet I feel like my crime is the worst.

My crime is personal.

"I hurt my *mom*. I took from her," I blurt out.

"I know."

My stomach drops. "What do you know?"

"I know everything there is to know about you, my needy little doe," Jordan reveals. His body is towering above me, hiding the rest of the club. He confines my existence to his. "I know where you went to school. Who you dated. Who your friends were. How often you went to Cyprus, Greece, and Italy with the daughter of... Never mind. I've traced your first-ever paycheck at a retail store on Oxford Street. I know the name of your real parents, something that you don't because you don't want to know them. I know everything that's ever been

documented about you. Every single trace you've dropped, whether accidentally or on purpose, I've picked it up."

Jordan crowds me, and my world caves in.

"I know what you think I'm unaware of," he says. "I know about your mom. The paper trail is obvious. I have a copy of the court documents. You were one of the first people I vetted when you entered the country. I kept your details, you know. They're fascinating."

"They're not! It's disgusting. I'm an awful human being. I... I took from the one person that helped me. She was so kind to me. I always had everything I wanted—"

"What do you want, Ivy? What is it that you search for?" he asks. There's an inappropriate smirk on his face. I don't like it, but fuck, if it suits him.

"I've been bad."

"I've been worse, my needy little doe. You haven't watched the life leave a person's eyes. I've watched it up close, sucked it in like it was my lifeline. Thousands of times. I'd do it all over again if it meant that I get to protect the ones closest to me."

"That doesn't count. It's your job," I argue.

Jordan's chuckle is mirthless and evil. He digs his fingers into my skin. My hips are at his mercy. It hurts, but I take it. It's a lesser evil than the vile thoughts corrupting my brain.

"What's it going to be? You've been a bad girl, you say. I don't see that. What I know tells me that you were hurt," Jordan says, and I shake my head frantically.

"NO!" I reply impatiently. "I was the bad guy!"

"Ivy, are you sure you're okay?" Jordan asks. He keeps saying my name like he knows something I don't. There's no response to his question, and he snaps. *Good*. "I don't do this on first dates, but I guess you're an exception. Since you think you're such a bad girl. You just want to get fucked, don't you?"

I lower my gaze, licking my lips.

“Don’t fucking pout at me. Look me in the eyes.” He grips my jaw tightly, lifting it. I meet his eyes, and I shiver. He feels hot against my skin. “You asked for it.”

“Yes.”

He slaps my cheek, not to bruise me but to wake me up. If he wanted to hurt me, he’d have used more force. It’s safe to say that I don’t *wake up*. I fall into a trance while he turns me around, shoving me against the wall. One hand’s on the back of my neck, choking and restricting me.

I shift on my feet, but Jordan puts a halt to it. “How long until the cream’s effects wear off?”

“I don’t feel it anymore. I feel sick. I—” The pressure on my neck thickens. “Please—”

“What?” he asks, tearing my leggings in two.

“Please, take this pain away.”

“I don’t do that, my needy little doe. I make it hurt worse.” After a brief shuffling of clothes, Jordan sinks into my pussy without a single touch of my clit. The impure cry that escapes my throat stops him momentarily. There’s a moment in which I’ve called upon the tender site of his heart. His thick and hard cock pulses inside of me, reaching the end of me. He can’t go any further. He’s nestled inside of me, and there’s no escape from beneath him. His hand’s on my lower back, a hint of tenderness.

“You like that? Do you want to know how it feels?” I nod, and he grips my neck with his lethal fingers digging into me. “I’m home, needy little doe. This pussy is mine. What was before? It’s like it never existed. You don’t get to be hurt over that shit. You are mine.” He thrusts into me for emphasis. “What happened before you came to Katantia is part of you, but you’re no bad guy. You’re an innocent little doe that I get to corrupt. I get to fuck you in the middle of this weird fucking club, surrounded by an eager crowd. They all want me to defile you. Can you hear it?”

That’s the problem. I don’t hear anything. They’re watching us.

“Get my dick wet, little doe. Put that needy pussy to work. Produce all the cream you need. I’ll fuck your tight ass, and you’ll scream for me. Let your past hear who the fuck owns you now.” I swallow, and I lose myself in the sensation. We haven’t fucked very often, but I’m accustomed to the challenges of his cock. It aches, but those tiny touches his thumb allows on my lower back tantalize me. He’s not careful at all about his cock inside of me, but his hand on my skin treats me like I’m precious.

Jordan’s in control while my control is jumping ship. It’s embarrassing to admit that he holds me together right now. He guides my body. My pussy is his. He asked for cream. He receives it, and he’s barely moving. He’s making his presence felt, warning me of what he’s about to put inside of my other hole.

My vomit’s foul taste is my companion while I get defiled in front of strangers by the man they all hold to high standards. I’m sure he’s making them proud. He’s putting me in my place. This is the ownership Katantians brag about.

I deserve it.

I broke a woman’s trust. I...

Jordan leaves my pussy, and I mewl at the loss. I drip at the emptiness, begging for more. His cock is slick with my juices, and he teases my lips, playing my neglected clit like a game only he can win.

“Ready, little doe?”

“No,” I tell him. I’m honest.

“Pity. Bad little does get their holes stretched and used. Isn’t that what you crave? That’s why you’re rubbing your needy pussy against me? I get it. You’re a hungry little doe. We must obey the rules of this club, don’t we? Crack & Nut?” He coaxes me. He’s in my ear, and I feel his breath on the back of my neck. “Pussies don’t get fucked in this club. It’s your tight little ass that’s getting used tonight.”

He bites my ear at the same time as his cock prods at my entrance. I can’t help but chuckle at his bite; he follows it up

by kissing my ear. He owns every part of my body. He can do as he wishes with it. “Open up, little doe. Make it easy for me.”

“Mr. Winters...” I squirm, and I twist. I need something from him. He’s holding me hostage in his embrace, but I crave it. I want more. Back in the car, I said that we’d play, which translates to sex toys. That’s why we went to the candy shop. Where’s the fucking candy now? I know Jordan’s size, which petrifies me because I’ve never even put a finger in *there*.

The ladies that gave me a massage earlier were the first ones to ever faintly touch me *there*. They didn’t penetrate me with anything because they wanted my *owner* to have the honor of being the first. They applied their magic cream, and they let it do its job relaxing me.

But I don’t feel so relaxed now that the crown of his bare cock pushes past the tight ring of my ass.

Jordan wraps his hand around my neck now, applying a pressure that robs me of my breath. He chokes me, unabashedly so. It’s shameless how he pushes inside. I feel the sharp sting from my head to my toes. It paralyzes me, and for a moment, I see stars. The cream that was applied to my skin earlier was a scam. There’s no way my body was ready for Jordan’s cock.

I would scream, but I don’t have it in me. I’m dumbfounded at the new sensation that’s taken over my body. Jordan torments me further, filling me up at his own pace. All I can muster is a gasp. Once he’s secured himself inside of me, and I feel the base of his cock against my skin, he says, “Good little doe. You’re such a good girl for me.”

His tone teases me, penetrating my profound need for affirmation. “You’re so fucking tight for me, little doe. You’re making me proud to be your owner.”

Jordan kisses the spot below my ear, and I don’t fight the smile. He’s into his role as my owner, and I like how it feels to be owned by him. He makes it... fun.

His length is seated inside of me, waiting for me to adjust. He's mean right now, but he doesn't want to tear me open. The hand that's not on my neck explores my lower back.

"You... I'm okay now," I blurt out.

"Are you giving me permission to fuck your ass now, little doe?" he asks, and there's a smirk on his face, I'm sure of it.

"You don't need it."

"I don't."

He slides out of me, leaving me breathless. Before I can get used to the emptiness, he dips back in, shoving himself as far as he can go.

"Are you going to be my good little doe?"

I nod fervently. He's got me on edge. "Always."

Jordan's hand travels to my pussy, cupping my front. I moan in response, ready for whatever wicked games he's got in store for me. He slaps my pussy. As always, I feel like he's holding back. He's got aggression in that tremendous body of his. He could break me if he wanted to.

He doesn't.

Because Jordan doesn't break innocents. He hurts those that deserve it. Meanwhile, I break promises left and right. I'm a fucking whore and not the fun kind that Katantians love.

"Don't disappear on me," he warns me, driving inside of me one more time. His fingers work my pussy, firing me up. "Come for me instead, little doe. You know you want to. Come for me while I fuck your tight ass."

His strokes are murderous, and my pussy can't handle the combined assault. I explode for him, and he chuckles at how easy I made it for him. I'm milking him, begging for his come. I feel my orgasm everywhere. It's something I have never felt before, and it makes me want more.

"Where do you want it, needy doe?"

"In my ass. Please..."

The thrill becomes debauchery as he starts driving inside of me, degrading and dirty. The astonishment doesn't only lie on me. It's everywhere. I can hear murmurs from the people that watch us. I had forgotten about them. Jordan does a good job hiding me from their sight, but Katantians aren't necessarily looking for a cock that slides into an asshole. They love the show we're giving them, even if we're clothed and keeping to ourselves.

I feel tender, and I don't know for how long I can stand before my legs give out for real. He's fucking the common sense out of me.

His last thrusts are the ones where he lets go, the ones that guarantee bruises. He comes inside of me. His delicious groan tickles me.

Jordan's post-nut clarity kicks in, and he embraces me from the back. I snuggle into his arms while he's still balls-deep in my tightness. Masterfully putting his cock back inside his pants, he kisses my shoulders.

"Let's go to bed now. We've had enough adventures for the night."

CHAPTER 16

JORDAN



I WAKE UP IN IVY'S BED, AND I KNOW I'VE OVERSLEPT BEFORE I catch a glimpse of my watch.

Ivy's light snores from my side amaze me. She's the only person, except for my ex-wife, I've ever *slept* in one room with. Sharing a bed with Ivy is an easy task. I feel her movements throughout the night. She's quite active in her sleep, climbing on top of me, resting her leg on my groin. She uses my upper arm as a pillow, then my chest. She can't get enough of me in her sleep, and I'm here for it.

In fascination, I observe her while she sleeps. We took a shower together last night, and parts of her jet-black hair are still wet.

The cold facts are simple with Ivy. Where it gets tricky is her thoughts. Why does she do the things she does?

To say that last night took me by surprise is an understatement.

The situation with her mom did a number on her. The facts are there, but I don't understand why it's Ivy's fault.

"Can I get a coffee?" Ivy mumbles. She stretches her delicate arms, almost poking me with her left arm. The oversized shirt she wears lifts, revealing her cheeks to me. She sports bruises from last night. I see my fingerprints on her creamy skin, and, for the first time, I'm unsure if I'm proud or disgusted with myself.

"You want me to make you one?" I've never done that. How hard can a cup of coffee be? I've done gastrectomy

before, the amateur version.

“No!” she yelps. “I’m asking if I can have one. You’re supposed to say yes or no since you’re my owner!”

My little doe woke up feisty today. “In that case, go ahead. It might fix your mood.”

Ivy brushes the hair on her face aside, revealing the most delightful pout on her face. She shakes her head as she rises from the bed.

“Good morning, little doe.”

“Good morning, Mr. Winters.” She winks at me before leaving her bedroom.

It’s like in this home, I don’t have a life of responsibilities. I could stay in her bed all day, analyzing the paintings on her walls. Smolyakov is the main focus of most of them, but I don’t give a shit. It’s her art. I’m trained in the art of facts. If I want to find a way into her thoughts, I must detect the details.

It’s eight, and I can’t stay in this bed forever. She’s in her kitchen. I can hear her from afar. As much as it smells and feels like her, out there, I’ve got the real Ivy. I don’t have to rely on eyes anymore.

Now, I can touch my Ivy’s flesh.

I put on last night’s clothes, dreading the fact that I must return to the palace in them. My men will sniff the sex on me, and I’ll have to pretend like I’m not going crazy over the finest piece of pussy I’ve ever called mine.

Ivy doesn’t hear me coming. She’s gazing out of her window with her cup of coffee in hand. I study her from the doorway.

“I want you to meet my family,” I tell her, and she twitches wickedly, spilling some of her coffee on the kitchen counter and on her shirt.

“But I’ve already met them. I know your entire family,” Ivy says. She’s bend over the counter, cleaning it up with one of the rags. She’s miffed by the spilled coffee. She makes me hard by doing whatever she does to that counter. She’s

meticulous about the act of cleaning, and I admire her slick fingers going to work. In my family, we're a bunch of neat geeks.

"You haven't been introduced to them as my girlfriend. Or object. But I think the real Katantians only count you as an object if I marry—"

"Do you mean that?" she asks, dropping the rag she cleaned the coffee with. "You want me to meet the Wraiths? As your girlfriend?"

I nod.

"Fuck."

"Hey," I warn her.

"I'm sorry." Her face goes red, and she grabs the coffee cup, downing the remains of its content. "I'd love to. It'll be weird as fuck. Why am I cursing so much. Fuck."

I lean against the doorframe, taking in her awkwardness. She could be my open book. I only need one glimpse into her thoughts... "Dial it down in front of Fylox, and we're good. You know how he is."

"Of course, I do!" she exclaims. Horror paints her face. "What will he think!"

"That you're owned and not to be fucked with. What else?"

I enter the kitchen, and I give her a kiss to calm her fidgeting. "Let's go to work. I'll pick you up at six."

"No, I'll come over," she insists. Her big doe eyes enchant me. I'll get into trouble for this woman. I've never engaged in trouble for any woman I've fucked. Things are moving fast, and I like it that way.

"There's no way I'm letting you drive around in your death trap—"

"Don't insult my car. I like it the way it is. Tiny and comfortable," she claims, awfully jolly.

"Do you want me to make an inappropriate joke?"

She blushes for me. “I’ll drive over at six. Be ready for me. Clean your room! I’m coming over. It’s like we’re in high school all over again, sneaking around.”

“Little doe, my house is always clean. In fact, the palace is always clean. You can come over at any time and confirm my statement.” She chuckles, putting her empty coffee cup in the sink. “Dinner with the big family at the palace or my home?”

“Your home.”

“Done.”



THE ONE-MINUTE COUNTDOWN IS ON.

From five different positions alongside the three-point line, Alex attempts to score as many three-pointers as possible. It’s like the all-star weekend but the Katantia version.

Alex and I play ball in one of the palace’s refurbished areas. Five years ago, this was just another hall of orgies for the king. The new queen has transformed it into my son’s private gym, basketball court included.

I watch from the sideline, in awe of my son. He’s a big guy. One of the criticisms he faced throughout his young career was his inability to shoot threes or do his free throws. He’s my son. There was no way he would leave this wound unattended. Every time he flies over here, I observe how much his shot has improved.

At the end of the one minute, my son has missed six shots out of twenty-five. If this were a contest, he’d have won it.

“That was great, son,” I tell him. He’s at the benches now, rehydrating. We didn’t work out as hard as we usually do. There’s barely any sweat on him, and he looks like he could do another one-on-one. “You should ask them to consider you for the next contest. It’d look good on your resume.”

He smirks at my remark. I approach him. Looking at my son, I hate myself for how I reacted after he won his fourth

ring. I feel ashamed that people found me in my men's gym, destroying everything we'd built for them.

"They send out invites. I can't *ask* them about this," Alex explains, gesturing at the court. He takes a seat on the bench, and I join him.

"You're a four-time champion. You deserve—"

"I know what I deserve," Alex retorts, harsher than I would've expected. "We have to talk."

I don't bother correcting him. He's a grown man now. If he thinks he can talk down on me, sure. He should try it. "Talk then."

"Kamila told me what happened." He sighs, his tone softening. "You've been acting weird lately. Everyone says that you're always at work. That's your standard. I get it. What happened, though, that made you demolish the new gym you built for the palace guards? You spent months hyping it up. Kamila poured a lot of investments in that gym."

"My psychiatrist says I had an episode," I reveal.

"An episode?" he yelps. Fuck. I don't want him to worry about me. He has enough trouble on his mind. "Dad? What do you mean by that?"

"It's nothing. I'm handling it," I tell him.

"Bullshit. Tell me what Ivy said!" I tense at the mention of my doe's name. What would Alex say if I told him that I have a girlfriend now? *I learned from the best.*

"I'm a workaholic, okay? I might be burned out. I've started taking it slower."

"Is that why you miss work now? Where do you go when you're away? The guards know, but they don't tell on you. They're loyal. Did you miss my game on purpose? Have I done something?" Alex blurts out. He's more affected by his monologue than by the one-minute three-point shootout, breathless and heaving.

"Son, relax." He doesn't. "I didn't miss your game. I watched it."

“You watch games with the family. It’s me, isn’t it?” He stands up, pacing in front of me. He mutters curses under his breath. “Dad, are you happy here?”

Before I can respond, my son goes on, “I did this to you. Fuck. Dad, I’m so sorry. I... You should be retired by now, not taking on new responsibilities. Everyone retires their parents. They don’t make them take on more jobs!”

“Son, stop and sit your ass down. Now.”

Alex gawks at me, and I’m reminded of a time when he was a little kid. Back then, I raised my voice, and he did as told. I scared him then; I probably still do, but he’s grown now, and he hides it better. After a couple of beats, my son takes a seat next to me. It would boost my ego that I make this giant tremble, but I don’t enjoy intimidating my son. I want his respect, sure. But there’s a line.

Even for me.

“You didn’t force me to come to Katantia,” I start in a sober tone. “I chose to do it. I took over because that’s what I do. You can’t retire from my line of work. What’s been happening to me is my fault, not yours, not Kamila’s, not Fylox’s. I love our family, and I would do anything for them.”

I’m not wearing a beanie, but I wish I was. I rub the back of my neck. “Right around your playoffs, my psychiatrist let me go.”

“Let you go how?”

“She said I wasn’t making any progress. The truth is I haven’t been honest with her. For five years, I’ve shut her out. I went to the meetings, but I never gave her permission to cross the threshold. I did this to myself. She’s brilliant at her job, but I’m ruthless, and you know how I can get. I retreat easily. I don’t mind going through things alone.” Alex nods, and it fucking pains me that he knows what I mean. He knows I’m unyielding when I must be. “My psychiatrist vowed to find me a new fit. She did. My appointment with the new guy’s in a week.”

Alex wants to comment, but I don't let him. "Yes, Ivy's not my doctor anymore. We didn't tell you or anyone else because of everything that's been going on. I never want you to worry about me. I worry about you. That's what we do."

"Is it bad? Please, Dad. If you need help, we should get it for you. You've never been irrational. When I heard that you trashed the gym you worked so hard for, I was speechless. I didn't believe that it was you." The worry in his voice fucks with my insides.

"I've got something to tell you, but I'm afraid of your reaction," I state.

"You? Afraid? Please."

"Son, I've got a girlfriend now."

"You, what?"

"I'm in a relationship."

Alex doesn't say anything, and his past words haunt me. *I learned from the best. You weren't there, Dad. Get over it.* I go on, "I will always respect your mother, and you know how I've felt about her for—"

"This isn't about Mom. This is about you. Leave Mom out of this. When did you get a girlfriend?" Alex asks. He's bad at interrogating, but he's my son, and I owe him the truth. "Who is she? Did you vet her?"

Of course, I vetted Ivy. Who does he think I am? "I know, son. I can't help but think I betrayed you."

"It's been thirty years almost! I never knew you two as a couple. I've never known anything but divorced parents. It's nothing new to me. I was always worried about you pining after mom after she dumped you. You never let go even while Mom had Howard," Alex says. His exhale is harsh. "But Howard was never the right guy for mom, and thank God, she finally realized it and got rid of him. She's enjoying life now, and you should, too. Is this woman you're seeing a good thing, or are you just passing your time?"

"She's no Howard."

“She isn’t?”

“No.”

“Who is she?” Alex asks sneakily.

“Will you ever forgive me for leaving you?”

My son pales at the question. He avoids eye contact, and I don’t fault him. It’ll forever haunt me that I missed a huge chunk of his childhood. If it hadn’t been for Fylox’s abduction and subsequent decade-long disappearance, I would’ve never returned. I was content in the shadows. At least, I pretended to be. I add, “You said that you learned from the best. Is that what I am to you?”

“It’s a figure of speech,” Alex says. His gaze is lowered, fixed on his shiny shoes. I can’t interpret his tone. Is he mad at me for diverting the subject? “I’ll never get over the fact that I had to grow up in a house with Howard. I hate him, and that’ll never change. He didn’t hurt me, but I didn’t like his attitude. We had irreconcilable differences. When you weren’t there, my mom loved me enough for the both of you. You came back at a time when I needed you most. Fylox wouldn’t be with us if you hadn’t helped to find and bring him back home. I forgave you a long time ago. You should forgive yourself at some point. You’re not perfect, but who is? You’re here now... Dad, if you want to leave Katantia, nobody’s going to blame you.”

“I don’t want to leave Katantia,” I clarify. My throat is dry, and I feel heavy where I sit. “I can’t get over what happened. It was the hardest decision of my life, leaving you and your mom. I’ve just learned to move on from your mom. I... I talked to her about this when she was here. I haven’t worked through all the guilt I feel for that decision, and it’s eating me up. I saw you succeed because you are you, and why the fuck would you not succeed?”

“I watched the finals with my girlfriend. She wasn’t my girlfriend at the time. It was an out-of-body experience. I was with her, and everything was going great. I felt like the dominoes were set up the right way. Nothing could disturb my peace. Then, Kamila called to check on me because I wasn’t

with the family during the game, and it all crumbled. It is weak. It's embarrassing, son. I don't know why it felt that way, but I couldn't stomach it. The palace, the kingdom... You, back home, taking all the risks, playing your heart out, and achieving your goals. I spread myself too thin, and at that moment, I felt it. I'm not Travis. He handled all of this without a care in the world. He was a warrior like that."

"Travis suffered," Alex comments. "Kamila talks to me about it. He wasn't just a warrior. He was human. He made mistakes. Ask Felicita about it. You need to accept that you make mistakes, too. You need to trust more. We all love you, and we will support your every choice."

I let out a long sigh. We should be working out since that was the plan, but having a heart-to-heart with my son isn't that bad after all.

"What happens now?" Alex studies me intensely.

"We agreed that I have to take a step back. I'm not ready to leave all my posts, but I've made a new schedule under the supervision of my... former psychiatrist. I will re-evaluate the positions of my top men, and there'll be changes in the structure of the palace's security," I explain.

"Good." Alex raises his eyebrows. "When did you have time to meet a woman amid your burnout?"

"It's your aunt's fault, really," I begin.

"Don't deflect."

"It's Ivy Lin, and I'm bringing her over for dinner tonight. It'll be a small affair. I have to ask Felicita—"

"Is this a joke?"

I shake my head.

Alex scrunches up his face, and we leave it at that. The workout is done. We take our shower in the lockers next door. We don't talk, and I worry. I follow him up the stairs to the queen's floors.

We reach their private living room with the view of Katantia. It's interconnected with the dining room, giving it a

relaxed feel that contrasts royal expectations. Kamila and Kendrick sit at the dining table. Kamila goes through government documents, awaiting Kendrick's dinner time.

On the television in the far end, The Carey Jean Show plays for my grandson's entertainment. It's like Hannah Montana, but a clear rip-off.

My daughter-in-law brightens up when she sees us. Kendrick's on his highchair with a teether in one hand and a baby giraffe on the table that he can't avert his eyes from.

"How was the workout?" she asks, and Kendrick's eyes shift to his mom.

"Fine," Alex blurts out.

"Fine?" Kamila doesn't buy it.

"Dad's fucking his psychiatrist but other than that, fine."

"Shh..." Kamila turns to Kendrick who's widened and terrified eyes threaten us with a meltdown. "Daddy's okay. Don't cry now."

Kendrick does just that. He has a little breakdown.

"Don't ever do that again," I tell my son, but I don't look at him because I can't focus on anything other than my grandson. Kamila picks up Kendrick, whispering sweet words to him to calm our young king down. She's heavily pregnant, but she doesn't shy away from being hands-on with Kendrick.

"What do you mean by..." Kamila addresses her husband, but she stops herself before cursing. "You and Ivy? Did I get that right?"

"Yes," I confirm.

"Why are you upset about it?" Kamila asks Alex, and he sighs, taking a step back.

"Can I feed him?" Alex asks apologetically.

"Not unless you tell me what bothers you about your father's relationship."

"Who said anything about a relationship to you?" I ask.

“I’m big sister. I know things,” Kamila states with her head held high. Kamila’s always fun, but she’s most humorous pregnant as of late. *When she’s not about to explode.* She tickles Kendrick, and he squeals in response, gradually forgetting about his outburst. “Smolyakov told me when the guards refused to open their mouths.”

Fucking Smolyakov.

“She treats you, Kamila. Fylox is doing great under her guidance. That’s what bothers me. She’s heavily involved with my family, and if she and Dad... I don’t want to ruin the balance we’ve all found,” Alex explains. He curses under his breath. “Look, I’m sorry for the explosion. It took me by surprise. I thought you’d met somebody unrelated to all of this. We can’t lose Ivy to a silly affair.”

I keep quiet. I don’t want to discuss this in front of my grandson, who’s obviously too young to understand adult problems, but he sensed his dad’s trouble anyway.

“Do you want Daddy to feed you? Or Mommy? Say Mommy,” Kamila addresses Kendrick. He makes a couple of noises, babbling for our entertainment. “Okay, you little cheat. Daddy it is.”

Kamila hands Kendrick to his daddy. There’s guilt soddening my son’s face, and I know he hates himself for upsetting the baby. Alex disappears into the nearby kitchen with Kendrick in the arm.

“I know about Ivy,” Kamila casually reveals, sitting back on her seat by the dining table. “I was just waiting for your confirmation. Smolyakov and I discussed it the other day.”

“Now, I know what it feels like to be stalked,” I blurt out.

“You’re welcome.” She stuffs the documents she was previously occupied with into a folder, and she gives me all her attention. “What’s it going to be?”

“She’s coming over for dinner tonight.”

“I love it. Can we come?”

“No. I told her it would be a small affair,” I explain. “Just my sister—”

“You don’t have to invite Valentina and Aris and my other weird brother....” She’s joking. “But I should be there. I’m the Head of State, and I’m married to your son. I know her already. We won’t embarrass you, don’t worry.”

I cross my arms in front of my chest, and Kamila’s eyes sparkle with excitement.

“What’s up with him?” I ask Kamila. She knows my son best these days, to my dismay.

“He brought up retirement again. I shut it down, but he’s being difficult about it.” That explains why Alex has been strained lately. “He claims he’s satisfied with what he’s achieved thus far, but I know he’ll get bored if he leaves now. He and Fylox had a little misunderstanding earlier because of it.”

“How little?”

“Fylox has been on the dark web all day, sending death threats to various people.”

“That bad?”

Kamila nods.

“Bring them to dinner. It’ll make them behave.”

“I know it will.” She winks at me, and I admire her light spirit.

The day goes by, and half the family grills me about my guest. Aris and Valentina haven’t been informed yet, but they’ll know by tomorrow. Felicita and a couple of palace employees prepare dinner, and at six, we assemble at home.

Get-togethers in Travis’s old home distress me. He’s missed, and I can see it in my sister’s brave face. She’s distracted herself with preparations all day. This is another big moment Travis doesn’t get to experience with us.

Fylox and Alex don’t speak to each other at the table. Alex oversees Kendrick, attending to his every need, keeping him

happy. Fylox's eyes are red, and I'm tempted to ask him if he'd like to have a smoke on the roof. I don't ask because I'm expecting my little doe.

It's six.

Ivy doesn't show.

CHAPTER 17



I SIT AT MY DESK IN MY OFFICE, BUT I CAN'T *SIT* STILL. WHO would've thought that I'd be a painwhore? With every move I make, I feel Jordan. He's not inside me anymore, but he's left an ache I can't shake.

I'm sore. Him fucking my pussy has nothing on what we did last night.

On my walk to the Queen I hospital this morning, I positively limped. The pain excites me because it's a part of *him*, my dream. For five long years, I've pined after him.

I've sat at this very desk, daydreaming about things I'd never get to have. I've used his burnout to my advantage, and I've dug myself a spot in his heart.

Like I said before, what's honor? Because I have none. Mr. Winters makes me accept the fact.

Tonight, I'm meeting the Wraiths as his girl. I've never been happier.

"What business do you have getting your ass fucked in public by the queen's second-in-command?"

I let out a shriek, startled by Smolyakov's sudden appearance in my office.

"Can't I have just a little bit of privacy?" I scowl. My heart pumps loudly in my chest. *We've been caught.*

"No." Smolyakov waltzes toward my desk, taking a seat on the opposite side of me. He looks disheveled, like sleep evaded him last night. I'm not used to an unpolished

Smolyakov. His perfectly structured face with edges other boys would murder for is tired today. His age shows, and that's a rare occasion. The usually trimmed five o'clock runs wild, savagely ruining his handsome face. "You need to keep it private if you want privacy. You fucked in Crack & Nut. Has he fucked you dumb?"

I sigh, stretching on my seat. Jordan might be in the palace, but I feel him inside of me as I lean back on my desk chair. "He probably has."

"Stop looking so satisfied!" Smolyakov thunders, and I twitch at his tone. What did I do? I acted like a Katantian. What's so wrong with me being normal for once? I fit in last night. That's what Katantia's for, fucking and making a fool of yourself in public.

"Why are you so bothered by this?" I ask.

"It's unlike you," Smolyakov blurts out in a tone I've never heard from him. He's anxious. Is he high? He probably took something before coming to the office today. I open up my emails, and I start typing a message for his assistant. I can take over his patients for the day. "What are you doing?"

"Go home. I'll take over," I inform him. "You seem exhausted."

"Fuck no. Stop it," he urges me.

"You seem high."

"I'm not."

"I've known you for five years. You're high. Go home, Smolyakov. I've got it covered," I insist. The message is ready, and I press send. I look at the rest of my emails, and I've got five thousand unopened emails on my work email. Most of them are about exhibitions and conferences overseas that I've never shown any interest in. I'm packed every week, and I can't bring myself to leave my patients and Katantia.

"You were doing so well." Smolyakov adds some rambling words to his statement in a hiss. "I never knew you'd turn out to be such a slut."

“Hey! Fuck you.” I shut my laptop. “You were cheering me on when I... When he took me home the first time! What’s your problem all of a sudden?”

Smolyakov runs a hand through his messy hair. “Me? Cheering? When?” He shakes his head. “You’re playing with fire, Ivy Lin. And I know you don’t like getting burned. You’re a little pussy, aren’t you? Running at the first hitch you face.”

“What are you talking about?” I ask, astonished at his tone. He’s never spoken to me this way. I thought we were friends. I’ve confided in him, painted him. I even did molly with him. What am I missing?

He looks awfully sober when he turns to leave. “You’re a spoiled little slut. You like the attention of older men, don’t you? That must be your kink. I should’ve known. I would’ve taken you to the appropriate places....”

Smolyakov leaves me stunned in my office. The door shuts behind him, and I gawk at it. I can’t wrap my head around his stabbing words. I don’t *like* older men. I like Mr. Winters. I’ve liked the same man for five years. Why am I considered a slut for that? Jordan’s the first one to touch me since...

The other man I once *liked*. Smolyakov’s right. I escape when I run into problems. I was about to get married, and I left my fiancé. I had a life. Stolen, but it was still my life. People pointed fingers at me for how I *stole* to get my life.

After last night, I’m bound to have another meltdown soon. Why not stop prolonging it?

Once upon a time...

I don’t manage to get into the details because work calls. My schedule is full, and I sit through six hours of patients. My lunch is canceled, but I don’t mind because my *owner* will feed me later. I bypass dealing with Smolyakov’s sudden mood change, and I sent him a message, asking if he’s calmed down.

He doesn’t respond.

Instead, I get a message from Ignas, who tells me that his fractured knee is doing great. He claims he's studying for school, but I envision him binging *Breaking Bad*, sprawled out on his bed. He needs his rest. It's sick and twisted, but I'm glad he's home. I'll call up the front office of his place, and I'll pay a couple of months of his rent. I don't have any expenses, and I've been saving up my lousy income for months.

Plus, I cashed in on the jewelry I brought from London five years ago, and I never spent that money.

My final patient of the day leaves, and I busy myself with the paperwork. I take all the necessary notes, and I message my assistant with my concerns.

I need to make time for Ignas' house visits.

I check my watch, and I'm right on time to go home. Dinner at the Wraiths is an exciting concept, considering we all know each other already. It'll be Felicita and us today. I don't feel nervous. I'm ready for it.

For five years, I've imagined this. It's my moment to shine.

I turn off the lights, and I grab my summer coat. There's a silly, content smile on my face, and I can't get rid of it. Smolyakov will get around. He loves me. He'll get on board with the new developments in my life.

As I exit my office, I crash into an unexpected body. I smell it before I see it.

Bergamot.

A peach silk pocket square is tucked neatly in the suit jacket's pocket, with no patterns. The mahogany tie doesn't match the pocket square. The suit is tailor-made, and you'll rarely see this man outside of it. Even if you live with him.

Even if you wake up in his bed.

"Baby girl, give Daddy a hug. What are you standing there like this for?" I drop my bag at the sound of his voice, quivers taking over my body. My bag's contents spill all over the floor. I work in a relatively private hospital area because I like

privacy for my patients, so nobody sees me on my knees, scrabbling my shit together.

He doesn't sound the same. His accent has faded, and I'm sure his mother would have had something to say about that.

My lipstick is by his leather-clad foot. I reach for it, and he steps on my fingers purposefully. "Give me a hug."

I suck on my finger to soothe myself from the pain he's caused me. I keep my gaze low, and I don't rise to give him a hug. I doubt that I could keep my body upright at this moment.

"You haven't changed," he says.

It's been five years, and I'm not as obedient as I once was. My reflexes don't respond to his sharp voice. His enunciation cuts me open with its clarity. After all this time, I see him for what he is, an empty threat.

He hurt me and seeing him now, I've only now begun to realize how much.

"What do you want?" I hiss. My knees officially give out. I'm stuck on the floor. Fuck.

"Daddy."

"Fuck off."

"You fucked off," he reminds me. The curse words sound foreign coming from his tongue. He's disgusted by it, scrunching up his face. "You embarrassed me, our family. Why would you ever do that? What did I ever do to you?"

The lump in my throat doesn't allow me to respond. I can't force the words out.

"Is this your office?" he asks, pushing past me. I breathe hard, and I decide to power through it. I get up on my shaky legs, and I shut the door to my office, locking it. I can't have any visitors right now.

I don't feel like Ivy Lin in Hugh's presence.

"I deserve an explanation as to why you disappeared, baby girl," he says. His disinterested eyes scrutinize every corner of my office. "This is what you left me for?"

“You’re not special,” I tell him. My heart palpitates at my audacity to speak back. *Good little doe*. “This is my life now, and I love it. I have everything I ever wanted.”

“What are you saying?” he asks. I don’t buy his shocked visage. “You had everything in London. This is nothing. Garbage. I bet there’s gonorrhoea everywhere in this hospital. How can you live here? It’s unapologetically nasty.”

“Why are you here? How did you find me?” I ask. I left Hugh while he was on his last business trip to Silicon Valley before the wedding. I’d been his fiancée for years, and when his mother died, we were bound to tie the knot. Of course, our marriage certificate would have been void in the UK. There was an entire plan of relocating to California.

I left, though.

And I haven’t looked back since. I don’t want this man to be in my presence. He irks the fuck out of me.

“I’m your daddy, baby girl. I knew you fled to Katantia the second you landed in this godforsaken place.” Somehow that doesn’t surprise me. His faint grin disgusts me.

“You’re not my daddy,” I insist, stepping behind my office for protection.

“Your legal papers say so. I adopted you when you were a little baby.” My thoughts spin at his disgusting words, and the shame I’d managed to hide away resurfaces.

Longingly, I gaze at the couch where Jordan usually sits. I crave him right now. I want him to protect me from this madman. It’s been five years, and I can see it clearer now.

I was a monster. I still am.

“Why come here now? It’s been five years. You had forgotten about me.” I tremble all over, avoiding Hugh’s eyes. He stares me down, taking in every detail about my body that’s changed. I’d tried hard to become a new person on Katantia. I changed my name, my hair, my clothes...

I used to dye it blond to fit in with the other rich daughters until I realized that my hair wasn’t the ticket to their paradise.

It was my soul.

“I never forget about my investments, baby girl,” he states. “I raised you, and under unfortunate circumstances, we fell in love. I was your first, and I’ll be your last. It’s time to make the latter legitimate.”

“What does that mean? I don’t... I’m fine where I am. I want you to leave my office. It’s been five years. I don’t feel comfortable speaking to you. Please, leave,” I blurt out. I can’t even look at him. He stands in the middle of my office, looking like half the man Jordan is. The suit, the leather shoes. It’s all a façade to hide his little dick.

All the money in the world doesn’t make this man a decent human being.

He turned me into the monster he wanted me to be. And I gave in. *Not anymore.*

“I’m not going to leave Katantia unless you come with me to California, where we’ll marry and live the life we carved out for ourselves,” he says.

Clearing my throat, I reply, “Well, I’m not coming with you. I don’t want to marry you. That’s why I left.”

“Very convenient to leave after ten years of endless sex. You cashed in for as long as you could, finished your degree, and then left me high and dry. I didn’t teach you to behave this way.” Quite frankly, he didn’t teach me anything.

The pain in my body gives me the strength I need to stand up to this man. I’m not Hugh’s little bitch anymore. I have a new life, a job, friends, and a possible partner. “I don’t remember needing your permission to leave.”

“Oh, but you did. Every move of yours was approved by me,” Hugh comments. The bergamot scent he carries around disgusts me, and I want to open the windows to let it all out.

“So, you admit that you encouraged me to drug mom?” I blurt out, going red all over. My temperature rises, and I clench my fists.

“She’s not your mom. She’s my ex,” Hugh insists, and I want to spit at him. “And she’s in rehab where she deserves to be. She’s been an addict all her life. Now, she’s getting the care she needs. I pay all of her bills.”

“I hate myself for drugging her! You gave me the sleeping pills. I was barely seventeen years old. You manipulated me!” I say. The words leave my mouth in a fury, and the next thing I know, I feel empty.

“Why did you do all of that?” he dares to ask, centered in my office. He doesn’t fold, and he doesn’t bow.

“To please you!” Admitting it hurts less than I expected.

“No, you did it because you wanted to take her place.”

I breathe hard at his ridiculous statement. Straightening up my posture, I glare at him directly. “That’s not what I remember. I haven’t thought about it in years... You groomed me from the moment I turned sixteen. Before that, you never even said hi to me. I was Mom’s project, her responsibility. When I turned sixteen, you started giving me lavish gifts. Cars. Purses. Trips to Santorini! You love-bombed me to a point where all I craved was your attention and your love. I applied to the schools you told me to apply to, and I did splendidly on my A-levels. After I’d achieved your academic dreams for me, your wishes became more sinister.”

“Katantia has messed with your head, hasn’t it?” Hugh grins.

“No, it hasn’t. Katantia has made me see it clearly. I... I was hurt.” Deep breaths. “You hurt me. First, it was school, then it was cutting girls out of my circle because their families weren’t on your level, and then you asked me to help you out with mom. You made me think she was in pain. You staged the scene brilliantly. She was throwing a fit, and you didn’t fight for her when the authorities came to take her away. You made her look like an addict, and I didn’t realize it until it was too late. I was too stupid. It’s my fault, really.”

“I received everything I ever thought I wanted from you,” I blurt out. “And you played me. You molded me into your

personal fuck toy, and I obeyed because I didn't know any better."

"You wanted it. Don't fool yourself," he hisses.

"I really didn't." I shake in my seat, trying hard to appear strong.

Jordan's right. I'd been the victim.

My degree hadn't been my first choice, but the more I studied, the more I became infatuated with the idea of being a psychiatrist. Studying gave me a purpose. I recognized that I had more potential than I was forced to believe I did.

I grew out of the shell Hugh Abbott had cultivated around me.

Our wedding was never supposed to happen while his mother was alive. She would've blocked it with all her might. To her, I was scum. She didn't even recognize me as her grandchild. She patronized her son for not having a biological child. My adoption thirty-something years ago had caused a massive scandal in her circle of friends.

When his mother died, Hugh Abbott sped up the wedding. From one day to the other, I was to finish my degree and move to the US with him, where I could be married to my adopted father, an educated trophy wife kneeling at his feet.

At the time, Kamila, the king's daughter, had fled Katantia, and the tiny peninsula in the eastern hemisphere was on the news everywhere. Girls on social media were becoming more and more intrigued about the sex island that caused headlines worldwide. Professors studied the enigma of Katantia and how so many women gravitated toward the country when it was clearly sexist and misogynistic—their words, not mine.

I was almost done with my degree.

And then, almost by a miracle or cruel fate, Katantia was hit by a tsunami that wiped out almost half the peninsula. Lives were lost. Houses demolished. Businesses shut down. Half the economy was in shatters.

They were desperate for women to migrate to Katantia, and I took a chance by secretly applying for a visa. The king himself contacted me, offering me a flight and a place to stay in the palace. I suspected what he would ask for in return. Sex. That was the main principle of Katantia.

I didn't mind. I'd been conditioned by Hugh to believe that sex as a method of exchange was the norm.

Preparations for my wedding were at their peak, and Hugh left for one final work trip before our wedding and subsequent honeymoon.

In London, I packed my bags, and I jumped on a private jet to Katantia—one that the king sent for me, risking my safety and facing an uncertain future away from the monsters of my past.

When I arrived, Katantia was a changed place. The King of Katantia had been murdered, and his daughter Kamila Ruby Wraith had taken over.

I'd prepared myself to adapt and do anything asked of me in this scandalous country, but in the end, Kamila gave me a work visa to work in the hospital.

And I haven't stopped ever since.

"I don't want you," I confess to him. "It's time you embraced it. Now, I have the framework to analyze my issues, and they all stem from my time with you. I've been happy here, and I will continue to be. It took me years to understand that I'm not your toy anymore, and I never will be again."

"I'm not going to leave Katantia until you come home with me," Hugh insists, tugging at the lapels of his immaculate suit jacket.

"Then stay here forever! I don't care. I'm not going back to that phase of my life. Who's to say you didn't let mom adopt me so that you could live out your fetish? You are a manipulative piece of—"

"Be careful," Hugh interrupts me. His authoritative tone roars through the office, shaking me to my core. "You won't like the consequences if you finish that sentence."

“What will you do to me?” I ask. “You’ve scarred me for life! I’ve been lying to myself for years. I’ve been painting myself as a monster when all along, it’s been you! You’re the monster. You’re a piece of shit, and I hate you for ruining my childhood!”

“That’s enough,” Hugh says, raising his hand. He’s signaling me to shut up, but I won’t. “Now that you’ve expressed your silly thoughts, I hope you’re content with yourself. I will leave this office, but I expect you to show up at the airport tomorrow. We’re leaving Katantia, and you’re going to come with me whether you like it or not. You owe it to me. I gave you everything.”

“Leave,” I blurt out. My ears are ringing, and I can’t focus. “Go. I don’t want to see your face anymore.”

I get up to unlock the door for Hugh. He attempts to kiss me, but I push him away, his mere presence causing me nausea. I watch as my former fiancé slash adopted father storms out of my department, dousing me in his bergamot scent.

Leaving the windows open, I hurry home on foot. My senses are alert, and I keep my eyes peeled at my surroundings. Any person I cross paths with is a suspect to me.

Hugh has money, and money buys people. Who’s to say he’s not watching me right now?

I’m on the verge of collapsing by the time I arrive at my building.

Quickly, I get ready without checking my phone or my watch. Jordan’s expecting me, and I don’t want to disappoint him. Perhaps I could stay at the palace for the night.

I don’t feel safe out here anymore.

Not with Hugh Abbott roaming the streets of Katantia.

Smolyakov doesn’t answer when I knock on his door on my way out. Defeated by his sudden change of heart, I call the elevator. I’ve put on a black knee-length dress and my posh heels. My face is powdered with make-up to hide my exhaustion and terror.

I grasp my leather clutch with trembling hands, gazing at Smolyakov's door. Why would he turn on me?

The route to the palace is swift and straightforward. I'm lost in my thoughts, and eager Katantians sound their honks at me while I miss green lights.

Perhaps it's my paranoia, but I notice the intimidating fence surrounding the palace for the first time since I arrived on Katantia. The chain-link perimeter is three times my height, topped with razor wire.

Five guards hover about the guard station at the entry point, chatting among each other. The security cameras are far more intimidating, posted at every corner of this fence to secure maximum surveillance.

I pull up to the gates faster than usual because of lacking traffic.

At the sight of my car, the guards stay away. I roll down my window, making myself more accessible. I don't want to look desperate, but I need the palace's protection right about now.

One of the guards picks up their phone. He hides his mouth with his hand, turning away so that I can't see or hear who he is calling.

My heart races, and I hate that it's taking so long.

A couple of minutes later, Måns arrives, and his scowl prepares me for another showdown. Malena's brother has been after me since the day of Alex's official arrival celebration.

"Go home," Måns orders once he steps up to my car.

"I have an appointment with Mr. Winters," I blurt out. "They're expecting me at the Cross residence."

"No, they're not," Måns replies in a clipped tone, cutting my open wounds and spitting on them to poison me. "Get off the property."

"Please, call Jordan," I beg. My hands clasp the steering wheel with urgency. I'm shaking all over, and I just want to

feel safe. Hugh is here to take me back, and I can't deal with it. "I'm supposed to have dinner with him."

"Nobody enters the palace tonight. Go home, and don't come back," Måns says, staring me down. Briefly, I consider speeding into the palace since the gates are not barricaded, but I know that such an action would only cause more drama.

"Thank you for your service, Måns. I hope your sister's proud of you," I hiss at him, and I turn on the engine of my car.

He calls after me, "She's very proud of me. I'm doing my job well, unlike some other people."

I throw my phone out of the window, right at his feet. He can get rid of it. I won't be tracked by Hugh. My car's old, and it can't connect to the internet, so it's safe.

I've run out of energy, and I can barely keep an eye open, but I don't go back home. I ride until the sun comes up, and I must go to work.

Unfortunately, I'm in heels and a black dress for work, but it'll do. I wash my face in the bathroom before entering my office.

My safety can wait, my patients not.

CHAPTER 18

JORDAN



DINNER'S A MESS. MY SISTER AND HER HELP PRODUCED A four-course meal from an hors d'oeuvre to dessert. The dishes were exquisite, but the seat next to me remained empty. Kamila handed me Kendrick the moment it became clear that Ivy wasn't going to show.

My grandson has been sleeping with his head on my chest for over an hour now while Felicita and Kamila hold a conversation about my unborn grandchild in Kamila's belly. My son glowers at the innocent empty plates before him while Fylox focuses on his phone, presumably sending out more death threats.

I didn't expect the night to turn out like this.

Kendrick's calm breathing against my chest calms me down, distracting me from the vile thoughts in my head. I rock back and forth with the baby in my arm while my sister sneakily glances at me in pity. I sit and think of the souls I've murdered cold-bloodedly, and suddenly, I'm not eager for my grandson to grow up and judge me. This dinner needs to be over already.

"I have some things to do in the city," I announce abruptly. Kendrick twitches in my hold, but he doesn't wake. "We should call it a night."

"Is anyone going to address the fact that Ivy didn't show?" Alex comments. His stiff posture makes me uncomfortable. "What does it mean? Did you imagine your relationship? Is she playing hard to get?"

“Enough,” Kamila intervenes before Alex can reveal more of his honest thoughts. “We had a nice family dinner.”

“It wasn’t nice, and you know it,” I say. We don’t raise our voices. We’re murmuring at each other, trying not to wake Kendrick.

“Alex has been here for over a week, and you haven’t shown up to one family dinner,” Kamila argues. She doesn’t wear make-up when pregnant, and her oily skin reddens at her eruption. “All of a sudden, you have a girlfriend. I’m trying my best to welcome her, but this is unacceptable behavior. I didn’t think Ivy was one to stand us up without reason. You only agreed to a joint dinner because she was coming. Do you know how that makes us feel?”

“How does it make you feel, Kamila?” I ask, my fuse short.

My sister pleads, “Jordan, please. Think about Kendrick.”

“That’s what I always do. I think about all of you,” I state. I don’t have to raise my voice. There’s no need. They’re all listening. “You’re my priority. I never once step back and think about the consequences for me. I didn’t force you to come to this dinner, Kamila. You asked to come. I haven’t had time to meet you for family dinners because I have a country to keep safe. In the five years that I’ve been on Katantia, I haven’t done anything but serve you and this screwed-up country.”

“Don’t talk to her that way when you’re the one who can’t let go. We don’t force you to do anything,” Alex sneers at me. “I’m right here. Say it to my face.”

“My son’s in another continent, working in the public eye. He’s in constant danger because of his affiliation with you. I never complain. Instead, I figure out solutions for shit. I run his security team, although he thinks I don’t. I have eyes and soldiers everywhere. So, no, I don’t know how it makes you feel that I missed a couple of dinners because I was keeping you and your family safe, and quite frankly, I couldn’t give a shit.” For once, Fylox doesn’t flinch at the curse words. “You’re alive to mess around with my son and his best friend,

who are mindlessly fighting because of his future in this family. Be grateful.”

Kamila’s eyes widen. “Thank you for that elaborate speech.”

She rises from her chair, speechless and dumbfounded. Alex wraps his hand around her arm, jumping up from his seat. She brushes him off, and she doesn’t look at him. When my son sits back down, my gaze meets Kamila’s round belly, and I’m stung with guilt over upsetting her.

My daughter-in-law reaches my side of the table, and she takes Kendrick away from me without sparing me another glance. She puts him in his stroller, careful not to wake him. “Thank you for dinner, Felicita. You outdid yourself. I’m going home. I want to be left alone.”

Fylox gets up, but Kamila ignores him. She’s out of the door before we know it.

“If you’re going to fight, take it outside,” Felicita demands. Her squinted eyes are full of disappointment. “The staff is coming over to clean up, and they don’t need to see this.”

“There will be no fight,” Alex announces. He pushes his chair back. “To make it easier for all of you, I will retire and move to Katantia. My father doesn’t have to interfere with my life in America anymore, and he can take a break to rethink his relationships.”

“You’ll regret it,” Fylox comments.

“In what sense? I get to see my kids grow up,” Alex blurts out. “I’m tired of you thinking that all I care about is work.”

“What else am I supposed to think? You’re your father’s son,” Fylox says.

“I’m my mother’s son, too, and she gave up her career to raise me while he was out in the world, killing people and calling it a job. It’s not my fault that you weren’t there when I was a kid.” *I learned from the best. You weren’t there, Dad. Get over it.* Only Alex sounded much kinder back then. Now, he is bitter. “You’re trying to compensate for your past, but I

won't allow you to work yourself to death, Dad. Kamila's going to let you go. You need a break."

"What do you think you're doing, son?" I ask, and my sister grows quiet. She doesn't move a limb. Everyone at this table is full of guilt, reeking from miles away. Fylox pretends like he doesn't exist, barely breathing. He's inhumane on his good days. Now, he's a ghost.

Without Kamila to keep them in order, my son and my second-in-command are lost.

"I'm saving you," Alex states.

Felicita shudders at my mirthless laugh. "You're casting me out."

I'm left cold at the realization. I'm not even surprised. First, Kamila took away Kendrick, and now, my son takes away my livelihood. They're stripping me of everything important in my life, and they want me to bow and take it.

"I gave you everything," I remind my son. Everyone in this room better remember.

Alex twists his head in my direction, fast and full of fury. "You. Gave. Me. Nothing."

"Don't say things you can't take back—"

My son interrupts my sister, sneering at her. "You stay out of it."

Felicita lowers her gaze, defeat taking over. Her shoulders are slumped, and she's forcing herself to stay numb while the tears are glistening on her cheeks.

"Jordan Winters isn't real as far as I'm concerned. He's a façade, isn't he? Who are you, Dad? Will you ever let us know?" *3013*. No, I won't, son. Alex goes on, "You crowd me. You press all the answers you need from us, yet you never give up anything of your own. You control our lives. You want us to be grateful... For what? For a failed dinner with your slut of the week?"

"Ivy isn't a slut," Fylox intervenes before I can open my mouth, and I stare at my second-in-command. They're all fond

of my doe, and I want it to stay that way. Something's wrong, and I need to figure out what it is. My doe might be in danger. She wouldn't stand me up like this. I need to finish this dinner and find her. "Your father hasn't touched a woman in years. I don't think it's a joke, Alex. It's real."

"It is," Felicita blurts out.

Stunned, I sit at this table. My body still feels the weight of my grandson, our small miracle. Kendrick doesn't ask for much right now. He wants to be loved and taken care of. He doesn't know the legacy he represents. He doesn't yet understand who we are. I feel his weight on me, tiny as he is right now, but I know that one day, we'll have to help him become bigger than us.

He's our future, and we must protect him.

My family means the world to me, and to see my son turn on me the way he just did breaks me.

"I bet he wishes you were his son. You're the perfect soldier, at his beck and call all the time. Is that why you don't want me here?" Alex scorns, and Fylox appears positively taunted. This wasn't a conversation we ever anticipated to have this late and in front of my sister out of all people. She's had enough trauma in her life. She doesn't need to witness how I ruin my relationship with Alex.

"Alex," Fylox warns my son.

My afternoon began in a light tone. My doe was coming over for a night of fun with my family. She'd have slept over if it were up to me. It would've been human, normal at best. We could've pretended like we were a normal couple for once.

We aren't.

My family is far from normal.

"The truth is, you don't want to know the real me," I say to my son. I push back my chair, grating the floor. The noise is ugly. Travis is here in spirit, warning me to take it easy. "My job isn't for little boys like you. No, I don't wish for Fylox to be my son. He is like my son, and that's enough. He has a dad, and you do, too. You better remember that. If you want me to

leave, tell me so yourself. Don't hide behind your wife and her status as my boss."

Alex doesn't speak, and I see a glimmer of regret in his eyes. I choose to ignore it.

"Since you don't have the balls to say it, I will do it. I'm going to leave," I say.

"No, please. Alex. Say something!" Felicita urges my son, but he just stares at me, staggered at the turn of events. "You're not well. Please, Jordan. Stay. We can go on walks. Take it easy. Don't go. We can invite her over again, just the three of us. I want to get to know Ivy. She's a good woman for you. I'm sure...."

She wants me close by just like I do. We need confirmation that we're both still here. I haven't left my sister alone in the years since our reunion, and it hurts to do it now, but I must.

"I didn't think you'd give up so early," Alex blurts out.

"I have pride. I won't be kicked out in front of my men. I'll be gone by the end of the hour. You can explain to them what happened tomorrow when I'm not around anymore." Which means I have about fifteen minutes to jump into my Escalade and head out.

Leaving my family behind in the dining room, I hurry up the stairs. They creak below me, more so than usual. It's like Travis is here, and he's unhappy with how I'm leaving things. *Too bad*. He was a better family man than me. He never left his daughter. But he killed the mothers of the people that mean the most to Valentina. He lied to his kids for years about his sexuality. He couldn't prevent my sister from being raped by Aram daily. Knowing what Travis did in his past doesn't stop Valentina from kneeling at his grave and crying her eyes out every time she visits him. My niece's love for her dad's endless. She's his little strawberry through and through, and in times like these, I question how I ended up in this mess.

The people around me are unhappy with how I'm handling things.

As I open the door to my bedroom, the door handle falls off, and I curse under my breath. Fuck you, Travis.

I don't even have my own home anymore.

Everything I do is connected to the people downstairs. I live and breathe for them. It stirs up the anger in me, but the detachment returns. I can't even be mad. I'm back in Ivy's living room, watching my son celebrate his fourth championship ring. My heart thunders in my chest, urging me to rethink my actions.

But I don't care.

I don't trust my heart anymore. That fucker's betrayed me too many times already.

Picking up a gym bag, I stuff it with my clothes, shoes, and guns. I don't even have an attachment to this room. I'm barely in here, and it doesn't feel like home. When I'm here, I sleep with one eye open, ready to fight anyone who dares to step into Travis's home to hurt my sister.

The guilt is back, but I bite at it, making it bleed out for me. *Die, bitch.*

I feel like I haven't slept in days as I carry my bag down the stairs and past my wailing sister. She's crying, but I know I should leave. Once I'm gone, Alex and Fylox will depart, and then, she'll have the house to herself again.

She needs to move on just as much as I do. I'm not sure how she can do that, considering that she lives in an empty home that she spent her life in with her deceased husband. She raised her kids here, one became the devil, and the other became an angel. My sister has lost a lot, but I know she can overcome.

In the end, she's stronger than all of us.

I unlock my car, and I faintly register a shadow from Valentina's home moving my way. I ignore it. Her husband must have heard the noises coming from the Cross house, and he came out to check on it.

My sister yells at my son, urging him to do something, but nobody else moves.

The car starts, and I float away.

Who's next?



IVY IS FRAIL, A BROKEN LITTLE DOE.

Just like me, she hasn't slept. I came to her house right after I left the palace for good. I kept hold of my senses, and I didn't lose my shit. At least, I don't think I blacked out. I haven't heard anything, so I must have been a good boy at least once in my life.

I knocked on Ivy's door, but she wasn't home.

Smolyakov came out of his apartment, looking more disheveled than I felt, and he stared me down. He didn't say a word, but we understood each other. Things wouldn't end well if we started a fight in front of Ivy's home.

Ivy's best friend retreated into his humble abode, and I left the building, settling in my car across the road. The deathtrap Ivy usually rode around in wasn't here. That was my only solace. She could be visiting friends.

Friends she didn't have.

All her fucking friends were in this fucking building.

No hospitals had her name signed in as an emergency. I reminded myself of that fact, and I stayed in that car, almost pissing into one of the water bottles from the gym. Fuck.

I'm in my car, surveying her as she walks home from work. It's six, a long day for her. Walking isn't an accurate description of what transpires.

Her spirits are low, and her eyes sunken. She wears a pretty black dress that hugs her beautiful body just the way I liked it. She holds a clutch in one hand and heels in the other.

Where has she been all night? Did she meet up with somebody else? Was this outfit meant for me?

The despair on her pretty face, her pouty lips that are turned all the way down...

This isn't a woman that had snuck out to meet somebody other than her fucking man.

She's limping, and I don't know why.

What did I miss? I lose myself in the thoughts of my mistakes. Why didn't she show? Are we going too fast?

What will my men do without me at work? Måns hasn't been back to his home ever since I left, and I saw the worry in his sister's face this morning when she left for work. He must be busier than usual now that I'm officially out of the way.

Unexpectedly so, I hear a shy knock from the passenger's window as I unbuckle my seatbelt.

Glancing up, I see my doe. She stares at the ground, and she's not well. I don't like that I've grown a conscience for once.

I unlock the doors, and she slips inside.

Ivy's tiny next to me, and she jitters like a frantic woman. She hasn't eaten. Not that I have either. At least, I have some weight to lose. Ivy doesn't.

"You should go home," she says, but it's barely a whisper. It's a croak at best. How can she go to work like this? It's her job to be there for people, but she isn't here for herself. She's fading away, and I need to know what transpired.

"Why didn't you show up, Ivy?" I ask.

She cackles, filling the car with an awful noise I never want to hear from her again. It sounds like she's dying right next to me, and the thought of somebody I love dying messes with me. "Oh, now you care?"

"I've been here all day," I remind her.

"I know. I feel it when you're around," she confesses, hiding her face from me. She's pulled up her legs, hugging

them close to her body.

“What happened?” I inquire.

“Remember when I freaked out in the Crack & Nut club?”

I nod, and although I’ve wanted to forget the event, it’s always there in the back of my mind. My vulnerable doe in my arms, asking for help. She let me take the pain away that night, and I’ll never forget it. We bonded. I have no idea what’s going on inside of her head right now, but if it has something to do with the anal sex club, I’ll burn them down.

Kamila can go on and lock me up in a punishment sex house for all I care.

“I drugged my mother, and then I started a relationship with her husband,” Ivy blurts out.

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me.”

“That’s not....” I cleared my throat. “Your mom’s in rehab because of an addiction. Your dad covered up the fact that you pushed her to take the drugs.”

She drops her arms to her side. “Of course, that’s all you know. You know things, but you don’t know everything. I’m sure you read about Hugh wanting to relocate to California?”

I nod. “He’s lived there for five years now, and he’s been fucking every wannabe Hollywood starlet he can find.”

“Well, that was supposed to be me,” she blurts out. “I was supposed to be his entertainment, his perfect trophy wife in a brand-new world. California was going to be our starting anew. We could get married there, away from the scrutiny of his cunt family.”

This is an unfortunate turn of events, and it makes me reconsider how I met my doe’s father the other day at Crack & Nut. If this is true, which it surely is... Fuck. Hugh Abbott wants Ivy back.

“Why did you leave?”

“I studied my way out of the cage he built for me. He made me attend college, but in the end, it backfired. I figured out what he was doing to me, and I decided to abandon him. He’s sick. He... He came to my office as I was leaving to come to the palace.” She snuffles, and I want nothing but to touch her. I know she needs space. She’s vulnerable. She’ll come to me when she’s ready. I say all that, but I know that it’s pussy. I should man up and save her from her hell.

Croaking, Ivy goes on, “He’s on Katantia, and he won’t leave unless I go with him. I haven’t seen him since he came to my office, but... I can’t deal. I didn’t sleep last night. I can’t hold in any food. I’m paranoid that he’ll burst inside and drag me to California. I felt your presence, but I couldn’t shake off the suspicion.”

She clears her throat. “I came to the palace, but Måns wouldn’t let me in.”

I roll my eyes at that piece of shit. “I’ll deal with him when I see him. I didn’t give them the order to block your entrance. I wanted you there, Ivy. All hell broke loose. The family and I had a fight. I quit my job.”

“You... What?” Confused, she blinks up at me.

“I’m without a job. And homeless.”

“Where did you stay last night?” she asks, her voice as clear as day. I see the strain in her eyes and the faint shudder of her muscles. She works hard to appear tough right now, to be my good little doe.

She’s on the verge of collapse, and I must take care of her before she fades entirely.

“I stayed here. I didn’t really do much else other than worry about you,” I tell her, and I can see a faint gleam in her eye. “I wasn’t going to let you be kidnapped by anyone. I worried about where you were.”

Ivy sighs, lowering her gaze. She stares at her thighs, her fingers folded on her lap now. Her hair is messed up, the roots growing darker every day.

We've both been a mess. I don't know if I should celebrate that even our downfalls are in sync.

"So, they let you go, and now you're protecting me?" she bluntly asks.

I nod.

"I'm glad you're protecting me. I wouldn't ever betray you the way they did. I've been ashamed. I don't deserve your protection, your affection... I deserve to be taken away to California. I played along, Jordan. I thought it was meant to be. It was hot for a while, fucking somebody so forbidden until I realized what a disgusting pig he was... We hid it from everybody. I'm sure he discussed it with his old pig friends, the ones who always gawked at my tits when we were at social gatherings... I brought this upon myself. Fylox didn't ask to be kidnapped and sold into sexual slavery at eight. Neither did Ignas. I went along with Hugh because it benefitted me to be under his wing."

"Don't compare yourself to Fylox and Ignas," I say. "Those are two different situations. It's your own unique trauma. Don't play it down."

She shook next to me, her sobs a torture.

"Let's get you something to eat, and then we'll go to bed, okay? You need to rest."

Ivy nods, but I know it'll take much more than some fast food to help her get past Hugh Abbott.

CHAPTER 19



I SIT NEXT TO JORDAN WHILE HE ORDERS OUR FOOD IN A drive-through, but I fiddle with my shirt endlessly, unable to drift into peace. I can't forget Kamila's face when she surprised me at my office.

After I didn't show up to the Wraith royals' family dinner for Jordan, Kamila came over for an unexpected session today.

A bully session.

And I was the victim.

Kamila Ruby Wraith put on a dress that pointed out her pregnant body to anyone and everyone. Her skin glowed, and her hair was a mess but in a sexy way, a way only the Queen of Katantia could pull off. The woman sitting by my desk and staring me down was owned by not one but two men. She looked like it, unnervingly confident. Did she think her pussy was made from gold?

Ninety percent of Katantia seem to think so. Add half the population of the US. Alex is being propositioned by groupies and IG models every day he spends at work, winning games and being the perfect end game for gold diggers. He doesn't cower. He doesn't break. Alex Winters doesn't have any cheating scandals under his belt.

And Kamila Ruby Wraith always remembers that.

She's certain it'll stay that way, too.

Fylox dominates her body, but Kamila owns her husband's and her boyfriend's souls.

Today, she carried their second child in her body, and she wouldn't let me forget. There were three palace guards at my door, inside my office. The entire floor always gets cleared when Kamila or Fylox come around. When Kamila's pregnant, they post ten guards around her—three inside of my office, seven outside.

I was glad Måns wasn't part of her detail.

“What was more important than showing up for Jordan yesterday?” Kamila bluntly asked while I hid behind my laptop. “And turn that off. Look at me when I speak to you. This isn't you, Ivy. What's going on?”

I shut my laptop, and I took a deep breath.

Kamila and I know each other. She helped me get a job and housing when I first came to Katantia, back when she had the immediate aftermath of the deadly tsunami to deal with. She had just become queen, but she was needed by thousands, but she chose to help me. Sure, I was a psychiatrist, and my services have now been sold out for years, but still.

Once everything settled and people digested the fact that a woman had become their queen, she started coming to my office. She sought my help.

I gave it to her.

Kamila's addict and abusive past didn't make it easy for the young queen.

We knew each other well, but why did it feel like we were strangers now that I had a different role? I wasn't simply her employee anymore. I was the woman who had broken her promise last night.

Was there any use in snitching on Måns? He was the one who didn't let me in.

“I had an unexpected visit from my past,” I revealed.

Kamila wasn't impressed. “I don't care. Felicita cooked for you, and you disappointed her. Jordan was sad throughout the dinner, and eventually, Alex, and he got into a fight. Now, I'm sure the fight escalated because things have been brewing

between them for a while, but your absence didn't help. My husband doesn't think it's wise of Jordan to mingle with the help."

She was doing this to get a rise out of me, and fuck, if it worked. "I'm the help?"

My accusatory tone got to the ice-cold queen, and for a moment, she considered slipping back into the role of being my patient. She sobered up quickly, and she masked her emotions. "You're one of our most trusted employees. Business and pleasure don't mix well in your world, I hear."

"I had every intention of being there." I hid my trembling fingers under the table.

"You weren't, though. I won't forget that. Ever," Kamila said. She took a deep breath. "Seriously, baby? Now is the time you decide to move? Your fathers and I have been trying to get you to move for so long!"

Kamila rubbed her round belly, talking to it. I wanted to reach out and feel the movement, too, but I didn't. Mom and daughter were having a moment, and I didn't want to intrude. Kamila's tone changed, and the shaking of my fingers stopped. She wasn't here to hurt me, but the men standing at my door were surely friends with Måns. Behind their queen's back, they glared at me. Måns' vendetta against me was tiring.

"How is she doing?" I inquired, curious about the next royal baby. She was due soon, and everyone was tense about it.

"Great," Kamila clipped.

"Have you decided on a name?"

"Yes."

"Will you tell me?"

"No, not anymore. You've lost my trust." She sighed, rubbing her face. "I'm so emotional lately, and Alex and Fylox fighting doesn't make it any easier. Couldn't Jordan have waited a little while to get a girlfriend? Everything's happening so fast!"

I had to disagree. I'd waited fifty long therapy sessions to get where I was with Jordan last night. I'd messed up royally, but I hadn't intended to. I was innocent, and when I saw Jordan, I'd tell him to his face. "Jordan's been waiting for years for something to call his own."

"And you're all that?" Kamila inquired, tilting her head to the side and taking me in with condemnation crawling out of her eyeballs.

"Yes, I am!"

"Honey, just because he fucked you a couple of times, that doesn't mean you're going to be his now." I clenched my fists, biting my tongue. I went red, and I forgot about the orgy of guards. They'd crush me in an instant if I moved to hurt the pregnant queen. I didn't fucking care! She wouldn't disrespect what I had with Jordan. "It takes a lot more than that."

"How do you mean?" I inquired, crossing my legs under the table. "Is there a special skill for it? Does he have to kidnap me for me to be his? How do you know that I won't be Jordan's?"

"First of all, you messed up by bailing on dinner last night," Kamila argued. She squinted her eyes at me. "Second, a man like Jordan doesn't own women. He's still in love with his ex-wife, and he has never been able to let go of that relationship. Alex says his dad probably hasn't slept with a lot of women since his mom."

"Alex knows a lot of things about his dad. Isn't that curious?" I bit back. I'd seen the way Jordan behaved around his ex-wife, and the punch to my gut came to wreck me. I wouldn't break in front of Kamila. "He knows so much yet so little."

"Don't get smart with me. Alex is his son, and we all want what's best for Jordan. He needs a break. He'll get it. Now, excuse me. I'm craving my men, and I don't need to be around your energy right now." Kamila's full height intimidated me. She got up from her seat, staring down at me. "I didn't know doctors wore dresses to work. Fix that. What's wrong with you?"

I tugged at my dress, embarrassed at my appearance.

“Ivy? Please, little doe. Talk to me,” Jordan urges me, dragging me into the present. Kamila came into my office earlier today, and I’ve been spiraling ever since.

I can’t muster enough courage to talk to him. Ask him about his ex-wife. Explain my absence at dinner.

As I sit next to him with a bag of hot food on my lap, I try to count my blessings, but I can’t see them through the blur I’m facing.

“Eat, Ivy.”

“I can’t. I’ll shit or throw up all over your car,” I warn him. The heat coming off the paper bag on my lap irks me. My stomach growls, but I know I won’t be able to hold it down. I haven’t had proper food in almost two days.

“I wish you would.”

“You really don’t,” I insist, laughing dryly.

“Little doe, this car means shit to me. I want you to look like yourself again. You’re shaking, and you’re starved.” He leans over to my side, opening up the paper bag on my lap. “Will it help if I feed you?”

I shake my head, and I turn away from him.

“Don’t cry. I’ve had a rough day and night, little doe. You have, too. Don’t waste your precious energy crying,” he urges me.

“I thought you liked my tears.”

“I love your tears. I love them so much that I crave them. I could make a diet out of your tears, and I’d be well-fed for the rest of my days, little doe. But I won’t. I need you to get back to normal. You’re fading....” The worry in his tone is honest, a vulnerable moment that I get to keep for myself. “You’re fading, and I won’t have that. You’re mine now.”

“I’m really not, aren’t I,” I blurt out.

“I’ll give you anything you need,” he vows. He’s waving a fry in front of my face, challenging me to part my lips for him.

I don't. "I'm done pleasing them. They dared to kick me out. I don't care if this shit burns down...."

Jordan doesn't mean the bitter words that leave his mouth. He's too invested to want Katantia to burn. But right now? It'll help him save face. I give him that.

"This is a blessing," I comment.

"How so?"

"It's the vacation you've been yearning for." I think about what Kamila said in my office today. *He needs a break. He'll get it.*

"That doesn't sound like me," he says, taking a bite from his burger. Juices slide down his chin, and suddenly, I want to lick at him, lap it all up with my curious tongue. He eats with elegance in front of me, but the burger's so juicy that he loses the battle. His fingers are greasy now, and I can't stop staring at him for being right here with me.

"I hope you were lying earlier."

"About?"

"You staying in your car."

He licks his lips, and my eyes trace the movement with hunger. "It's my truth."

I shudder. He must be as exhausted as I am if he's been staying in this goddamn car. It's spacious, but Jordan's a big man. He does big things. He needs his downtime. "You shouldn't stay in your car."

"How else am I going to keep an eye on my needy little doe?" Fuck. His words make me wet. I would let him stalk me all over again. As long as his eyes are watching, I'd do anything for my new favorite drug. His attention, affection, and protection.

"You could stay with me," I suggest. Unless you're still in love with your ex, and you want her back, that is.

"Why do you say it like that? There's a but somewhere in that suggestion," Jordan claims, studying my face for hints. I

take a deep breath, and I realize that we can't play games. I've got a situation with Hugh, and Jordan's family has kicked him out. If we're allies, we should work together.

"Kamila said you're still pining over your ex," I blurt out, avoiding his reaction. Images of Jordan, his ex-wife, and his son proudly taking pictures at his championship celebration flood my mind. I stash the food on the dashboard, and I hoist my legs back up against my chest. I hug myself for comfort.

"She's lucky she's pregnant. That's all I'll say about her. And she's the mother of my grandchildren. Fuck. She irritates me so much right now." His reaction surprises me, and I dare to glance at him. He gives in to his frustration, chunking down more of that juicy burger in his hands.

I mutter, "Get in line."

After he's chewed and swallowed, his Adam's apple tempting me, he continues, "And, no, little doe. I spent a long time *pinning* after my ex, but the moment you let me fuck your pretty little mouth out in the open, I knew I had crossed into new territory. Our territory. I've always looked into what you were up to outside of work—"

My eyes widen. "You did?"

"That's not romantic, Ivy. Don't look at me with stars in your eyes right now. I stalked you. I would've bugged your apartment, cameras scrutinizing your every move." I clench my thighs together at the thought. "I didn't. I also didn't have you killed, which is a miracle, considering you know more than half of Kamila's secrets. You've always intrigued me, and it never felt right to remove you from the equation. I enjoyed our sessions."

"You did?" I ask, astonished. He never looked like he had enjoyed it. I always had to press the answers out of him, failing miserably.

"I liked watching you squirm."

That sentence causes a reaction that only he brings out of me. I want to jump on his lap and fuck him out in the open.

With Hugh wandering out and about on Katantia, I need to be careful, though. I whisper, “I like squirming for you.”

“I could always see that. Why did you never tell me?” he asks.

“In case you haven’t noticed, I grew up sheltered and thinking nobody outside of Hugh would ever love me,” I tell him, blushing some more while he finishes his burger. He takes a paper towel, drying his hands. He works hard to get rid of the grease, but it’s not going anywhere. He lets out a harsh breath. “I didn’t know what to do with my feelings for you. You represented everything I never had. I know you’re everyone’s dad, but you’re so much more than that... You carry so much pain and guilt with you. You never opened up, but I could see it weighing you down.”

A car drives by us, but the Escalade doesn’t shake like my car would. I continue, “I guess I like older men. I crave the maturity, the security that comes along with somebody who’s twice my age. Smolyakov said so. I have daddy issues.”

“Ivy.”

My gaze is lowered, and tears travel down my cheeks. I wipe them before he can see, but I have a feeling he knows I’m upset already. Hiding from Jordan is futile. “What?”

“I won’t be your father,” Jordan says. He grabs the keys and the paper bags of food.

I gulp down my shame. “I get it. You don’t have to be.”

He gets out of his car, and I remain inside, sobbing while he can’t hear me. Quickly, I wipe my eyes again. Snot is running down my face, and I need to clean it up ASAP.

Jordan opens my door, helping me out of his car. “Jesus. You weigh nothing. Ivy, you need to eat. I’m not joking. I won’t have you faint on me. I know a lot of things since I’m the brave, wise older man in your life, but it involves killing people. I don’t know how to help if you faint.”

“I’m sorry,” I blurt out.

“Don’t be. Let’s go upstairs, and I’ll force-feed you fattening burgers. You’ll be back in shape before you can say psychoanalysis,” he states, shutting the passenger’s door behind me. His hand is on my lower back, and it helps stop my shaking. I know that with Jordan here, not a lot can happen to me.

“Ivy?” Danai’s voice takes me out of my daydream. I lift my gaze, and I see her by the gates. Her brown hair is loose, almost messy. She just came home from work, and I can see it in her red eyes behind her glasses. “Where have you been? I’ve been trying to reach you. You haven’t answered any of my calls. What is going on?”

Jordan grabs my hand, and I’m momentarily fazed. I gawk at him as he takes us forward, closer toward my friend. He magically produces my ID card, scanning it at the gates. Danai and I stare at Jordan while he holds me like I’m his. She’s as stunned as I am.

We walk into the building I live in, and he conversates with Danai like they’ve known each other for years.

Technically, they have. Danai is Valentina’s doctor, her OB-GYN.

“Kamila’s doing great. The baby is as healthy as ever, and Alex seems so excited to meet her! He’s crazy about them,” Danai tells Jordan, and I see his face change, but she doesn’t notice. Danai doesn’t pick up on the dark turn of Mr. Winters’ eyes. The grim thoughts that plague him eat at him, making him doubt all the effort he’s put into his family.

He feels cheated.

Jordan’s part of this fucking family, and it hurts him to be cast outside.

He needs to be there, overseeing it all. The babies are growing every day, and the more he misses, the sadder he’s going to end up being. I can’t have that. Yes, taking a break is integral to his progress, but he needs to be close to his family.

Jordan wants to feed me? Well, I’ll make him rest. We’ll recuperate together.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Jordan responds, and Danai scans her thumb to call the elevator for us.

“Malena says that Måns won’t be coming home in the foreseeable future,” Danai comments. She gazes at nothing, tapping her foot. She doesn’t want us to see her tense shoulders.

“He hasn’t?” I ask, the question addressing Jordan.

“He got a raise,” Jordan reveals, and the fake smile that polishes his face intimidates me. I never thought I’d be more afraid of Jordan pretending than of his stalking skills. “He’s in for a treat. It’ll take some time until he finds a new rhythm.”

“Oh, that’s good to hear,” Danai replies, obviously unhappy with Jordan’s response. She wanted the juicy details, but Jordan gave her the short version, the lie.

When we reach our floor, Danai hugs me. “Please, call me up? We haven’t spoken in a while. Smolyakov’s been absent, too. We should go to the Gold Necklace this weekend.”

“Definitely.” I nod into her hug. The truth is, I don’t want to party. I don’t want to go outside of my home. I can’t risk it.

“Goodbye, Jordan. It was nice to see you again,” Danai says as she enters her apartment.

Jordan kicks off his shoes like I do once we’re inside my place. He doesn’t wear a leather jacket today. He must have left it in the car. I stare at his fit physique. He barely fits into my hallway, his big frame crowding it.

Danai’s petite frame was a stark contrast to Jordan’s. Seeing it again in person made me realize the difference.

When it’s just us, it’s hard to pay attention to how big Jordan is, how defined his body is. I’m used to seeing him post-workout, his body buzzing from his exercise. From his thick thighs to his strong arms, I can see it all through his T-shirt. It sticks to his formed skin, and I’d salivate over him on any other day.

Today, I don’t have the energy to gawk at him some more.

We take a shower together, and afterward, we go to bed. We hang the towels to dry, and we lie down naked. Jordan places the paper bag of fast food on the night table. He wants me to eat, but I can't.

My hair is wet, making a mess of the pillows.

"I can't be your dad," Jordan says. "I don't want to be, little doe. You don't want that from me."

"I'm sorry," I blurt out, hiding my face behind my sheets. It feels good to be home, and I was sleepy on my way from work, but as I lie here, I can't be still. I fidget with the sheets, my temperature rising.

"Ivy, I mean it. How old are you again?" he asks in his serious voice, and I shudder. I'm not at the end of that voice very often, and it's a scary place to be.

"You know how old I am," I tell him.

"I do. Say it."

"I just turned thirty-one."

"You can't afford to act like a baby," Jordan says, and I want to disappear. My eyes are shut. "For fuck's sake, Ivy. You treat the Queen of Katantia. You haven't had a proper vacation in years because everyone asks for your service. When will you finally register how important you are and how much you mean to people? You can't let Abbott make you feel useless. I don't recognize you right now."

I don't know how one meeting can make me feel so low, but it did, and I can't hide the sobs. It's pathetic and weak. I'm sent back into the mindset of my old self, the girl before Ivy.

Hugh Abbott doesn't lie when he says he controlled my life. I required his validation to exist.

"Do you regret me?" I ask.

"No, I don't," he states, removing the sheets from my vicinity. "Don't ever hide from me. You're having a phase, and we'll get you out of it."

"We?"

“Yes. You’re going on a coffee detox, little doe. I don’t want to see a drop of it until you’re back to your normal self. I’m not your daddy. I’ve got grandkids, little doe. I’m your partner, and we help each other out of our funks.” My heart pounds in agreement. He reaches for the paper bag, and I study how his muscles contort for this simple movement. He doesn’t stretch much to grab the food, but it’s enough of a sight to feast on. I can see that the bag’s oily and dirty and... Fuck, it smells so good. My stomach reacts instantly. “As I said, I’ll force-feed you now, so take a seat, and open that mouth of yours. I’m only going to do this once.”

I do as told, and *as I said* I would, I spent the rest of the afternoon in the bathroom.

Jordan’s right there with me, though.

CHAPTER 20

JORDAN



IVY STARES AT ME WHILE I EXCHANGE THE OLD LIGHT BULB IN her living room with an LED one. Her doe eyes take me in like she's never seen me before. I don't even need the ladder she's provided me with. I reach up, and I twist.

Her eyes trace every movement.

"It's nice to have a man at home," she comments, biting her lip. It's a hot day on Katantia, and she's in her panties and my T-shirt. Without a T-shirt to cover me, I have my basketball shorts on. All her windows are wide open, and we're sweating our asses off without the A/C turned on.

"That's all I'm worth to you?" I hold the old light bulb in my hand, contemplating what to do. In the old days, before I removed myself from the palace, I would've taken it to our recycle point. Kamila's recycling is a sport of its own, and she promotes this side of Katantia to the world with pride. Light bulbs and batteries, among other things, are routinely sent to the palace for disposal. The government deals with countries that dispose of such items.

Anyone who uses plastic straws here gets fined. Plastic bottles are widely shunned like sexting, and porn is—absurdity at its finest. In some cases, whenever Kamila's in her bad moods, she might send a man to a punishment sex house for a week because they disobeyed one of the strict environmental laws. Sometimes, my daughter-in-law's a sex dictator, and on other days, she's just a woman that wants her shores clean, citizens happy, and her air clear.

Ivy steps up to me, her delicate fingers trailing the waistband of my shorts. They hang low, and she knows that. She's been staring at my dick all day. One thing that I've noticed about Ivy is that she is spoiled. When she doesn't get what she wants, she gets pouty. She's a horny little doe right now, and it serves her right to suffer for a little while until she learns to treat her body like a temple. She says, "I offered to step on the ladder and do it myself, but you said something about not fucking me until I started eating regular meals again. If I stepped on that ladder, you would've had no chance but to spot me."

Her fingers dip below the waistband of my shorts, and she grabs the base of my cock. She knows I don't mind the pain. I welcome it. Her rough grip gets me going, and she manages to get me turned on in an instant. She doesn't even have to stroke me. Her grip is enough. "I know how hard it is for you to spot me without dragging me to bed. All those innocent touches get you worked up."

"You think too much of yourself, little doe." I smirk at her, but she's got me by the balls. I'm trying to teach her a lesson. No food? No sex. I'm patient. I must be. Without patience and discipline, I'd be fucked. *3013* and no arrests are my reward.

"I don't have to think. I see. I feel..." She rubs my dick, making me groan.

"You're not playing fair," I say, finding her hand in my shorts and removing it. She shrugs cheekily.

If my needy little doe could take a page from my book... My obsessive nature works both ways, apparently. Without a job and a country to look after, I focus on new goals. *Make Ivy eat again.*

We've been doing great for days now, having found a schedule for food and relaxation. I go to work with her, and then I run errands.

I study her, and as much as I'm wary of her home after finding out who Hugh Abbott really is to her, I can't find it in me to uproot Ivy from the only home she feels comfortable in.

Where would we go?

I can't bear buying another house on Katantia, one that's not on the palace compound. I can afford any place I set my eyes on, but I can't do it to myself. It hurts my soul to think that the rift between my family and I can grow deeper.

It's been days.

We haven't spoken.

Not even Fylox has messaged me to keep me in the loop.

People don't know that I'm not an official palace employee anymore, and that's good. I don't hate my family. I feel betrayed by their willingness to drop me. They still need to be kept safe, and until my men figure out their schedules and protocols, we'll keep it quiet.

I'm living the life of a retired man, and if it weren't for Ivy, I'd be bored.

In the week I spent with Ivy, I've visited her best friend slash most important patient, Ignas. Ivy is too exhausted from work to tend to him, so I check in on the poor guy every other day. He doesn't like me and my obsessive tendencies very much.

It must have to do with the fact that I keep offering him money to move out of that unsafe shithole he resides in. If I were on speaking terms with Kamila, I'd urge her to make this abandoned youth facility one of her top priorities.

Kids are in danger there, and we must do something about it.

Nobody in their right mind willingly stays in the abandoned youth facilities. Most of the facilities are in the devastated south side, and at night, Katantia's law enforcement must work double shifts to make sure nothing happens in the area.

People have moved out of the area, leaving the once family-friendly neighborhood a crime-ridden mess. The ruins of the mansions that once decorated the south side's shores depress visitors. Youth facilities, homeless shelters, and

shelters for lone women crowd the area, mostly underfunded and forgotten projects by international help organizations. Public services like schools, hospitals, or supermarkets are nonexistent. The only service that has been salvaged is public transport.

That's how people like Ignas go to work in the city every day.

It breaks Kamila's heart to have a decaying south side, and she works hard to lure in investors. There are a lot of dumb rich fucks out there, but none are dumb enough to build on land that might get ravished by nature in the future all over again.

Young men like Ignas have few prospects on Katantia. When you're a man, and you don't come from money, what's your purpose on Katantia? The female body is the main breadwinner here, no matter how many campaigns Kamila and Adonis finance through government funds. What do you do when you were the victim of a child trafficking ring as a preteen boy?

You certainly shouldn't go into sex work.

But Ignas did just that.

He reminds me of Fylox, back when he came home to us at eighteen years of age. Fylox couldn't contain his aggression. He didn't want help. He couldn't trust. I had to work on making him a productive citizen—for my purposes, of course. With the treatment he's been receiving from Ivy for the last five years, he's calmed down even further. The lack of traveling throughout the year grounds him.

Kendrick changed a lot of the dynamics in the family.

I don't know what Fylox sees when he faces Kendrick, but whatever it is, it makes Fylox ferociously protective of my grandchild. It's how I can cope with being away from my family for a little while. I know that Fylox has it under control even when I'm away. We're a unit—a broken one for now.

Ignas doesn't have a support system. No parents, family. No friends outside of my doe. Ivy's made me aware that

money's tight for him. If he were to decide to live in the city in a better area, both Ivy and I could help him with rent until he finds his footing.

Ignas doesn't want to hear it.

High on pain meds and stuffed with chocolate strawberries, he refuses to talk to me or let me check out his injury.

On my visiting days, I sit with him until it's time to pick up Ivy.

"While I love it when you're skeptical and broody, I'd like to know what's on your mind," Ivy comments. She's not gripping my dick anymore, but she consumes it with her eyes and a bite on her lips.

"My eyes are up here," I remind her, and she chuckles. She lifts her doe eyes, and they meet mine. "I was thinking of Ignas. We should buy him a place."

"I've been thinking the same thing," Ivy replies, rubbing her hands in mischief. "And a car. I also want him to have a Fuck Me French subscription. He loves strawberries. How do we go about gifting him all that? He won't let me do it. He rejects you—"

"We'll force him." Her eyes widen in fear, and the thrill is addictive. "For his own good. He can't stay in that rat-infested place. The elevators smell like puke and piss. It's horrid. The security covers the kids on the upper floors, but the lower floors are left unattended like the residents can afford to be raped and looted. His door doesn't even lock properly. I have no idea why he still lives there."

"He just started his new job, and he got injured. It's just his luck," Ivy says, sighing. She crosses her arms in front of her chest, heading for the kitchen. "I told him I could help make him a guard."

"Oh, you did?" I inquire, intrigued by her angle.

"It's either that or be a pimp." She spits out the word like it's poisonous. There are no illegal pimps on Katantia, not to our knowledge. Here, it's all above the table. Everyone pays

their taxes. The red-light district? That's the entirety of Katantia. Men have limited options when they're uneducated on Katantia. Male prostitution hasn't completely warmed up to Katantians yet. It's at the stage where few people make tons of money from it, and the ones who become male prostitutes are shunned for their choice. "He doesn't want to be either. He wanted to get into sex work."

"Perhaps it's his coping mechanism? I have no idea what to condone regarding behavior on this island anymore, but if he were my son—"

"I know, right?" Ivy agrees. Her cheeks have turned bright pink, and she's gawking at her coffee machine. She's tempted to make herself a drink, but I've put her under strict orders not to do so. If I'm supposed to take it slow and behave like a retiree, she should get a grip of her coffee addiction. "I just hope he's been doing his studies. He has so much time on his hands now. He can graduate from night school earlier."

"You're a hot little doe, all protective of your friend," I tell her, and her eyes gleam at me. She blushes, biting her lip.

"I care about him. You're out of the palace now, but that doesn't mean we can't do good on Katantia, right? I will be there every step of the way. Perhaps we should look into Ignas' neighbors and research whether they need help, too...." She doesn't finish her thought because there's an impatient knock on her door.

Ivy immediately grabs hold of me, and it affects me that she comes to me like that. I'm hard now, but I can't fucking do anything about it. We're being abstinent. Plus, there's an unexpected guest at the door.

The clouds are rosy outside, sundown sneaking upon us.

"Jordan? I'm not expecting anyone," Ivy reveals, trembling like a hurt little doe. She's upset, and she clings unto me for dear life. We hurry into her bedroom, where I draw on a T-shirt, and she slips on a pair of shorts.

I kiss the top of her head once we're done. "Let's see who it is. Nobody's going to hurt you."

She takes my hand, gripping it harder than ever before. I lead us to her door, and before I even open up the door, I smirk. I don't have to check the peephole. I hear the heavy steps come up the stairs, the ruffling of leather, and harsh whispers that communicate over earpieces.

Ivy gasps when I open the door.

My grandson sees me first, and he squeals, lighting up my world. Ivy's touch softens, and she lets go of my hand.

"It's good to see you," Kamila says. She's backed up by the guards that occupy the foyer and the staircase. My daughter-in-law's disheveled look doesn't go unnoticed. Her hair is darker than ever, the red fading more and more as the day of my granddaughter's birth approaches. The Queen of Katantia appears sleepless, the bags under her eyes a curious warning of what she's endured.

It's only been days.

Should I feel proud that my absence results in pain? No. I should feel ashamed.

Kendrick shuffles and twists in his mom's tight embrace. Her belly is round, almost ready to pop. Her doctor has told her to take it easy with Kendrick, especially because he weighs so much. But Kamila doesn't listen. She still holds her child.

"Please, come in," Ivy says, moving aside. I'm speechless, my mind numb at the sight of Kamila wandering inside my safe haven with my grandson. There's nothing wrong with this image. It just startles me. "Would you like something to drink?"

Ivy shuts the door after three of Kamila's guards squeeze into Ivy's tiny hallway.

"No, I don't want to drink anything. I'm here because Kendrick misses his grandpa," Kamila says. She doesn't sound cold or indifferent. She suppresses whatever bothers her, radiating royal tones. "You can hold him if you want to. Felicita and I haven't been sleeping well because he's anxious all the time."

We're in Ivy's living room, and Ivy's in her kitchen, being a good little host. I approach my daughter-in-law, and she hands me my grandson. He arches his back, getting comfortable in my embrace. The look he gives me when we settle on the couch leaves me speechless. I haven't seen him in days, and he's already changed a lot again. His hair has grown even longer, the tiny curls shining through.

Kendrick's eyes are still pitch black, and he weighs even more than he did last time.

"I missed you, young king," I tell him, and he coos in response. "Have you been a bad baby, keeping your mom up all night? I told you we don't do that. You let mommy rest, okay?"

He stares at me for a moment, and then he bursts into one of his giggles.

Kamila sighs, and even if I'd prefer my full attention to be on my grandson, I glance at her. She sits down next to me, her eyes on her lap. "I'm not supposed to be here."

"Where are you supposed to be?" I ask, and Kendrick settles on my chest. I feel every move he makes, his tiny breaths of life. Kamila instructs Ivy to turn on the A/C at the right temperature for the baby, and she does. Then, Ivy joins us officially, decorating the coffee table with cookies, a water bottle, and tumblers if Kamila changes her mind about the no drinks.

I scoot over, making space for Ivy next to me. She takes her place, and her eyes study Kendrick.

"We made a pact," Kamila blurts out. "I can't... I need to tell you."

"Spit it out," I say. Kendrick's attention shifts toward Ivy. She sits away from us like she's scared, and Kendrick senses it. He tugs at me to reach Ivy. I let him play, seeing that he's amused and chuckling his ears off.

"The men said we should fire you," Kamila reveals. She sinks into her seat. The queen we know her to be evaporates. "I didn't agree at first, but then they convinced me. Alex has

been in a horrible mood lately, even having won the championship ring... He thinks it's his fault that you're burned out. He's worried about you. We all are. We want what's best for you. If that means that you must stay away, so be it."

"You took away my choice," I say, rubbing the back of my neck. "You staged the fight."

She swallows. "You have to ask them. I-I don't want to believe that they meant what they said... Felicita asked me about it, and I didn't know what to say. I didn't want to involve her in the plan. She hates lying to you."

"Good thinking on your part," I comment. Kendrick's little finger is wrapped around Ivy's. I can see how nervous Ivy is. She can't hide her panting from me. Heat emanates from her, and I bet her heart is racing. She's nervous, and she doesn't know how to behave around a baby.

"I'm here because I know that it's your day off tomorrow, Ivy." At the mention of her name, Ivy's head snaps in our direction. "I want you both to come to dinner—for real this time. We shouldn't be apart, and I know how much you hate missing out on the kids. We just must figure out what to do with work. The guards have scheduled their new formations. Måns and Fylox have taken charge, following your instructions religiously. We need a permanent solution. One that will benefit you."

"Not us all?" I ask.

"You're our priority now," Kamila says gently. "What you said... I want you to know that I'm forever grateful for everything that you do. I never had a man like you in my life, Jordan. I'm not used to having a strong father figure that takes care of things. I'm familiar with abusers. I guess I've turned into an abuser now, taking away precious time of your life."

"You're not an abuser," I assure her. "You take what I give you. It's my fault for not knowing what my limits are. We'll work on that."

Kendrick almost climbs off my lap on his own before I pick him back up and place him where he should be. He keeps

wrestling me, his tiny arms pointing at Ivy.

Her doe eyes are frightened. This isn't just my grandchild. It's a royal baby, and she must be careful. I hand Kendrick over to Ivy, who accepts him, wrapping both of her arms around him. She secures him like he's about to jump off the sofa and into some kind of madness. She's scared that she'll drop him, but they're sitting, and the chances of an accident happening while I'm close by are slim.

Kendrick settles into Ivy's embrace with a sigh. He stops moving around, peering up at me with his inquisitive eyes.

"So, it's serious?" Kamila asks, gazing at Kendrick on Ivy's lap. "You haven't bitten each other's heads off while you've been living together?"

"He's quite the calm retiree," Ivy comments. She tickles Kendrick's knee, and he chuckles in response. Meanwhile, I try to process the fact that my thirty-something-year-old girlfriend referred to me as a retiree.

"You should see your face right now," Kamila comments, grinning like a fool. I roll my eyes at the women in the room. My daughter-in-law clears her throat. "I also wanted to apologize to Ivy."

"What for?" I ask. I notice the sudden tension in Ivy's shoulders.

"I came to your office, and I offended you. Obviously, I wasn't aware that Jordan wasn't playing about you. I expected that he would come running home after a day of being outside, but he stuck with you, and he's here now... He seems more relaxed and... Happy," Kamila says to Ivy, her features softening.

"I accept your apology," Ivy says, her voice choked with something beyond my comprehension.

"I was a bitch. I do that quite often, being a bitch and all," Kamila admits, exhaling sharply. She blushes. "I should've never questioned Jordan's intentions with you."

"What did you tell her?" I ask Kamila.

Her timid response is unlike the queen's standards. "I said you'd never want to own her."

I seek out Ivy's reaction, and she's trying to make funny noises for Kendrick. The discomfort this conversation creates is in her hard smile, almost ghostly and fraudulent. Kendrick doesn't mind that Ivy uses him as a distraction from the conversation I'm having with his mom. He enjoys the attention.

"If she agrees to such a proposal, I want to own Ivy eventually."

Ivy's gulp is audible.

"Again, I apologize for my bitchiness. Valentina can write a book on how rude I can be. It's the Aram Wraith in me. On some days, I can't shake it off," Kamila says, her hands reaching for her belly. Absentmindedly, she caresses it.

"You're protective of him," Ivy blurts out. Somehow, Kendrick's eyes flutter shut. He leans against Ivy's chest. "I respect that. I wouldn't want it any other way."

Kamila grabs one of the cookies from the coffee table, and she gulps down some of the water. Down the hall, one of the guards speaks into his earpiece. Ivy twitches at the strange masculine voice speaking in code behind her back, seemingly forgetting about the guards' presence in her home.

"I never stopped trusting you," Kamila adds. She rises from the sofa, stretching from left to right. "I only said it to see what your reaction would be. You've been loyal, Ivy. I'm truly sorry that I hurt you."

Kamila picks up Kendrick, who fell asleep on Ivy. "We have to go now. I expect you both to come over tomorrow. We'll do it right this time."

The guards escort my family out of Ivy's apartment, and once they're gone, I feel lighter.

"Kendrick's... Adorable," Ivy comments.

"He fell asleep on you. He likes you," I tell her, and my little doe blushes at me, biting her lip.

“I’m glad she came over,” Ivy says, scooting closer to me. Her hands wrap around me, snaking in my body closer to hers. “I didn’t like how we left things.”

A sigh doesn’t suffice. For once, my family interfered with my business instead of the other way around.

The betrayal fades, and what’s left is a touch of sweetness. Payback is like candy, bad for your health but oh so tasty.

I want nothing but for my family to be united once more.

CHAPTER 21

FELICITA



JORDAN'S ABSENCE FROM THE PALACE MAKES ME HOLLOW inside. Our co-dependency after Travis' death is unhealthy, to say the least.

My babies are next-door. The rest of my family is inside the palace. Everyone but Jordan's on this property, and it messes with my head. I cling to the past like it's running from me, but the reality is that the past vanished a long time ago. I'm late, and I'll remain stuck if I don't get a grip.

Kamila promised that Jordan will bring his new girlfriend over for dinner tonight, and I cried out of joy. Yesterday, I spent the entire day cleaning up the house. Luckily, the babies didn't need me for the day, so I could work on my house unbothered. Naturally, I prepared my meals overnight—this time, without the help of the staff. I took the car, and I purchased my groceries on my own.

It felt lonely, but... I had to do this simple task. I can't force my brother to watch over me or the palace's staff to babysit me.

Jordan needs to start anew. I want to be supportive.

Quietly, my chest heaves, drops of tears decorating my cheeks. I'm happy for him. I am.

Everyone's moving on with their lives, and I'm here, sleeping in a bed I used to share with my now-deceased husband. A bed that I've felt move at night, at the strangest of hours when Travis used to come home from work.

Sometimes I was the one out late, and I'd come home with a bruised body, courtesy of Aram Wraith.

A sleep-deprived Travis would comfort me, and I'd feel his guilt, paired with my pain, the soreness that Aram caused in me. Once upon a time, my husband had vowed to keep me safe, but the moment I arrived on Katantia those promises became a joke, laughingstock for the King of Katantia, Aram Wraith.

His sadistic fantasies took a toll on me, and Travis knew. Yet, we fought on. We kept going for years.

We did what we did for our daughter. We couldn't save Kamila from harm, but Valentina was able to remain unharmed.

Travis was drenched in guilt, and so am I, for I'm alive, and he's gone. He sacrificed himself so that Kamila could become queen.

He can't be a part of his granddaughter's life, a girl who would've loved her grandpa with all her might. He's not here to see Kamila become the queen this country deserves.

My phone hums on the nightstand. The rays of the sun make it impossible to detect who's texting me from afar, so I stretch to pick up my phone.

MÅNS BENGTSSON:

I'm on my way

FELICITA:

Please, don't

MÅNS BENGTSSON:

I said I'm on my way

I take one last glance at my husband's unused pillow. Nobody sleeps in this bedroom but me, yet when I make my bed, I pretend like it's the old days.

I wash Travis' favorite linen, and every other month, I clean his pillow. His scent has faded, turned into dust. Before I

can reminisce some more, I hurry to the en suite bathroom to wash my face.

Måns has taken it upon himself to check on me, even when I don't want him to.

I'm trying. Can't they see that I'm trying to become more independent? It's too late for such a change, but I must attempt it since everyone around me is evolving.

My effort to make myself presentable results in a messy sink, a toothbrush that's run out of battery. My hair is all over the place, sticking out and making me anxious.

If Aram Wraith were coming over to check in on me, I'd have failed this test.

Meagerly brushed teeth? Disheveled hair? Sunken eyes? Dry lips?

My lip balm has run out, and Valentina hasn't yet ordered a new batch from the States. After years of abusing my body, my skin has become sensitive, and I require special products to not scar.

I manage to salvage my hair by the time Måns knocks on my front door. After slipping on my robe, I climb down the stairs, and I let him in.

He wears no suit when he comes to me. It makes it less official, and I appreciate not being made to feel like a charity case. He's in one of the tracksuits he goes to the gym with, black with a tiny Katantian emblem gracing his heart. His stoic body is toned out of its mind. He's been bulking up lately, and I attest it to Jordan.

The palace's men are shaking in my brother's absence.

"What's so funny?" Måns asks. His crooked grin makes me forget my thought, and I stand there watching him kick off his shoes.

"Jordan," I blurt out. "He's gone, and everyone's stepping up."

Måns balls one of his fists. I notice that he carries a leathery sketchbook in his free hand. "He's your brother, and

he's my boss...."

"But you want him back, don't you?" I ask. I lead him into my kitchen. Am I bragging? Possibly. It's a clean kitchen, filled with food that would make a chef jealous. I've packaged everything, ready to be reheated once needed. I'm prepared for the most wonderful dinner with my family. "You don't like to check up on me all the time. I get that."

Måns lingers by the door as if he requires an invitation to enter my space. I know that he doesn't need such trivialities. He's stormed my space before.

When he stands by the door, I can't catch his cologne. And I like that cologne. It makes me want to stick my nose to his neck and inhale every detail of his body.

It's a thought that makes me quiver where I stand.

"When I'm in your presence, you worry about me. Forget about Jordan," Måns says, his deep voice almost growling at me.

"He's my brother," I remind him.

"And he's not here," Måns insists. I catch his eyes on me, and we stare at each other without exchanging any words.

"What does it mean? That you're here and he's not?" I ask, breaking just a little bit as I lose myself in his steel-blue eyes. I pour Måns a glass of water out of politeness. The men of the palace don't drink anything other than water when they're on duty. They need to be sharp in case something happens.

Måns is younger than my daughter. He's twenty-four years old, and he's got his life ahead of him. He must have girls lining up for days. All the men of the palace do. Jordan and my daughter have given the new security men clothes that make people salivate.

Slick designs, expensive shoes. Their bodies look like temples once they're in costume for work. Never mind that whenever these men remove their clothes, there's a whole new show to gawk at.

I admire Måns's strong body, envisioning what he had to endure to get it. Hard work. Sweat. Showers. Those showers...

Simmer down. It's not my place to flirt with a palace employee.

One that comes by my house every morning before work when my brother's not around.

One that scrutinizes me with his eyes, dissecting every movement I make. Every thought that crosses my mind in his presence feels unsafe as if he knows what I'm thinking.

"I brought this for Penelope," Måns says, gesturing at the sketchbook in his hand. He steps forward, placing it on the kitchen counter. "You can look through it and decide whether you want to hand it over to her. I'd like to know what she thinks of it. I draw when I have time, but as of late... It's been hectic with Jordan's absence."

"You draw those books she likes to read?"

Måns nods, and I take an inhale of shock. It's not her birthday or any other special day. My heart warms at his thoughtful present for my granddaughter. I say, "I trust you."

"You shouldn't," he replies.

I chuckle the nonsense away, and I grab the notebook. It carries his warmth. Would it be rude to keep this sketchbook hidden in my home?

"My intentions are impure," he reveals, and for the first time, my ears perk up. It's the paranoia my deceased husband installed in me. Family above all. If anyone tries to harm our babies, we go feral.

"Get out," I hiss.

"I can't get out, Mrs. Cross," he says, stepping forward. "I'm in too deep."

"What do you want, Måns?" I ask.

"I want *you*, Mrs. Cross." He comes closer, and I hover by my food, seeking comfort. Food doesn't provide comfort. I cook it to distract myself. When I invite people to my home to

feed them, it makes me feel like I haven't been forgotten, like I still matter.

"You can't have me!" I yelp, breathing hard. Only one step to removing any barriers between us. He wouldn't. Wouldn't he? "You... What are you trying to accomplish? Do you want to harm us?"

"I'd never jeopardize my job, Mrs. Cross. Keeping your family safe means everything to me. You insult me," he says, a glimmer of harshness in his eyes. Another step forward. I can't leave. But... I can. He doesn't corner me. He hovers around me, dizzying me with his awe-inspiring presence. "I want to show you that you'll be happy again."

"And how do you want to accomplish that?" I ask, rolling my eyes.

"By making you mine." I choke on air. His absurd statement turns me red from top to bottom. I can't feel my toes. "You won't have to worry about a thing. I'll take care of everything."

That sounds tempting. My heart melts for him, and my ears go numb. If he's playing games, I won't be able to deal. "Everything?"

Måns nods.

"But... You're a boy. You don't know. I... I-I can't...."

"Min lycka." His hand cups my jaw. His thumb swipes across my cheek like he can sense the dried tears. "I know enough. Are you in?"

"What... How?" Baffled, I seek for words that'll drag me out of this predicament. I don't want to leave. Måns's promises are alluring enough for me to forget the absurdity of it all. He's younger than my daughter, half my age. He's my brother's favorite and most effective employee.

I don't even know him. I can't *date* him.

That's ludicrous.

"Show me your bed of pain, min lycka. It'll be the last time you ever see it."



MANS IS UPSTAIRS.

My family is having dinner, and he's upstairs in my bedroom, doing whatever people like him do. I left him there, and he didn't follow me downstairs. He isn't hiding. There was something sinister in his eyes as he took in my bedroom, and I departed from the scene before he could derail my plans further.

"You've outdone yourself, Felicita," Kamila comments. There's not an empty corner on my dining table. The plates are full, and my guests are dining away, intaking my food with indulgence.

I cleaned my home yesterday, but today, I made it my mission to set my dining room. I spent a little too long figuring out a seating plan.

In the end, everyone took a seat wherever.

To my surprise, Jordan sits next to Alex, and they're not bickering. It helps that Kendrick's on Alex's lap, as joyous as ever.

"Yes, it's a perfect dish," Fylox adds to Kamila's comment. He says it like a line from a script, but I've learned not to take it personally. Kamila's man is strange, but he's ferociously protective and invested in our family. He can't help being antisocial.

Ivy, my brother's girlfriend, nods in agreement, her cheeks rosy. She's embarrassed, and there's guilt all over her features.

I don't blame her for missing our last family dinner.

For Jordan to bring her around, it means that she had a solid reason for her absence.

As the hostess of the family event, I eat little to nothing. On my plate, I push around a tomato with my fork. Next to me, Kamila's already on her fourth plate. She eats for two, and it makes me happy that she enjoys my dinner.

Jordan's relationship with Penelope Jade is already fun to experience, and she isn't his real grandkid. I can't wait until we meet the new baby girl. Jordan will have his hands full.

"Why are you the only woman my brother's ever brought home?" I blurt out, and the table goes quiet.

Måns is upstairs, giving me the bite that I need to get through this. I can ask uncomfortable questions. I trust Ivy, but I must examine her intentions.

"I love—"

Jordan interrupts her, "She's my partner. We'll be making it official soon. There's no need for an interrogation."

Ivy chokes on her salad, and Jordan promptly bends her over, helping her clear her throat while she coughs. My eyes remain stuck on his hand and how tender he is with her, stroking her back.

I shiver where I sit.

I gaze at the ceiling. What am I doing with Måns? He's a boy, younger than my daughter. He wouldn't know how to handle me.

"I need to know whether we're leaving you in good hands," I insist, shifting my focus to the table. Kamila. Fylox. Alex. Baby Kendrick. Jordan. Ivy.

Jordan wants this to work out. He didn't insist on sitting at the top of the table, leaving it to Alex. This is important to him.

"I promise that I'd do anything for him," Ivy vows. She clears her throat, setting aside the cutlery in her hands. She's a proper young woman, squirming around my brother. He's a tough man, a man people look up to, a man people respect. Nobody talks back at this man, and I suspect she might be the only one who could get away with it. "Anything isn't enough. Jordan deserves the world. I promise to make him as happy as he can be."

"Ivy, will this ruin our dynamic?" Alex asks. Kendrick holds his toy giraffe, squealing at it. His daddy fed him, and

now, he's getting ready for a nap. Yet, our young king, as Jordan lovingly refers to him, isn't ready for bed. He senses his grandfather's presence, and he wants to play with him, steal his attention.

"I've found a new therapist for Jordan, and he will continue his sessions with him if it's a good fit. As to Kamila and Fylox... If you wish to keep seeing me, you're welcome to. You can try out other options. The hospital expanded this month, and it managed to lure in top graduates from all around the world—"

"Ivy, I want to keep seeing you. We like you," Kamila reveals. Fylox nods curtly. "We can't open up to new people the way we've opened up to you. In the years that we've known you, you've proven yourself trustworthy, and I apologize for not taking that into consideration when I waltzed into your office like you'd betrayed me. I've had a short fuse lately, and this baby isn't helping. She's big, and she's kicking... I wonder what my mom felt like when I was in her belly. If I stretch any further, I'll fit twins inside of me the next time."

"You'll be all right," I assure Kamila, and she huffs, taking another bite of food.

Dessert comes and goes. Kamila forgets about her pregnancy worries. She decides to share one of the old stories with her dad and me, the painfully funny ones. At any table that she decides to open up at, I'm the only one that understands. The rest laugh because Kamila is a born entertainer. She spins her stories, twisting pain into something positive. Something ridiculous. Something Aram would be embarrassed about.

The end of the night barges in, and I fight my family over who'll help clean up. *Nobody*. This is my home, and I have control over my kitchen. If I need help, I'll call the palace. *Not* my family.

"It was nice to see you today," I tell Ivy as I hug her goodbye by the door. Alex, Kamila, and Fylox stand behind

me. The baby's napping in the dining room. I feel small, almost crushed in the presence of my new family.

"I want Dad to be happy, and if you can promise to help him achieve that, you're on my good side, Ivy," Alex says from behind me, admitting defeat. We gaze at Jordan and Ivy as they make their way to their car.

"Thank you, son," Jordan says. There's a tremble in his voice that not a lot of people outside of me can catch. Fylox picks it up, but that's normal. When I notice Ivy rubbing Jordan's hand more tenderly than before, I make my decision.

I must let my brother go.

"It's time, Jordan," I say, pushing back tears. The breath I take lies heavy on me, and for a moment, I can't find the strength to hold myself. "Goodbye."

Jordan and Ivy leave. Ever the polite boys of the family, Alex and Fylox insist on helping me bring the dishes back to the kitchen. I let them help while Kamila sits by Kendrick's stroller, observing him while he sleeps.

She's exhausted, and she's more than ready for this baby inside of her to pop out.

I... I understand. Valentina was quite the troublemaker in my belly. At the time, Ryan was the easy baby, quiet and full of smiles. Thinking of him makes me choke up. My firstborn doesn't deserve any caring thoughts.

We gave our all to our children, Travis and me.

Valentina has brought us more joy than we could have ever imagined. Penelope Jade is a precious child that I wouldn't change for the world. Ryan, on the other hand... Well, my son tried to rape his sister. He hurt her with his obsession with the Wraith family.

He hurt us.

He's being fucked to death in one of the sex punishment houses, and I don't feel an ounce of empathy for him. His death will be slow and full of agony like he deserves it.

I go feral when my children are in danger, and it doesn't matter who's hurting who.

Eventually, Kamila, Alex, and Fylox leave with the baby. I drag myself up the stairs, my aching heart messing with my ability to focus.

I open the door to my bedroom, but I'm confounded when I set eyes on what I refer to as my bedroom.

“What did you do?” I ask, choking on air.

“I'm making you mine, min lycka.” With a grin of utter satisfaction, Måns stands in the middle of chaos. I quiver by the doorframe, overwhelmed by Måns. He pulls me toward him without a touch. “Crawl over to me on your pretty knees and show me your gratitude for taking away your pain.”

CHAPTER 22



WE'RE ON TOP OF THE PALACE, OVERLOOKING THE breathtaking beauty of Katantia.

Nearby, the borders to the mainland are as intimidating as ever. Bright lights shape the tall fences and concrete buildings. If the peninsula's border was intimidating before Jordan's time as a security advisor, now, you avoid it all cost. It resembles a detention center with its claustrophobic tunnels that lead outside of Katantia.

It's past midnight, and Kamila has gone to sleep already. Otherwise, she'd be up here with Jordan, Fylox, and me. They share a joint while I lean against the rooftop's railing.

Jordan brought me here, and as if he senses our presence, Fylox joined us a little later.

From up here, I hear the ocean waves as they hit the shore. The wind blows my hair into my face, tossing it in whichever direction it wishes.

"Are you sure?" Fylox asks me, gesturing at the joint between his fingers.

I nod. "I'm okay, thank you."

This is my rite of passage into the Wraith family. Jordan and I survived dinner together. Alex wasn't as mean as I expected him to be. How could he be when Kamila kept him busy with Kendrick? Whoever held that little baby was bound to behave.

Felicita was kind, as always. Jordan told me that his sister had prepared a meal with coffee flavors in every dish last time. Since we currently obtain from coffee and sex, the dinner had a Mexican flavor to it instead, spicy, wholesome, and less experimental.

The rest of the family retreated to their respective bedrooms when the clock struck eight. Kendrick's time to sleep ushered another section of the evening in.

It was time for Fylox to vet me.

Here we are now, on top of the palace.

My teenage prejudice about weed would have Jordan and Fylox giggling and cracking jokes while high. Instead, the men are somber, faintly relaxed.

"Tell me, Ivy. What are your intentions with Jordan?" Fylox asks. He puffs out smoke, staring into the night sky.

"I want him," I reveal, goosebumps tingling my skin. I put on another dress for the occasion tonight. Silky and smooth, my dress hugs my body that feels alive after a couple of days in Jordan's care. He doesn't want to be my daddy, but he takes better care of me than any daddy I ever knew did. Sure, he deprives me of coffee and his sex, but... "He's mine."

"We've heard all of that before. The entire island is obsessed with Jordan. He's quite a catch, isn't he?" Fylox teases me. I cross my arms in front of my chest, and Jordan shifts where he stands. It's a micro-movement that I wouldn't catch if my eyes weren't glued on him.

"He's a catch. My catch," I insist, trailing every inch of Jordan. Sure, the men in the palace don't come short. Aside from Weston, everyone on this compound is built like a machine. In Jordan's presence, they seem small.

Fylox and Alex are in no way tiny, but next to Jordan, they fall short.

Jordan's retired now, and although it hurts him, he stays away from work. At night, his spinning thoughts keep us both awake. He can't calm down from the high of being responsible for half a million people.

Now that we're back in the palace, his eyes move over every surface like he's still ruling the compound even if he hasn't been here in days.

"Are we still your patients?" Fylox asks, and there's a drop in his tone, unexpected and heartwarming. He and Kamila have grown attached to me, and it swamps me.

"Of course," I assure him. Jordan's faint snicker rumples me. "I might work on Katantia, but I value our physician-patient privilege. Your secrets are safe with me. They've always been."

"I don't ask her about you," Jordan clarifies. His warm voice on this cold rooftop makes me shudder. "We have better things to do."

"That's good to know." Fylox clears his throat. "Since you're aware of almost everything about this family, we don't have to give you a lesson on the Wraiths."

"You don't," I agree.

"You're aware of the danger, right?" Fylox begins.

"Hey." Jordan continues, "Don't scare her."

"Are you moving into the palace?" Fylox asks.

I shake my head. "I have a place."

"If this is as official as I think it is, your place won't cover it. We must organize an entire entourage for visits. That's time we can't afford to lose—"

Jordan interrupts Fylox, "So you're okay with Ivy being mine? You won't throw a fit like Alex?"

"Ivy's cool." Fylox winks at me. He's less on edge than he was when Kendrick was about to be born. Something about being a parent has made him realize that he can let the tortures of his past go. When Kamila was pregnant with Kendrick, he would never let her out of his sight. Now, she can move freely without Fylox stalking her every move. Well, she still has a harem of guards following her everywhere... "You're so cheap. Girlfriend and shrink in one. That's pretty clever."

“Says the guy who’s the queen’s boy toy,” Jordan comments.

They have a laugh, but Fylox’s eyes reveal he’s not a *boy toy* by any means. Jordan is dimly aware of how Fylox and Kamila run their sex life, but it goes far beyond what the cameras capture on record. Alex is Kamila and Fylox’s anchor. Without Alex, Fylox and Kamila would physically hurt themselves beyond repair.

Their dynamics adapt to each social setting. In public, Kamila rules. When it’s the three of them, Alex has the final word. During the season, when Alex must work, Fylox takes over.

There are layers to their relationship, and *boy toys* don’t even begin to cover it.

Jordan’s phone rings and he slips it out of his pocket while Fylox takes another pull.

“I have to take this,” Jordan says. He approaches me, giving me an innocent peck on the lips. His whisper against my neck tickles me. “Be a good little doe while I’m away.”

I nod. “Of course.”

Jordan climbs down the ladder, entering the palace from above. I watch as he disappears into the light, and my heart clenches for him. He’s taking a piece of me wherever he’s off to. It’s late, and his life is mysterious, but those late-night phone calls are a thing to get used to.

“I’m having a girl,” Fylox blurts out. He spreads his arms open, one hand holding the almost finished joint. “I’m Having. A. Girl.”

“It’s exciting, isn’t it?” I say. Jordan’s jacket is wrapped around my shoulders, so the wind that blows doesn’t affect my body. I lean against the rails, not afraid of the height.

“Exciting?” There’s a quiver in his tone, a high-pitched sign of fear. “I’m petrified.”

“You’ll do great. I’m sure she’s going to be a daddy’s girl. Most of the Wraith girls are,” I say. He nods in agreement, but

the distress is still there, slurping around in the edges of his tense shoulders.

“She’s going to be a princess of this place one day, and I have no idea how to approach this. I never imagined myself having *kids*. That’s not the type of stress I need in my line of work,” Fylox says. It’s the most he’s opened his mouth all night. When it’s just us two, and he doesn’t have to pretend in front of the family, he opens up. Kamila gets the grimy details because they’re partners. I receive his private thoughts about anxiety and the royal kids. *The future*. “I don’t think Kamila will appreciate it if I keep going on my trips....”

In the dark of the night, a helicopter flies over us, and Fylox doesn’t even bother checking it out. I stand there, gawking up at it. The palace team is accustomed to surveillance. I should be, too. After all, I’ve been under surveillance all my life.

“You need to pick your priorities,” I tell him, intoxicated by the lights of Katantia from above. Below us, traffic is buzzing.

“I don’t have the same issue as Jordan,” Fylox claims, taking another pull from his joint. He takes his time with the smoke, the exhale following a moment of silence. “I can focus on a lot of things. I’ve been conditioned that way, haven’t I?”

The palace’s rooftop isn’t decorated with lights and spectacular flags, only red blinking dots on the roof railings. I can’t see Fylox clearly. The rooftop is drenched in the night sky with the moon hiding behind clouds tonight, but I can hear the bleakness in his statement.

“Jordan’s used to being everyone’s dad. It’s time the next generation took over,” Fylox says. “He’ll keep the title, but he’ll work part-time. I’ve studied our employees, and I’ve made a decision to give five men a raise.”

“Five men for half of Jordan’s workload?” My jaw drops.

“I’m being stringy with five. We could use more, but then we’d have to hire more men, and that takes six months... It’s complicated, and I can’t say much more than that. What you

need to know is that he'll be home more often, and that's going to take the pressure off him. The best of the best will replace him, and that should suffice," Fylox explains. The cold wind caresses my skin, making me hug Jordan's jacket tighter.

"How's Ignas doing?" Fylox asks.

I'm taken aback. "Ignas? You know about him?"

"Yeah, of course. The attempted murder at COCKed&screwed from the other week? Is he doing better?" Fylox inquires. He asks because he feels like it would be the kind thing to do, but I'm confused.

"Ignas fractured his knee. He... I wasn't aware of a murder attempt," I confess.

Fylox chuckles, the sound so foreign coming from a man like him. "No need to blame Jordan. Police were still investigating when we kicked Jordan out. We found out a couple of days ago. Yes, I'm hereby officially telling you that your friend almost got murdered."

"But... Why? He's never harmed anyone," I say. I sway where I stand, searching my pockets for my phone. Right. I threw my phone out in front of the palace, and with Jordan in my home, I haven't felt the need to replace it. My friends call the office or my landline at home whenever they need me.

"Would it help if I told you that more people have tried to come after me ever since I moved to Katantia than ever before? It's like the wild west down here. Anything goes," Fylox explains. He gazes at the ladder that leads into the palace from above.

"Wait. They're coming after the victims?"

"The Katantian chapter of the organization that was responsible for the sale and distribution of child slaves to wealthy clients hasn't been dismantled. Kamila tries, but they're like the hydra. You send one of them to a punishment sex house, ten others pop up. They're still here, and the children that have managed to escape their hold by sheer luck are in danger," Fylox reveals. His stare is blank. I can't feel his pain because I never went through his ordeal, but I can

imagine that speaking of the trafficking ring takes him back to a dark place, a place I wish nobody had to ever endure.

“Fylox, why are you telling me this? I’m a civilian,” I remind him.

He clears his throat. “It’s been difficult to keep this from Jordan, but I’ve managed. If anyone knows how to keep a secret, it’s me. I don’t know how to tell you without hurting your feelings... It’s not something people want to hear.”

I fumble with Jordan’s jacket. “I don’t understand.”

“Hugh Abbott bought you.”

“He adopted me,” I insist, crossing my arms in front of my chest.

“You were bought. Hugh Abbott bought you as a baby on the black market. With his connections in the government and beyond, he managed to make it look like a legitimate adoption,” Fylox reveals. I shuffle backward, and I almost trip against the rail. “The good thing is that you were removed from their system when you were a baby. I don’t know what happened to you in their custody, but you didn’t participate in any further sales.”

“I... I wasn’t raped if that’s what you mean.” My mouth goes dry. “You’ve got it wrong, Fylox. Why? I don’t believe this. I was adopted. Lots of couples adopt. It’s not unusual.”

“Jordan’s been snooping around, and he’s suspicious, but I hid it from him. I found a random couple in Taiwan to pose as your parents. I couldn’t find your origins. I searched, but I can’t make any sense of it. Hugh Abbott’s friends are regulars in the organization. Faces I identify from my time in their system. The money trail is obvious, and you’re at the center of it. You got lucky, Ivy,” Fylox explains. His gaze wanders toward the bright and busy border in the far-end. “I know what this feels like, so it’s your choice whether you want to tell him or not.”

“There must be a mistake.” The jacket ceases to warm me, my body temperature dropping. I’m cold, shaking all over. “I’m not like you. Hugh... He didn’t do *that*. He never paid

any attention to me when I was a child. The people that worked you and Ignas... They're into kids. Hugh is an awful human being, but... I was of age. I fell into his trap. I—”

“You preach to me about trauma and how it works in mysterious ways,” Fylox comments like he learned the line from a script. “Hugh might have done things to you that you’ve closed yourself off to.”

“Hugh wants me back because he’s a sick fuck. I know he’s sick and twisted. But not *that* twisted. He doesn’t intend to endanger me. He wants me to be his again. He’s obsessed with me,” I say. My throat dries. “Not kids.”

“Jordan’s coming back. I can’t say much more. You can decide whether he should know or not. Be careful with whom you trust.” Fylox turns away, stretching while Jordan climbs up the ladder.

A ghostly expression covers Jordan’s face, a paleness that makes me shudder.

Jordan closes the distance between us, and he embraces me. “Little doe, I need you to stay calm.”

Shit. He listened in on our conversation!

“What happened?” Fylox asks.

“There’s been a fire.” Jordan holds me tightly, and I cuddle into his hug, not wanting to hear it. “The apartment... Little doe, the firefighters are there, but it’s a hopeless case.”

“House? What... No?”

“Yes, your apartment building is on fire.” Jordan sighs. His body is warm, full of comfort. But I can’t remain this delusional. Something’s wrong. “There’s something else... Ignas. He messaged me that he was coming over. He called himself a cab, and he reserved himself a wheelchair since he was tired of being home all the time. I have no idea where he found the money... I messaged him not to do it, but he never saw the message. Smolyakov informed me that he was in the apartment when the fire broke out. Little doe, he’s been hospitalized. Smolyakov barely got him outside alive.”

I collapse in Jordan's arms.

CHAPTER 23

JORDAN



FROM INSIDE THE HOSPITAL ROOM, I CAN HEAR DANAI AND Malena discussing Ivy's vitals with their hospital colleague. The window is covered by blinds that block most of the sunlight, so I sit here in dimmed light.

Ivy fainted on the palace's rooftop, and I brought her to the hospital immediately. We could've treated her at the palace. There's an in-house emergency physician, but I knew that once Ivy regained consciousness, she'd want to check on Ignas.

He's currently isolated in the emergency room, pumped with oxygen after Smolyakov rescued the young man from the fire.

Ivy woke up when she was brought to this hospital room, and she asked for Ignas in panic, but the doctors didn't let her leave. I wasn't supposed to be in the room, yet I stayed while they extracted her blood, checked her pulse...

She's been asleep for eight hours now, and her friends outside of the room haven't left.

The only one missing is Smolyakov.

If I had a minute to spare for him, I would track him down, but for now, Ivy's well-being is my priority.

My presence allows Ivy to be treated in the royal section of the hospital. Here, the television on the wall is the most recent and expensive model one can find on the market. Perks of having wealthy CEOs of tech companies visit Katantia every year.

The nurses that sneak into the room every other hour urge me to turn the TV on, watch a little something to pass the time.

I don't need television when Ivy's engulfed in white linen sheets, looking paler than ever. She doesn't move outside of the rise and fall of her chest when she breathes. She faces the ceiling with her arms at each side. It's a strange position to be asleep in for her. She doesn't remain in one place when I sleep next to her.

If I didn't know any better, I'd say she was dead. She's not, thankfully. She's asleep.

The uncomfortable chair I sit on reminds me of when my niece's husband was in the hospital after his coma. I can't say I miss sitting by the bed of an unconscious person. It gives me anxiety, and this type of anxiety, I can't numb out. I feel it in every shallow breath and hammering heartbeat.

Ivy takes a deep breath, exhaling sharply. Her lips part, tasting the scent of latex gloves and cleaning supplies in the air. She rubs her doe eyes, a groan mixed with a yawn escaping her.

She squints her eyes at me, questioning whether I'm here in the flesh. "J-Jordan?"

"It's me, little doe."

"Fuck..." She swallows, running her hands through her messy hair. "Where's Ignas? How is he doing? What happened?"

"Calm down, Ivy. That's an order," I state, leaning forward on the uncomfortable chair. Ivy's doe eyes widen at my command. Observing her eyes in fascination, she catches me off-guard.

Ivy jumps from the bed, shimmying away from me in her mint robe.

I let out a grunt of frustration. Then, I follow her.

"Ivy! You need to rest!" Danai yelps when Ivy bursts out of the hospital room, rushing by her two friends outside. She doesn't give Danai and Malena any attention, limping by them

in a hurry. Ivy's barefoot. I want to pick her up and spank some sense into her, but I keep my urges at bay.

"Jordan?" Malena addresses me, her puffy eyes red.

The apartment building burned down. There isn't much left of it, and there weren't any victims because they either managed to get everyone out in time or most of the building's residents were at work.

Since they are fucking doctors.

However, the traumatic ordeal can't be swept under the rug.

"Ladies, I suggest you take your own advice. I'll take care of Ivy. There are cars outside for you, ready to take you to the palace until we find you better accommodation," I tell Danai and Malena while keeping an eye on Ivy. "As you can see, she's up. I'll let you know when there are news."

They're not satisfied with what I tell them, but they don't hinder me from following Ivy.

My needy little doe grimaces as she attempts to understand where she is. The Queen I hospital is spacious, but it is also her space of work. She needs a couple of moments and a closer look at the signs on the bleak walls.

I catch up to her as she heads for the ER.

"You shouldn't have done that," I say to her as she marches away from me with intent.

"I want to see Ignas!" Her croaking demand makes me want to douse her in water.

"Little doe, they won't let you in. He's being treated right now. He's intubated. You can't barge in there in your robe and demand answers," I say. She works twice as hard to walk right now while I comfortably take each step without even missing a breath.

"I need to see him," she begs, her whimper stinging me. "Please!"

“Okay, slow down,” I demand, and for once, Ivy listens. Breathing hard, she bends over as she attempts to catch her breath. I give her a moment. Then wrap an arm around her lower waist, lifting her from the floor. Gasping against me, she snakes her arms around my neck to secure herself from falling out of my hold.

I take her to the ER, and I signal the nurses to show us Ignas’s room. They’re not happy about it because they have better things to do than show us around. I’m still me, though, and they obey.

Through the glass observation wall, we finally see Ignas.

Ivy holds my hand as her eyes take in her friend. There’s buzzing around us. There’s a brawl on the far end of the corridor we’re in. The murmurs and the arguing want my attention, but I’ve got my eyes set on Ivy.

Her face falls, and the energy she had assembled to escape her hospital room vanishes.

The boy is in the worst shape he could be. There’s no color on his skin, no life. Machines help him with his breathing. He’s innocently lying there on his bed, hooked up on IV poles.

I hear nurses strolling in and out of nearby rooms with supply carts, chatting among themselves.

Ivy gasps at Ignas’s bandaged face, arms... Most of his body is wrapped up.

3013.

I stretch my neck to the side. And again. And again. My eyes drift over the boy and my devastated doe. Her distressed breathing flips a switch inside of me.

3013. I’ve been lacking lately, haven’t I? It’s time to do some math.

Show whoever’s fucking with me and... my doe that they can’t touch me without repercussions.

“You said there was a fire,” Ivy croaks. The boy’s skin isn’t burned per se. His face and neck are full of cuts, from

tiny to menacing. “This... It looks like an explosion. Not a fire.”

“I can see that, little doe,” I say to her. The exhaustion that dared to hold me back sinks back into the ocean, far away from my reach. Goodbye, motherfucker. I’m buzzing with the need for destruction. “I want you to take a seat. You need to rest. It would be best if you returned to your room. He can’t see you.”

“He needs to feel my presence. He doesn’t have anyone else. He came to visit me, and he got... He got hurt. My home... He could’ve been killed, Jordan. What happened? Who did this?” Ivy rambles, pacing in front of the glass that separates the boy and us.

He’s innocent in all of this, and he got caught in the crossfire.

For better or for worse, he’s my needy little doe’s project. She’s taken it upon herself to protect her young even if he’s not *her* young.

“Ivy, will you do as I say and stay here?” I ask her.

“Where are you going?” She turns to me with a whipping speed, her eyes burning with questions.

“I’m going to take care of this. I’ll have the hospital evacuated—”

“Please, don’t,” Ivy urges me. She’s been around for years now. She knows the process.

“I’m locking the place down, little doe. You won’t be able to run out, and nobody will get in. It’s for your protection.” I gesture at the hurt boy, and I feel a pinch, a stabbing sensation. The Wraiths and the Winters ended up becoming one big family because we understand one thing.

Family.

The boy needs a family, not a friend. A whole fucking family.

“You’re lucky he’s not in diapers,” I tell her, and the corner of her mouth lifts, if only for a bit. “Stay here, little doe.

Watch over him. He's in good hands. I'll be back by tomorrow, and we'll plan how to convince the kid to move in with us, alright?"

Eagerly, she nods. "But... Where?"

Her eyes widen with fear of the unknown.

"Little doe, I'll build you a home. I'll build Rome in one fucking day for you, understood?" She sucks in a harsh breath, heartbreak swimming in her eyes. "Did you hear me?"

Ivy dips her head. "Are we going too fast?"

"Not fast enough, little doe."

There's no room for hesitation. I grab one of the nurses, and I give her instructions. In less than five minutes, I've managed to convince a group of nurses to bring my Ivy a bed by Ignas's room so that she can keep an eye on him while she rests.

Ignas is the nurses' main concern, and I manage to calm Ivy down, making her settle on the bed and under the thick covers. She's flipped on her side, watching Ignas from afar.

I kiss her fingers, something you'd never catch me do on any other day. I do something that would be considered praying. I think of her, our future. The boy in the room nearby deserves a better future.

We can't save everyone, but if we can help out Ignas... Why the fuck not?

"What do you mean you'll build me a home?" Ivy asks before I leave. Her fingers are wrapped around my wrist. Physically, I can remove myself from the situation. She's not strong enough to force me to stay and confront what I feel for her.

What my promise means for our future together.

"Dream of something you'll never have, needy doe. That's what I mean. Dream of it, and I'll make it happen for us. And for that little shit. He's a big guy, but I'll teach him how to be my son. You'll see." I kiss the fingers that hold on to me, the

top of her hand. Her wrist. “I turn broken boys into men, little doe. I’ll make that happen for your friend.”

I take a deep breath, the antiseptic stench in the room reminding me of the old days.

“I’ve been running for decades, Ivy. It’s time I rest. I want to watch my grandkids grow, you know what I mean? I need to see my sister to make sure she’s good after all she’s been through. I don’t want to be alone anymore. I need to open my eyes and feel my family for real. I’ve been on the run, and I need to settle down. I want to settle down with you. I can’t imagine it any other way. Do you want to go on that journey with me, Ivy?”

“How can I say no to you? You’ve been my dream since the day that I met you, Mr. Winters,” she confesses, blushing a cherry red for me.

“I need to do this last thing, little doe. I fear that you know who’s behind this incident. You’re not mine until he’s out of the way,” I tell her, and she flinches, curling into a ball.

“While you were away on that roof... Fylox told me something disturbing. My adopted father turned fiancé bought me when I was a baby, Jordan. I haven’t unlocked that part of my trauma if there’s any, that is. I know what he did to me when I grew up. Grooming me. Seducing me with money. Comfort. I played along because I didn’t see a way out. He made me turn on the woman that raised me. I haven’t seen her since she was submitted to that rehab. I’m a horrible person... Hugh took a young girl that looked up to him, viewed him as a safety net, and he wrapped said safety net around her neck like a rope he’d strangle her with if she ever said no.”

Her lips tremble, her eyes distant. “I hate myself for not seeing it any earlier. What if he’s harmed others in the meantime? Younger than me? More vulnerable?”

Panic races through her veins, and she lifts herself from that bed. I gently push her back down, cocooning her in the warm white sheets of her bed. “He hurt you. He manipulated you. Don’t ever think otherwise, little doe. He’s going to get what’s coming for him. I promise you that.”

“I want to tell you to back off, but....” She gulps. “I can’t. If there’s one person that can make him pay, it’s you, isn’t it?”

“That, my needy little doe, is the greatest compliment you can give your man.”



“WHY DO YOU SMELL LIKE THOUSAND-DOLLAR COLOGNE?” I sneer at Fylox, who climbs into my car. I’m parked outside of the Queen I hospital while it’s being evacuated and placed on lockdown.

My men still listen when I call.

It doesn’t surprise me. It makes me... happy.

“Don’t let me start,” Fylox mutters, shutting the door behind him. The car rattles, and I feel my son-in-law’s anxiety go through the roof. Cursing. Colognes. He’s sensitive and easily triggered, my son-in-law. “Did Ivy tell you?”

I nod.

“Of course, she did,” Fylox says. “Please, give me enough time to mentally prepare for a wedding, will you?”

He puts on his seatbelt, and he twists his head in my direction. “I’m sorry I faked information.”

“You did what? She didn’t tell me that part,” I blurt out.

“I wanted her to decide whether you should know. That sort of thing... Finding out you were bought as a baby by a pervert... That’s not easily digestible now, is it?” Fylox runs a hand through his hair, dark hair that he’s growing back after years of bleaching it.

“What’s going on, Fylox? You must have information,” I tell him.

“Indeed. Unfortunately.” He takes a deep breath. “Hugh has been going in and out of Katantia for some time now. We know that. He never bothered Ivy before. The moment you got close to her; Hugh makes another triumphant return.”

“He’s got eyes here, doesn’t he?” I ask.

“Of course, he does,” Fylox replies, deadpanning. “I looked into the house that Ignas resides in, and I hate to tell you, but our security has failed that building. The system’s been offline for weeks now. We’re talking about vulnerable kids here. And Ignas and the rest of the young adults in the already-dangerous part of the building.”

“You mean to say that the attack on Ivy’s home was premeditated? Somebody dismantled the security system on purpose?”

“What do you say?” Fylox asks.

“I agree. When Ignas messaged me that he got himself a wheelchair and money for a ride to Ivy’s place, I didn’t think anything of it. I didn’t want to. Ivy’s told me how he makes money, and quite frankly, I don’t like thinking of a person of his age being forced to sell his body to make ends meet. I told him to stay at home, thinking that at his age, he would easily read his texts before he makes a move. He didn’t. He came over, and suddenly, a fire erupts at the building? It doesn’t sound right.”

“Police is in on it. They are interviewing our guards and the people at the abandoned youth facility,” Fylox tells me. “There’s something else you need to know. This time, when Hugh flew into Katantia, he brought a child. He didn’t register her, but there’s been an abduction connected to his name in California... It’s a long story, and it involves a group of people in Los Angeles. Their woman works with this underage teen, doing her nails. The kid’s a television star. Hugh’s into all sorts of business, isn’t he? Apparently, he opened a production company. He’s been working with studios to find young talent... It’s his playground. He grabbed one of the girls, and he brought her over to Katantia. Her friends have come looking for her. I locked them up in the cellar, but Kamila insisted on letting them out. Now, we wait for them to wake up.”

“You want me to bring the kid to the palace?” I ask.

“Yes. Quickly. I can’t stand guests. You know that.”

“Oh, I do. Listen... I’ve been craving the old days. Since he blew up my woman’s home, I want to burn him alive,” I tell Fylox.

“You do?” I nod. “I’ve got tons of what you need. Take me to the palace. I’ll show you my dungeon of pain.”

“I hope you don’t tie up Kamila in there—”

“Not that dungeon,” Fylox corrects me. “The other one, where people go to die. I’ve saved one of Kamila’s father’s rotting toes there. I always gawk at it when I feel down. It cheers me up to remember how I chopped him up and made him choke on his own dick. It’s a freeing feeling to hurt abusers.”

I start the engine without interrupting Fylox. He goes on and on about his father-in-law, the man he killed in front of Kamila. It’s a trip down memory lane that he takes quite frequently. It’s a scene that motivates us to go the fuck on.

That’s what we’re here to do.

Cut off heads until there’s nothing but dust left.

CHAPTER 24

IVY



MY EYES DRIFT SHUT, LURING ME INTO A DEEP SLEEP.

“Ivy.”

It’s a voice of comfort that comes to me, but this comfort has twisted into sorrow. Smolyakov takes a seat at the edge of my bed, and for a moment, we’re back at my place. He’s begging me to entertain him, paint him.

We’re laughing at nothing in particular and enjoying ourselves until my coffee’s ready and I can sit down on the floor to paint him while he looks out of the window.

But we’re not at my place.

That place has burned down.

Since I haven’t left the hospital like Jordan asked me to, I don’t yet grasp the severity of the situation. It doesn’t feel real yet.

I open my eyes, and I encounter a broken Smolyakov. His head hangs low, and his eyes are more sunken than ever.

And he’s the type to regularly do molly.

“We need to talk,” he tells me, and my heart shatters. His mask has slipped off, making me shiver. Where is he going with this? I don’t want to find out.

I glimpse at Ignas, and I’m relieved that he’s still in the position I left him in five minutes ago. I drift in and out of consciousness.

“I did that.”

“Excuse me?” I gasp.

“Ignas.”

“What about him?” I ask.

“His fractured knee? I did that.”

“You’re not making any sense,” I blurt out. I shift on the bed, but I’m too disheveled to get up and face my friend. Since Jordan had the place emptied, the noise has stopped. Where there used to be shuffling and pacing, now, it’s a silence ready to swallow me whole.

“I was supposed to kill him, Ivy. Do you understand me now?” He scowls at me, and I’m taken aback. I wrestle away from him, but he clutches my knee. I freeze.

“Why? Who made you do that?”

“Nobody,” Smolyakov quickly reveals. He doesn’t make a show of it. Simple. Hard. Facts. “Nobody makes me do anything. I was paid to do it.”

“But you failed,” I remind him. Ignas got away with a fractured knee.

“I decided against it at the last minute,” Smolyakov says, his icy eyes turning tense.

“You want me to congratulate you? Do you understand what you’re saying? You let perverts pay you to kill a teenager? Perverts that hurt kids? Are you... Are you listening to yourself? You’re a doctor. You’re not... Please, tell me you’re joking?” I’m transfixed by his words, the timelessness in his features.

He doesn’t care, does he?

For the first time since I’ve known him, Smolyakov shows me the one side I’ve always ignored.

The monster.

“I decided against it because I wanted to see the boy suffer,” Smolyakov tells me, and his words whip me, five years of trust vanishing. “I wanted to extort your daddy, Ivy. He has enough money to feed me, so I beat down on the boy

until I felt satisfied with the results. Okay, I almost killed him. He's been a little cripple for the past couple of weeks, hasn't he? Your daddy seemed content with my slow torture. Being locked inside that tiny unprotected one-bedroom apartment in the abandoned youth facility... That's a prison right there."

"Fuck you," I spit at him.

"I fucked the boy often enough. That should suffice." Smolyakov stuns me quiet. "That's not even the worst of it. I've decided that I won't be your daddy's employee for much longer, Ivy Lin. Or should I say Willow Abbott? I don't care. This entire ordeal bores me, and I want your boyfriend to come and get me already."

"You don't mean that," I whimper.

"I do." Smolyakov reaches out for the sheet that covers me. His fingers trace lines on the surface until he flattens his palm, pressing the sheet against the bed. "Ignas told you about the guy who paid to punch him after shoving his dick down Ignas's throat?"

I nod, my chest caving in.

"It was me who hired him. I made him do that, the punching and all. That was just the icing on the cake. I told the guy to keep calling Ignas, and he did. I told him to act like he works for the hospital, and he did. I handed him a wheelchair decorated with explosives that your silly friend would never detect. He handed Ignas the chair, and he drove him to our home. I was inside of my apartment when Ignas strolled into your place, Ivy. I'd meticulously prepared the entire building. I was so eager to watch it burn down. I was ready to die with him."

"Then why the fuck didn't you!" My heart begs me to shut him up. I can't take it any longer. I'm fucking grateful that he saved Ignas. If he hadn't... Smolyakov sounds like a child, confessing to his crimes like this. It pains me to see how our friendship unfolds, but there is nothing left to do but wait and see.

I'm not letting Ignas out of my sight now.

“Because I’m a sucker for pain, and your boyfriend is going to make my death more fun than a stupid wheelchair bomb,” Smolyakov explains, cold and unaffected.

“So, you saved Ignas because you didn’t want to die a boring death?” I yank the sheet away from Smolyakov, twisting my body away from him. He doesn’t budge, and I end up hurting myself, thrashing myself against the bedframe. “You almost killed everyone I know. Why the fuck did you do that, Smolyakov?”

“Your daddy paid for the building. He paid for it to be destroyed. He didn’t want you to have any attachments left in Katantia. He wants you back by his side, Ivy Lin.” The calm I’m used to from Smolyakov has twisted into a broken record of nothing. I can’t dissect what’s wrong with him. Perhaps it’s everything.

He doesn’t seem to feel any remorse for his actions.

That puts him in a box with Hugh.

I don’t want to believe that Smolyakov simply got paid for his actions. There’s something sinister at work here, but I can’t read between the lines. He isn’t giving me anything.

“I’m not going back to him,” I hiss through my teeth.

“I know you’re not, you dumb slut. You have a new man, don’t you? I’ll wait here for him. What’s his specialty? Dismemberment? Asphyxiation? Does he like guns?” There’s a pounding in my ears, and Smolyakov’s jaded voice punches through it. His insults are the least of my worry. “I’m ready for it all. I’ll die by an expert hand. There’s nothing I want more than that.”

“You lied to me for years,” I blurt out. All this time, I believed I was alone, but Smolyakov was watching. He reported back to Hugh, letting him know that I was lonely and miserable.

Single.

The moment Jordan showed interest, Hugh found out.

We were never safe.

“I fucking did. And you never noticed,” Smolyakov says, an ominous cackle erupting from him. “I guess Winters fucked you clever. Not dumb. How could you keep me around? Why would I be interested in you? You’re just another slut that likes older men, Ivy. I’m surprised you never begged me to fuck you.”

I quiver where I lie, our joined memories breaking pieces of my peace.

I don’t have it in me to speak, and I know that he sees it. He’s vigilant like that, his skills reaching beyond mine. I built a space of safety for myself, trusting my friends to keep me in high spirits. I believed that he appreciated me as a friend.

It felt real.

“I’m glad it all burned down, you know,” Smolyakov says. “That way I don’t have to see your ugly face ever again. When’s Jordan coming back? How long will it take him to kill your daddy? I’m bored, and I want it to end.”

“You’re sick.”

“That’s what Ignas said when I fucked him for the first time,” Smolyakov says, shifting his gaze toward my injured friend.

The only friend that matters.

“I don’t know how long it’ll take him,” I jeer. I take harsh breaths, my heart pounding offbeat. “But when he comes, I’ll make sure you pay.”

“That’s what I’m counting on.”

CHAPTER 25

JORDAN



FYLOX'S DUNGEON IS LIKE CHRISTMAS FOR US.

It's one of the only places on Katantia that make me feel nostalgic.

My son-in-law and favorite second-in-command grins like he's rummaging through Christmas cookies. Instead of cinnamon and Mariah Carey's Christmas album, down here, it reeks of bleach and citrus. He's in another corner, but I feel his energy radiate enthusiasm from where I stand.

The only sound I hear is the clicking of metals, the ones in my hands. While I've been romancing my little doe, Fylox received a new shipment of handguns from back home—a rare event with Katantia's financial status.

“How much do you need?” Fylox asks. He's got a system. It's like a private library but for deadly weapons down here. He's by the area of liquid poison, the chemicals. We're not chemists, but in our active years, we've managed to read books, ask some involuntary friends about dealing with things like acid.

Blackmail is fun when you know how to push buttons.

Next to the chemicals, Fylox has a range of tools for any vengeful man to use. If I wanted to slice somebody up, I'd grab one of Fylox's knives—knives that the best chefs in the world recommend. Sharp. Cutting through bones.

We do... We did a lot of that. Not anymore. Stabbing and chopping people up exhausts me. It's Fylox's favorite way to do his job, but I prefer my hands. Guns. Chemicals.

“Think big fat Mountain Dew,” I tell him, and he beams. “Two liters or a gallon. Whatever you have. The more, the better. I’m in a mood.”

“Give me a minute,” Fylox says. He rubs his hands, disappearing into the dark corridor that we came from.

Nobody has access to this dungeon, and there are no cameras down here either. Virtually, it doesn’t exist. A long time ago, Aram used to host secret sex parties down here, the ones Kamila wasn’t invited to.

Or Felicita.

Those parties included minors.

Minors like Fylox when he was a prepubescent boy.

It suffocates me to think of a young Fylox in a room full of older men and women, disgusting pigs that raped him, tortured him, for their perverse pleasures.

During our first months on Katantia, Fylox renovated the place to enjoy his downtime rather than float in the memories of his past. He’s in the epicenter of his emotional torment when he’s down here, but with the help of Ivy as his therapist, his romantic relationship with Kamila, my son’s friendship, and our young king Kendrick, he works through his pain. Fylox uses this basement dungeon for fun. He works on it intensely. No mold. Dust? Non-existent. He cleans it every other day. He shines his toys, from knives, guns...

My throat burns, and I decide to distract myself before I lose it.

I play with the other toys in Fylox’s dungeon while he’s finding me what I need. I’m never invited down here these days because we don’t have any enemies like that anymore. When people attack us now, it’s not personal. It’s Katantia-related.

Fylox and I are too busy to disrupt any people’s peace for them to want revenge on us.

I don’t have any downtime.

Well.

Now, I do.

But my downtime is my little doe and everything she's up to.

Murder used to conquer my every thought, but little does are better for my health.

"It's going to be Mountain Dew," Fylox calls from wherever he's snuck into. "I don't have any other bottles left. Kamila let the palace gardeners take a share of the acid we confiscated from those terrorists that were planning to hurt some Hole Store employees."

"Pity we can't just buy sulphuric acid. You'd get as much as you need to feel safe," I reply. Fylox reappears, a huge black plastic bottle in his hands. "They should be thankful that the state has money problems or else."

Fylox chuckles because he knows... If the state's finances were on point, and we didn't have to provide welfare for half our island, we'd stack up our weapons.

Instead of expensive weapons of murder, Fylox spends his time designing bottles to match the protective suit going along with the usage of such chemicals.

Fylox cheerfully hands me the bottle. It's full, and it feels good in my hands. Like water. Like it can't kill me if I inhale it. Like it won't burn me to crisp if I pop the lid open and test how the clear liquid feels against my skin.

"Let me get the protective suit," Fylox says, leaving me in his dungeon with my companion for the next couple of hours.

"Do you have my size?" I ask him, calling after him. "I don't want to look like one of those mumble rappers."

"They're baggy, you grumpy old man. Kamila let me buy new suits for my birthday," Fylox explains. I hear his frantic steps, the thudding of the shelves he's combing through. "You'll love it."

I hold on to the bottle of acid like they'll take it away from me.

The reality is they can't forcibly remove it from me.

This bottle's contents will free my little doe.

And the kid that the motherfucker dared to drag into this whole mess.

When Fylox returns, breathless and blushing in excitement, he carries a garment cover bag as big as him. With one hand, he's hooked his fingers in the boots that we wear for jobs that involve chemicals.

I breathe out in relief. It's a simple gesture, but it feels good to trust. Fylox thinks of everything. If I give up portions of my responsibilities, he won't let my family get hurt.

After this final deed, I'll free my little doe from her woes like she's freed me from mine with her mere presence and her hard work all those years.

Work I never appreciated.

"Look at you. Is Ivy turning you soft?" Fylox comments. He strolls by me, heading for the table nearby. He lays out the garment cover bag, and his fingers reach for the zipper. I follow him, studying him as he presents my new fit. His eyes sparkle with an intoxicating excitement.

"Nothing gets through this protective suit. Look at the mask!" Fylox takes out the badass mask that can cover my entire face, my neck. It's a hard protective shield that not even acid can burn through. He hands me the mask, and I try it on. It's a tight fit, but I'll manage.

I slip into the black suit that Fylox designed, and he helps me zip everything up. In the end, he helps with the gloves.

Working with chemicals and my big ego... I need to look a certain way. Can't risk marring my beautiful skin, now, can I? Leave no trace behind. Not even on myself.

"Don't lose yourself tonight. You've got a girl now. That's... That makes the pain worth it," Fylox says, stepping back. His head hangs low, his eyes avoiding me. I try not to think about what this dungeon means to him, but it's hard. I back away with a shudder.

"I..." I'm not in pain, I want to lie.

“What is it?” Fylox asks.

“I’m in love.”

“You are?” His eyes go wide, and he swallows. “It can be painful, you know. That feeling.”

“I’ll manage, won’t I? It’s better than being on an endless quest of soul-sucking solutions to my anger management issues. I can’t keep killing time at work so that I don’t feel alone, Fylox. I’m too old for that,” I confess. I stretch in my protective suit, making sure it won’t rip in action. “My sister once told me I need comfort. Not everyone does, but I do. I’ve finally grown comfortable with admitting it. I need a friend outside of this. Somebody who’s mine and mine alone.”

Fylox nods, averting his gaze. “Like Kamila for me.”

“I have no idea how you manage to share your woman,” I blurt out.

“It’s not sharing when it’s Alex. We’re one,” Fylox explains. “There are no percentages.”

“I can’t have Hugh lay claim on Ivy, Fylox. Am I a fool for what I’m about to do? We’re supposed to be out of this game. We’re palace employees now,” I tell him.

“Speak for yourself.” Fylox shakes his head. He clears his throat. “When you’re done, bring the girl back. Our guests from California want her safe and sound,” Fylox warns me.

I give him a quick nod. I check my pockets, making sure to leave any devices behind.

“What’s our clean-up team’s status?” I ask.

Fylox confirms, “They’re one phone call away.”

“Perfect. Hugh’s at his mansion?”

He takes out his phone, sending out a quick message. A couple of seconds later, his phone perks up. Swoosh. He nods for me. “Yes. It’s five minutes away from the palace. Next to the Hole Store Aris and Valentina love to sneak out to when Penelope Jade’s sleeping over at Felicita’s.”

“That’s a visual I don’t want,” I say, grimacing.

Repulsed, I shake off the imagery of my niece and her husband doing whatever young couples like them do in their free time away from their daughter.

“Knock him dead, will you?” Fylox says, grinning like a fool. “Make us proud.”

“Always.”



I TAKE OFF MY MASK FOR THE RIDE TO HUGH’S MANSION.

It’s uncanny how close his mansion is to the palace. It underlines his connections to Aram. There aren’t a lot of houses in this area of Katantia. Whoever lives here has made it to the top of the food chain on this island.

And then there are the sex stores—in this case, one of the most famous Hole Stores on Katantia.

Behind it, almost in its shadow, Hugh’s driveway begins.

I pull into it.

Do I care that cameras record my car driving to Hugh’s house? No. We’ve invested enough money in our country’s security that outside sources cannot surveil us without us knowing. We have drones set to stalk our citizens from foreign agencies, but those focus on the city center, our banks, and hotels.

That’s where the juicy stuff happens.

Meanwhile, at Hugh’s mansion, kids get abused, and these foreign agencies don’t give a damn.

If they won’t, I will.

I’ve been blinded by Ivy. I know everything there is to know about her. I’ve known about Hugh Abbott and his tendencies to be a fucking creep. It was none of my concern, and I believed he was just another old man who wanted himself some forbidden pussy in the form of his adopted daughter.

When I faced Ivy, she didn't seem like a victim of anything more than that. For years, she's been a strong and professional young woman. It's my mistake that I didn't believe there could be more in her.

I've certainly seen that in the aftermath of my family dinner with her.

I can understand where she stands mentally when she clings unto me like I'll betray her trust. She's my needy little doe, and fuck, I want nothing but to be her hero.

Tonight, I'll do just that.

Hugh's mansion is hidden by old trees that must have seen it all.

I park my car in front of the house's entrance, and I kill the motor. He must have heard me coming, and if he didn't, he's a naïve piece of shit. Grabbing the plastic bottle of death and my mask, I break and enter.

No alarm goes off.

Another sign of gullibility. Aram used to think he was impenetrable because nobody would dare to hurt him, and then his people revolted, trashing his palace while Fylox murdered him in his very office. That's when Kamila became queen. That's when I evolved the palace's security system, adding my magic to it so that now, nobody can enter without being vetted by us.

Men like Hugh don't care. It's like he's waving his bullshit in front of my face.

I focus, and I hear hushed whispers and frail steps from upstairs. It's a cold place, and there's almost no decoration whatsoever. Why would there be? Hugh comes here to fuck, doesn't he? No need for comfort when all you want is sex.

I hold my mask and the bottle while I climb up the stairs. I want him to see my face before I kill him.

The further up I go, the more I hear frantic breaths. The entire place stinks of bergamot, a scent my doe despises because it reminds her of *him*.

I hear Hugh from inside one of the rooms, and I follow my instincts. The tightness in my chest returns, swindling me. I can't afford to blackout as much as I'd enjoy ripping this mansion apart. There must be a kid in here somewhere, and I must remove her from the situation before I kill him.

"Pee on the stick," Hugh demands, his voice a beacon that's drawing me in. He wants me to hear this. "Do it now."

"I don't want to!" The kid. A ferocious young girl. Fuck.

A loud thud stops me in my tracks. Then, sobs erupt. I rush where I assume I'll find Hugh, shoving the door open. It's a bathroom of white marble.

I'm stunned, speechless at what my eyes take in.

Hugh's in one of his tailor-made suits, the ones with the silk pocket squares folded inside of the suit jacket's pocket. It has a striped pattern, navy, and white. He stands above a crumpled girl with dyed black hair. Her entire body is shaking, and despite not wanting to look, I must. She's undressed but physically unharmed.

Although Hugh hit her, and she crashed against the floor. She's in the midst of a panic attack, and I don't blame her. Hugh is poking her side with a stick, a pregnancy test. He's enamored and distracted by the naked body beneath him, so he doesn't notice when I whack him with my bottle of death until he loses his senses. I almost break his nose, too.

The girl gulps. Hugh is unconscious and on the verge of falling on top of her. I grab his suit jacket, and I shove him out of her way.

"Carey Jean?" I ask. "Is that you?"

She nods. I'm an attentive grandfather, but today, I wish I wasn't. Kamila doesn't let Kendrick watch television, so when he's with Felicita and me, we tend to show him television shows for kids from back home.

I wish I obeyed Kamila.

The girl that's naked on the floor? She stars in one of the shows my grandson occasionally watches with his grandpa.

Fuck this.

“Who are you?” she asks, fidgeting with her arms. She attempts to hide her body from me, but I’m not even looking.

“There’s no time for that. Is there anyone else in the house?” I focus once again, attempting to feel out the sounds of the mansion. The girl’s whimpering obstructs my effort.

She shakes her head. “We’re always alone.”

“You know where he keeps your clothes?”

She gives me a quick nod.

“I want you to get dressed and meet me by my car. Can you do that? It’s right outside the door. A big black Escalade. Charles and Vegas are waiting for you at the palace. They’re your friends, right? I’ll take you to them.”

“What? That’s impossible,” Carey Jean croaks. She quivers some more, and it physically pains me.

“What’s impossible? Are they not your friends?”

“No... Why would they come for me? I... I mean nothing to them. Nobody cares about me unless they can make money off me—”

I interrupt her. “Are they trying to make money off you?”

“No... Not Mr. Dane or Mr. White. My friend Grey is dating them, and she seems like she cares about me. It’s my mom. She sells me to Hugh so that I get better jobs. My dad doesn’t give a crap if I live or die. My bosses fired me because Hugh told them to... I’m all alone. Are you trying to lure me into another trap?” She gradually gains her strength, scowling at me. I don’t condemn her for that.

“Hugh abused my partner when she was a kid,” I tell Carey, and she freezes. “I’m here to murder him. It would be best for you to leave unless you want to be a witness to this crime.”

“Oh,” she blurts out. Her eyes fixate on the bottle in my hand. Some of Hugh’s blood spilled on it already. “You’ll murder him with a bottle?”

“Yes,” I confess.

“Will it hurt?” she asks tentatively.

“More than enough.” I don’t offer her my car’s keys because I didn’t lock the doors. Only my fingerprint can start the car—it’s one of the new security measures. She won’t be able to leave without me.

“Okay. I’ll leave you to it. I’m an actress, but I can’t lie *that* well. If somebody asked me about today, I wouldn’t be able to hold back. Okay. Okay. Okay. I...” she mumbles.

I turn away from her, giving her space and privacy to leave the room.

“What’s your name?” she asks as she’s about to depart.

“Jordan Winters.”

“Thank you. Please, make it hurt. I’ll be by your car!” She rushes out of the room, leaving me with Hugh Abbott. His suit is dirty with his blood now, but I can’t wait to watch it melt off his skin.

I kick at him with my feet, pressing him to wake the fuck up.

“Did you check on your properties? What do you think? Isn’t it time to pass ownership to somebody else?” I dig my heel into his neck, fucking with his throat. He spurts awake, panting on the floor. His limbs twitch like he’s a fish out of water, and his eyes shoot open, a nasty red making them bulge out of his eye sockets.

At first, he stares at me in confusion.

When I proceed to slam my foot into his stomach to work that shock in some more, he starts coughing for me. Inaudible words that provide me with immense pleasure flow out of his mouth. Is he begging?

Perfect.

“P-Please!”

“Please, what?” I hiss. He’s coughing up blood already. I can’t have him die before I use my favorite torture method on

him, can I? He's seen my face, so I can safely put on my mask. I can get to work now. "What did you do to the girl I just sent away?"

"None of your business!"

"Oh, it's my business." I pop the lid of my plastic bottle. "Are you thirsty for underage pussy, Abbott? Are you?"

"Let me go," Hugh begs. His suit is soiled now, ruining his splendid image. He means nothing without his clothes and his money. He's an empty fucking shell that takes pleasure from innocents. "I'll pay you. I can find you better pussy than my daughter's. I... I used her already. You can have a virgin! I promise you!"

"Fuck you," I spit at him. "What did you do to the girl? Carey Jean's her name, isn't it? Why was she naked on your bathroom floor? You hit her. I heard it."

"She disobeyed me," Hugh mutters. I take my bottle, and I give him a drop of acid on his wrist—the only part of his upper body not covered by some sort of pretentious piece of fabric. A harmless act. Not really. He shrieks as soon as the liquid connects with his skin. It's potent, and I haven't diluted it. He shifts around in front of me, shuffling toward the sink.

I grab hold of his ankle, and I hold him where I want him. I remove his slippers and socks.

And I drop more of my acid on his feet, burning his soles.

Open that mouth, Hugh. Inhale the sickening scent of my torture. More heavenly shrieking.

That's what I want to hear. Unfortunately, I don't have much time, or I'd extend this session until next week. "Talk to me, Hugh. I might let you get away."

"You won't d-do that," Hugh cries out. He coughs some more, and his face is as red as can be. I have an entire bottle left. He's already breaking. Weak little bitch.

"You know me so well."

"What do y-you want?" Hugh's attempts to fight me are ruthlessly... boring. His arms slap around into the air,

punching nothing.

“Maybe I want money. Maybe I want answers. Be a clever boy, and pick which one will save your ass,” I suggest. Fylox’s protective suit and mask protect me from the death that looms in this room.

I could let Hugh go with a couple of burn marks on his skin.

But I won’t.

I close the lid of my bottle, giving him a false sense of security. We remain there for a couple of moments, not speaking. He’s still in pain, biting his lips. Choking on nothing but the deadly smoke in the air. I don’t touch him for a while to give him space. *Space he doesn’t deserve.*

But the fucker can’t walk away from me now, can he? I burned his soles off.

“When Ivy applied to come to Katantia, I knew of it. Aram Wraith was going to trick her. I gave him free rein with her until I decided to get her back. I had interesting offers in California, and I’d explore my options as a free man until I grew tired. Unfortunately, Kamila became the queen, and she messed up my plans with Ivy. You stepped in, and I couldn’t get her back the way I wanted to,” Hugh begins, whimpering through his words. “I remained in California. I had my fun. I won’t lie.”

“What type of fun?” I ask.

“Private parties with wannabe actresses,” he sneers. “Innocent girls. Just the way I like it.”

“Age range.”

“Ten to thirteen. Sometimes sixteen. Depends on what the production needs,” Hugh explains, and it takes me every ounce of restraint not to strangle him.

“And Carey Jean is one of those Ivy-replacements?” I ask. Hugh nods, clutching his stomach with the hand whose wrist isn’t burned by acid. “What do you do with her?”

“She takes pregnancy tests for me. I like seeing that.”
Fucking pig. “Haven’t managed to get her pregnant yet, but it’s coming. I’ve changed my diet.”

I pray that the girl isn’t pregnant. I fucking pray, and I don’t even believe.

“You know, I’ve done horrible things in my life,” I tell him.

He coughs, visibly swallowing. “I can relate.”

“Oh, no. You can’t,” I insist. “I’ve murdered over three thousand people. Think of that circle of life. Three thousand times. Over. Dead and gone. Because I decided that they weren’t worth living anymore. You know the difference between you and me?”

He flares his nostrils.

“I kill people that deserve it. You hurt innocent girls and boys. You scar them for life unless you end their lives,” I say. My accusatory tone has faded, and it’s replaced by a sadness I can’t control.

I haven’t forgotten Fylox’s state when he first joined us.

He was broken beyond repair.

He’s a man now, but it took a monstrous amount of work to get him here. And he still has his issues.

“You paid Smolyakov to spy on Ivy, didn’t you.”

“I did,” Hugh confirms.

I hold the bottle of death like it’s going to slip from my hold.

Which it won’t.

“Why him?”

“I sent him here, Jordan,” Hugh confesses. “I paid him to come here. He was going to kill Aris Wraith while he was in his coma, but we decided against it. There was no use for it after Aram’s death. Aris wasn’t our main problem. It was Ivy,

and she worked in the same hospital as he did. Lived in the same building. I had her under control at all times.”

“He did it out of loyalty?”

Hugh lifts his chin. “Money, my friend. People like Smolyakov don’t understand the concept of loyalty. I caught wind of him at one of my parties in London. Smolyakov likes the young boys, doesn’t he? I fetched him as an asset in London, and he proved valuable in the end. Smolyakov traveled across the world to fulfill my mission. I paid him well. He let me know that Ivy grew particularly interested in one of the boys out of the program. She has a lot of clients from the program.” *The program.* My breathing turns heavy. Fylox was part of said program. Ignas. Apparently, Ivy, too. “You surround yourself with a lot of ex-program participants. You like broken people, Jordan? I can find you some more where that came from.”

He’ll betray himself, but if there’s one thing he won’t do, it’s giving up the program.

That’s a code not even a dying man breaks.

I don’t keep my hopes up for that information.

“Smolyakov burned my building down, the one I paid for. You knew I paid for it, yet you never did anything about it, didn’t you? The fire was meant to be a suicide mission that would result in Ivy jumping right back into my arms because all of her friends would be dead,” Hugh explains. He shuts his eyes.

“What happened? Did your bank run dry?” I ask, scowling.

“I paid Smolyakov triple what I usually do. Ordering somebody to commit suicide... That’s quite an assignment. I failed to consider the type of person he is. He tricked me.” Hugh jerks away from me when I touch the bottle’s lid.

“Don’t you want to know what I did to Ivy?” he asks, one last offering before he leaves this world.

“I don’t know. Do I?” I snort. The truth is that I can live with all his atrocities but the ones that concern my doe. I want to be the broken one in our relationship. I don’t want Ivy to be

the weaker link. But she is. We both have our weaknesses. It's time we faced them.

“To this day, I don't know who gave birth to her or what her origins are. She was an orphan by the time she arrived in the program, and she remained that way until I bought her,” he explains.

“You deal babies in the program?” I ask, swallowing.

Hugh's cackle unnerves me. Of course, he won't confirm that information. “She was quite the stinky and unruly baby, so I gave her to my wife who fell in love with her. She asked to legally adopt her, and because I was intrigued by the challenge, I went along.”

“Did you harm Ivy when she was a baby?” I don't want to know, but I must find out.

“What do you think?” I can't move. My limbs assume the weight of bricks, slowing me down and punching me in the gut. He goes on, “I cashed in again when she grew up. I doted on her with gifts, gave her the world. I showed her what it's like to be one of us. She liked the life of an elite. Fancy schools. Fashionable outfits. Expensive cars. Her pale skin looked sublime against my jewelry. Then, when her mom started asking too many questions, I convinced her to calm her mummy down with a couple of pills. Of course, the pills were more than what Ivy could comprehend at the time. She was just a silly schoolgirl, not a therapist with a degree. She drugged her mommy on my behalf, and when the authorities came to pick her mummy up because Mummy was lashing out, I let Mummy go. She's been in rehab for over a decade now, and she'll die there.”

I don't cower. Fuck, I want to, but I keep my chin up.

“I took away Ivy's safety net, and I embraced her, using her for sex. She played along. She wanted it so bad. You should've seen your girl, Jordan Winters. She was a horny minx, the best I've ever fucked. She's better than prepubescent —”

“Shut the fuck up,” I blurt out, incapable of sitting there while he praises himself for being a dick. I pop the bottle open, and I take a moment, dragging it out. Will I? Won’t I? I know my plans, but Hugh can keep guessing. Am I fascinated by his cruelty? Do I want to join his team of depravity?

I don’t. I never would. I value family. I value innocence.

Hugh says, “It won’t end if you kill me. Your suffering. You’re aware of that?”

“I am, but at least, I’ll have rid the world of another monster. Say hi to Aram Wraith from me. I’ll see him when I die.”

I pour the bottle’s contents over Hugh’s head, and he burns away, turning into crisp. His cries die out slowly, the poison working its way into his veins.

Hugh melts in front of me. His face isn’t identifiable by the time the acid’s snuck into his lungs. He stinks, and I’m glad that Fylox’s mask works wonders. I don’t have to inhale the mess I’ve created.

I’ll live with this image for the rest of my life like I’ve lived with countless other deaths I’ve caused. I’ll paint over this one with my doe’s smile, though. A smile this pervert won’t disrupt ever again.

I don’t take off my mask until I exit the house. The bottle’s in my hand because I like to keep souvenirs. The numbing silence that once surrounded this mansion is disrupted. Aaliyah plays, thudding through my system. The kid sits in the front seat, bumping to my favorite music. What the hell? The car’s not supposed to go on without my thumb.

Climbing into my car, I instantly see a backpack and a stuffed turtle on top of it. Two strong arms wrapped around both. The girl’s dressed from head to toe, and she belts out my favorite song by Aaliyah.

I turn it down, and the kid gasps. “Hey! I was listening to that!”

“What do you know about Aaliyah, huh?” I ask, turning the engine on. “Put your seatbelt on.”

“I know that you stink!” The girl pouts, clutching her stuffed turtle.

“Sorry. I was busy with murder. That tends to affect personal hygiene,” I sneer. Before pulling out of Hugh’s driveway, I sent the clean-up team a message. Hugh’s corpse is ready to go.

To my surprise, the girl bursts into laughter. We pass by the Hole Store, and I hope that she doesn’t look at it. She’s not from around here, and I don’t want to explain. Kids from overseas don’t and shouldn’t understand what goes on in Katantia.

“Can you please turn the music back on? She... She calms me down,” Carey Jean begs me once she’s had enough of a laughing fit.

“You know what, kid? I can relate to that.”

I flip the switch, blasting Aaliyah as I accompany the kid to the palace where her friends are waiting for her. I keep an eye on her as I drive, and what I see troubles me. I want to forget what I witnessed when I stormed Hugh’s house, but I know I shouldn’t.

I’ve seen those empty, sunken eyes before.

The clogged-up throat... She sings along to my Aaliyah, but there’s a tension in her voice that makes me uncomfortable. I see through her amused smile because it’s not real. She’s happy to listen to her favorite music, but she’s using it as a distraction from what just happened to her—what’s possibly been happening for a while.

Outside of the music, there’s silence. That doesn’t change when we pass the gates at the palace. I make this one exception—nobody touches the girl. Not even to make sure she’s not carrying a bomb. I witnessed her suffering. I don’t want to add to that.

I park my car, and Carey Jean hops out of it with her stuffed turtle in hand. I had a son, but I vaguely remember that at fifteen, kids hate stuffed animals. They’re busy with high school and grades. Not stuffed animals and perverts.

When Kamila appears at the palace entrance, Carey Jean stares at her pregnant belly with fascination. Mechanically, Carey introduces herself to Kamila, Alex, and Fylox. Kamila's men hover in the back, aware of the kid's trauma. They give her enough room to breathe.

The kid doesn't speak to us as we get her settled in a room with food and all the other amenities she could ask for. Kamila, Fylox, Alex, and I leave her to rest.

"One less monster," I say as we make our way to Kamila's office.

"We have to keep going," Fylox adds. When we use the staircase and Kamila's around, he all but carries her so that she doesn't have a freak accident. "Undoubtedly, they'll never stop."

"Are you sure you can trust her friends? Who are they?" I ask, worried about the underage girl that we're not handing over to her parents—because they don't care.

"They're the only family she has. Her mom let her spend time with Abbott, and her dad's busy in NYC," Fylox explains. "Once our guests wake up, I'll hear it again from their side, but they should be good to go."

"I trust Grey's judgment," Kamila comments.

I ask, "Who's Grey?"

"Kamila's current girl crush," Alex informs me.

"Girl crush?" I raise my eyebrows. "Should I—"

"No, Dad. Her hormones are driving her nuts," Alex explains, chuckling.

"I can speak for myself!" Kamila intervenes. She's as red as her hair when she's not pregnant. "It's not... Okay, maybe my hormones are adding to my imbalance. But I believe Grey and her men have Carey Jean's best interests at heart. They'll help her get emancipated so that her mom doesn't have any power over her, and they'll make sure Carey gets the therapy she needs. Grey and one of her men go to therapy like we do."

They're good people. Her two men traveled across the world for a child that's not even theirs."

"That can mean a lot of things in our world," I remind her.

She rolls her eyes. "Grey is a trafficking victim. She's the widow of Máximo Martí. Do you know of that guy?"

I nod. Ecuador. Human and drug trafficking. The family died out five years ago with the death of Máximo Martí and the subsequent murder of Alexis Nina Blanco, the clan's mom. They were one of the most ruthlessly cruel families in South America, a reputation built with their enemies' blood, sweat, and tears. Kamila continues, "Her men would do anything for her, including take care of Carey Jean."

"Dad, leave that to us. You should go to the hospital and be with Ivy. She needs you right now," Alex says, and I stare at him, eyes bulging. I don't know how to react.

"He's right. We'll handle it. You take care of our Ivy," Fylox encourages me.

Kamila gives me a heartfelt nod, and I take a couple of steps back.

CHAPTER 26



SMOLYAKOV CURSES AT JORDAN, SLINGING HIS ARMS AT HIM. He's playing with fire just to get Jordan to react.

But Jordan doesn't get up from his seat on my bed. His arm is an armor of protection around my waist.

"Can you... Is that possible? Smolyakov wants to be murdered by you, but I don't want his wish granted," I ask Jordan in a whisper.

Without another word, Jordan waves at the guards that are stationed at the end of the corridor.

Smolyakov mumbles, lashing out. He yells at Jordan. There's no reaction.

Palace guards take away Smolyakov, and his wish to die at Jordan's hands vanishes, becoming an afterthought.

Jordan isn't well, and perhaps that's why my request to give Smolyakov a trial before deciding what to do with him was heard.

I didn't rest while Jordan was gone because Smolyakov was nearby, and I didn't trust him around Ignas. I kept my eyes directed at my injured friend, who's still asleep in his room.

Jordan sits on my bed outside of Ignas's room, and he stares at the ceiling. The occasional tremor he finds himself in betray his inner goings.

"Do you want to get out of here?" I ask him. "You should go to sleep. Eat something."

“Murder doesn’t wash away with sleep or food,” he says, his voice slicing through the silence.

“I’m worried,” I confess.

“You shouldn’t be, little doe. I took care of Hugh Abbott,” Jordan says. He rubs his face with his hand, groaning. “It’ll be all right now.”

“What did he say?” I ask out of mere curiosity.

When Jordan remains quiet, I receive my answer. Whatever Hugh said, Jordan doesn’t want to hurt me with it. I go on, “Whatever he said, it doesn’t matter anymore. I love you.”

“I love you more,” he says, shifting toward me. When his hands touch me, I feel Hugh’s blood on his skin. Jordan’s as clean as ever, but I can sense Hugh’s death on him.

I revel in it.

I feel Jordan’s thumbs on my ears, kneading at me. I close my eyes, and I breathe him in. This isn’t my Mr. Winters, the one I’m intimately used to. He scrubbed himself with Fylox’s scentless soaps before he came here, and I can smell the faint citrus and heavy antiseptic on him.

He plants kisses across the outline of my face, ending with his nose rubbing against mine. “Little doe, if you need to be hurt, let it out. Don’t hold it in. I’ll be there for you.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, snaking my arms around him. Jordan’s body is cold, but it’s still him. I’d rather freeze than let him go.

“Let’s help each other heal, little doe. Please.” His needy request warms my heart.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” I tell him. I emulate his kisses, trailing along his strong jawline. His thick lips. His beautiful nose. He’s carved to perfection, and he’s all mine. His darkness. His light.

Most of all, his love.

EPILOGUE

IVY



IT'S COLD FOR A LATE SUMMER DAY ON KATANTIA, AND I'M not wearing a coat.

Jordan didn't warn me that we'd be going on a walk of the palace's premises. He holds my hand, leading me wherever he intends to take us.

"Are we there yet?" I ask, my teeth clattering.

"Soon, my needy little doe."

His chuckle warms my heart. We pass by Valentina and Aris's home. I gaze at it from afar, and I detect Penelope Jade and her mom in the kitchen, having lunch. I quickly look away because that's an invasion of privacy.

"Where are you taking me anyway?" I ask, rubbing the sides of my arms.

"To your future."

"Oh wow," I deadpan. I want him to hug me warm. Now. "I'm cold. Please."

Soon after Valentina and Aris's home, the street abruptly ends, but we don't stop our walk there. Jordan marches on, and I follow closely behind him. He follows a trail that I can't detect.

"Little doe, I'm going to build you a street here," Jordan says. He gestures at the poor trees that he'll have to remove for the said street. "So that you can take your death trap to work."

"What?" I gasp.

“I’ll buy you a new car, but I hear that people buy cars on special occasions. I shouldn’t just hand you a new car. You’ll return it. If I wait until Christmas or your birthday, you’ll feel bad about returning my gift,” Jordan says, his smirk tickles my insides.

“I don’t need a new car. I already have one.” I pout.

“And I don’t need to go to therapy. The real one that’s not as fun as yours,” he sneakily comments. Jordan’s been going to Mr. Bradley’s sessions twice a week, and from what I can tell, the sessions are more than precious for Jordan’s well-being. Mr. Bradley is an exceptional psychiatrist, and he’s a valuable asset to our team.

He’s able to calm Jordan’s demons in a way that I can’t.

Sex is fun, and we laugh a lot together, but there are certain things in Jordan’s existence that I don’t understand.

“Hey!” I hang my head, terribly embarrassed by my lack of professionalism regarding him.

“Little doe.”

“I’m a real therapist!”

“Yes, you are you pouty little doe. I’m so proud of you.” He halts mid-step, and I crash into his hard body. He lifts my jaw with his fingers, connecting our eyes. I breathe hard. I can’t resist his warmth even when he teases me. I wrap my arms around him. “You’re not me, little doe. You don’t understand my experience.”

He clears his throat. “I want to build our house here.”

I remove myself from his embrace, wearily so. My eyes drift over to the trees, the nature. There’s a lot of space for us here. I’m used to the icy city. I don’t know what to do with space.

“I’m scared,” I tell him in all honesty.

“You’ll never sleep alone, little doe. I’ll be by your side.” We’re a couple of minutes away from his family and his workplace. The Wraiths don’t use their property to its full potential because they value green space. It isn’t an easy

decision to tear down what's been evolving for years. "I've already hired people to come up with plans for us. We'll approve of everything together. How does that sound?"

I heard his question, but I'm dumbfounded. "You'll protect me?"

"Always."

Jordan goes ahead and outlines his vision for our home. It'll be close to his family but far enough to give us some space. "... Ignas will have a room. We can ask him where he wants to stay, or we can pick one out for him."

"Do you think he'll move in with us?" I ask, dropping my gaze. He's still hospitalized, but he woke up three days ago. He's getting better every day, and he doesn't seem mad at me.

When he should be.

I endangered him.

"Little doe, he's an extension of our family now. He needs someone to take care of him while he gets back on his feet," Jordan says. I can't touch his confidence. He won't accept no for an answer. Ignas is our project now, and we'll help him until he kicks us out of his life.

"What will happen to Smolyakov?" I ask, mindlessly staring at the blue sky.

Smolyakov's being held in the palace, and I haven't seen or heard from him in days. Jordan made sure that he's being held in a prison of the highest security measures. He's the palace's number one prisoner at this moment. He's the most dangerous liability in the palace, and he's not been killed for his crimes yet because Jordan holds the ropes.

"I hope he dies in that dungeon," Jordan says, exhaling sharply. "But I know he won't. To be honest, I don't know what will happen to him if you don't want me to end him. I could. All you have to do is ask."

"That's what he wants. I won't grant him that wish," I reply. Smolyakov's betrayal smacked me in the face, and I haven't yet recovered. "Will he be put on trial?"

“Yeah, but I’m unsure whether Adonis and his lot will be able to extract any further information out of him. He betrayed you. He did Hugh Abbott’s bidding. He’s a disgraced national hero... Well, we won’t make that information public. That would cause an outrage, and it would weaken our position. It’s better if people think Smolyakov’s missing in action,” Jordan explains. He scoops me up, carrying me out of the woods. Longingly, I gaze back at our future.

I’m ready.

“I trusted him.” My throat burns with hurt. I hide my face against his strong chest.

“I know you did,” Jordan says, kissing the top of my head. “It’s okay, though. Mistakes happen. He used your weaknesses against you. That won’t ever happen again, little doe. I’ll make sure of it.”

In silence, we stroll back into the palace. The guards pat us down. They stare at our coupling in awe while I gaze at their boss.

Jordan is their hero, and it never ceases to amaze me.

We venture inside the palace, and Jordan leads the way to the stairs.

“Do we really have to take the staircase?” I complain, yawning and slumping my shoulders to emphasize my point.

“We do,” he says, adamant on getting his way.

“What can I do to change your mind?” I ask, playfully tilting my head to the side.

Jordan raises his eyebrows. He bites his lower lip, deep in thought. Or so I presume. “Little doe, I want your mouth.”

“My mouth’s yours, Mr. Winters,” I proclaim.

“That’s what I like to hear.”

We end up taking the elevator up to his floor. Once we reach our destination, I’m reminded that the ladies at the reception haven’t warmed up to me yet. Jordan is mine, and they can’t have him. They don’t like that, but I don’t care.

At all.

When we enter his office, I sigh. “Why don’t you have a nice view of Katantia like Kamila does?”

“I don’t need nice views, little doe. Distractions lead to errors. We can’t afford that at our levels of stress,” Jordan explains, taking a seat at his desk. This entire room could use a renovation. It’s too bleak to be inside of for more than ten minutes.

Jordan opens his laptop, and his attention fades from me.

“Hey, we said no work today,” I remind him in a pout.

“I can’t hear you, little doe. What did you say?” He teases me. He takes away his attention, one of the things I crave most from him. “I can’t hear little does that aren’t on their knees with their mouths full of my cock.”

I make my way to his desk, and I drop a kiss on his lips.

“Little doe, you better hurry up. We’ve got visitors,” he announces with a smirk. I panic, impulsively sinking to my knees. His desk is wooden, and his legs take up most of the space.

I regulate my breathing. Fuck. I didn’t think this through.

The door opens, and I pull Jordan out of his pants, squeezing at his flesh.

“Is everything okay with the kids?” Jordan asks, and I drop my hands from his crotch.

“Yes, it’s all good,” Felicita reveals, and I breathe out in relief. I cover my mouth the moment I do, hoping that nobody heard me.

“She’s under that table, isn’t she?” Måns asks, and I swallow wrong, holding back my coughing attack. Being found out... It turns me on, and I’m afraid to admit it.

“Who?” Felicita asks. Chairs scrape the floor. They take a seat on the opposite side of Jordan.

“Nobody,” Jordan insists, his voice almost a growl. I stroke his hot flesh, willing him to take it down a notch.

“I want to move into Mrs. Cross’s home,” Måns announces. Like me, Måns lost his home. Felicita’s place is big enough for an entire family. She can help him out until he finds a new place to stay.

Jordan reminds Måns, “You can afford a hotel.”

“I don’t want—”

“Please, Jordan?” Felicita’s voice is thick with trembles. “For a week. He’s already looking for a new place. His sister will move into one of the women’s shelters on the South Side.”

“All right.” Jordan clears his throat, and I take him back into my throat. I hear his grunt, and I fight a chuckle. My tongue laps at him. “Take my room. Don’t abuse her kindness. You can do your own laundry. She’s not your mom, okay?”

“I know,” Måns says, and I feel a shiver run down my spine. I stuff my mouth with Jordan to distract myself.

Felicita’s heels announce their departure. A soft click of the door lets me know that they’re gone.

I stroke him, applying more pressure on his hot flesh. The crown of his cock is engulfed in my mouth, my lips wrapped around his head with need. Spit and precum drips down my chin, and I welcome it. I don’t touch myself because both of my hands take care of Jordan.

It’s his moment, but I can’t help clenching my thighs to seek pleasure for myself.

He curses, hissing in thirst for more. “You want me to come in your tight little mouth? Cry for me, little doe. Taste your tears and my come.”

I let him thrust inside my mouth, shoving himself as deep as he can. He stops my world, and I’m breathless, my insides flipping upside down. I ache for him to finish, and he does, filling me up until his come is overflowing my mouth.

He doesn’t move for a breath, still stuck inside my mouth.

When he finally does, my breaths turn frantic. It takes me a moment to settle down. Jordan picks me up from the floor, and

he settles me across his lap. His finger drives through the combination of come, spit, and tears on my chin.

Tucking a strain of hair behind my ear, Jordan says, “Your mouth will end me one day.”

My eyes go wide. He chuckles.

“Don’t worry, little doe. The end is only our beginning.”

ALSO BY ARABELLA BLACK

THE SAN RICARDO SERIES

[Grey, #0.5](#)

[The Chief, #1](#)

[Extended Epilogue](#)

[The Twins, #2](#)

[Remo, #2.5](#)

STANDALONE

[When The Sun Goes Down \(A Dark Reverse Harem\)](#)

THE WRAITH ROYALS TRILOGY

[Exposed, #1](#)

[Wanted, #2](#)

[Obsessed, #3](#)

[The Wraith Royals: The Complete Trilogy](#)

[Goodbye, Mr. Winters](#)

(INTERCONNECTED STANDALONE TO WRAITH ROYALS UNIVERSE)

TRANSLATIONS INTO GERMAN

CALIFORNIA LUST (REVERSE HAREM)

Her Dead Eyes - Band 1

His Cruel Eyes - Band 2

Their Filthy Eyes - Band 3

DIE WRAITH-ROYALS-TRILOGIE

[Exposed: Enthüllte Lust, #1](#)

[Wanted: Verschollene Prinzessin, #2](#)

[Obsessed: Verbotene Liebe, #3](#)

STANDALONE

[When The Sun Goes Down: Du Gehörst Uns](#)

BOOK OF CHARACTERS

THE WRAITH ROYALS

King Aram Wraith

Queen Penelope Wraith, DEAD

His King's Object Princess Kamila Ruby Wraith

Prince Aris Wraith

Prince Weston Wraith

DECEASED:

King Wraith I

Queen Wraith I

King Wraith II (assassinated)

Queen Wraith II



THE CROSS FAMILY

Mr. Travis Cross

Mrs. Felicita Cross

Ryan Cross

Valentina Cross



THE RAWLINS FAMILY
Mr. Spencer Rawlins
Mrs. Amalia Rawlins, DEAD
Mandy Rawlins
Manuel (Mandy's fiancé)



THE WINTERS FAMILY
Jordan Winters
Aretta Winters Howard (ex-wife of Jordan)
Alex Winters
Mr. Howard (Aretta's new husband)



THE CASTRO FAMILY
Fylox Castro
Maia Callie Castro (Fylox's sister)
Mr. Luis Castro
Mrs. Castro



THE NEXT GENERATION
Penelope Jade Wraith (Daughter of Aris and Valentina)
Kendrick Wraith (First-born of Kamila, Alex and Fylox)

Amalia Wraith (Only daughter of Weston and Mandy, using
Valentina as a surrogate)



OTHER KATANTIA CHARACTERS

Adonis, (Travis's lover)

Ms. Malena Bengtsson (doctor)

Lee (tattoo artist)