

His obsession  
would be  
her ruin

WICKED HEART

A WRECK & RUIN NOVEL  
RIA WILDE

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HEART

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A WRECK & RUIN NOVEL  
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# Author Note

This is a dark contemporary romantic suspense meaning there will be many things in the book some people may find triggering or will make them feel uncomfortable.

This book includes heavy sexual content, dub-con, violence, strong language, alcohol use, mentions of kidnap, SA, and human trafficking.

If any of these make you uncomfortable, please do not read this book.

If you are unsure, please reach out to me.

This book is a spin off to the Twisted City Duet, while it is not necessary to have read the duet, doing so may enhance your reading experience.

Wicked Heart is a full-length standalone novel which will be part of an interconnected series. There will be plot points with this book that will continue throughout the series and may not be instantly resolved.

Wicked Heart is set in London, UK.

I hope you enjoy reading Kingston & Eleanor's story!

## PROLOGUE

# Kingston

I had been waiting a long time.

Three years to be exact.

Three years of biding my time and watching those ticking hands of the clock.

But that's the thing about time, it runs out and at the end of it, the only thing left to greet you is darkness.

Their time is up, and they don't even know it. I think that's the most satisfying part about all of this.

I watch the lights of London grow closer as we begin our descent. Isobel, my sister, sleeps in the chair opposite me but despite the nine-hour flight back from the US, I haven't been able to rest. Not with the weight of the flash drive in my pocket or the images burning holes through my bag stashed in the overhead lockers.

I've been a patient man and it has finally paid off.

You don't cross the Heart family and expect to come out of it alive.

There would be nothing to stop me now, no one to deter me from this path.

Those who hurt my sister are about to pay and the only currency I'll accept is blood.

## CHAPTER ONE

# Kingston

Murder is a sport.

A wicked game of violence and power, of strategy and corruption. A line that you must tread carefully, one that will tip you off the edge should you lean too far to one side.

But when the bloodlust runs dry, and the bodies turn cold, what do you do with the left-over rage that still heats your blood? What do you do when the game isn't finished but everyone around you has already lost?

It never goes away. That rage that forces my fingers to curl around a throat and steal a life, the fury that allows me to pull the trigger or bury a knife into flesh. It's a constant itch under my skin.

I've watched hundreds of men die, in various ways and even thinking about it does nothing to dampen the anger that continues to flow like wildfire through my veins.

There were still too many out there. Too many still standing.

For the past six months my life has been consumed by righting the wrong committed against my sister, but I have hardly anything to show for it.

Six months ago, I gave her my word that it would finally be over, that we could move on from it, and yet here we still stand, fighting a war that should have ended the moment I got my hands on that information, and the reason my rage still burns hot and bright inside my body.



It needs an out.

That's where the fucking comes in.

I watch the bodies on the bed, writhing with their pleasure, the sound of wet skin slapping together, of greedy mouths and tongues matching the tempo of the blood that pounds furiously inside my ears.

My cock is fisted in my hand, my body laid back on the crushed velvet armchair that sits directly opposite the foot of the bed, and yet the release I seek does not come.

The limbs tangled in the silk sheets become more frantic, spines arch, breasts pushed out towards the ceiling and moans turn to breathless pleas as one of the women finds her own release, and still, watching as I do, something I've done plenty of times before and used for my own gain, nothing fucking happens.

I curse and squeeze my hand around myself hard enough for it to hurt and the girl, a beautiful blonde looks up at me from beneath her lashes, gaze just addled and grins. She climbs unsteadily from the bed, leaving the two remaining bodies to continue their search for pleasure and comes to stand before me.

I allow my eyes to drift down her body, taking in the long legs and narrow hips, the taut stomach bejeweled with a ring in her naval. Her breasts are small but perky, her nipples rosy and peaked, and the smile she gives me is nothing short of seductive.

"You always watch," she lets her tongue run across her bottom lip, "but never join."

Her eyes drop to my cock, still hard and aching.

"Do you need some help?" Her mouth tilts up at the corner.

Without invitation, she drops to her knees between my legs. My nostrils flare and before she can wrap those pouty lips around my crown, I catch her

shoulder.

“Not tonight.”

I didn't want the feel of another body near me. I didn't want the kisses or the hands and the touching that comes with it. I just wanted to get my fucking self off and go to bed.

It's been months since I sank into a woman's body, months since I allowed myself that level of release. My hand and the odd lips around my cock have been enough so far but I knew I was getting to the point now, where unless I ripped apart this entire city, I wouldn't be getting anything at all. And that's my problem. Blood and sex mingle too closely together that one cannot come without the other.

Soon, I tell myself.

“Are you sure?”

A curt nod is my only response.

She shrugs and stands, hips swaying as she heads back to where the guy is now slamming himself hard into the second girl, hard enough that the bed rocks against the wall, the thump steady and rhythmic. Red welts line the skin on his back from fingernails dragged across his flesh. I shove myself back into my boxers and jeans and stand, eyes on the blonde as she diverts to a chest of drawers and pulls a giant silicon cock from the top drawer. As if sensing what she is about to do the guy forces the girl he's fucking further down into the mattress and bends forward, giving her all the access she needs. I leave before she shoves it into his ass.

The house is a bedlam of sweat soaked bodies and alcohol infused breath, the wood flooring sticky under my shoes. People fuck against the walls, on the tables and furniture and the smell of sex, mixed with sweat and spirits tinges the air. Every body is in a various state of undress, some of the men with their trousers around their ankles, their women with their dresses pooled around their hips or waist, others completely naked, their partners the same, breasts and asses rocking and tensing.

I find Ace – Abel, my best and most loyal friend – with his cock down a red heads throat while he tips a bottle of beer to his lips. Before I took over the city, Crimson, the name of my elusive sex club, was already thriving and continues to do so. It was an escape. Sex had always, *always*, been the one thing that kept my head on straight. This club had kept me alive, even when I thought I was dying. But now it wasn't doing what I needed it to do, even if it kept doing what I needed it to do for the men and the women under my payroll.

Every single person who walks through the Crimson doors is willing to be here. They come for the release, the thrill, the pleasure. I would have it no other way, despite the thin line I walk in every other aspect of my life.

With Ace too far gone in his pleasure I don't bother to tell him I'm out for the night, instead I tell Micha, one of my security guys to relay the information that I've left for the evening, sorely unsatisfied.

He claps me on the back as I exit, the loudness of the club suddenly silenced as the door slams shut behind me. Standing on the porch in a quiet residential street in the city of London, I take in a clean breath of air. It's cold, winter had finally arrived with the trees bare of any leaves, a frost spreading across the ground, turning the grass stiff and white and making the glass on the cars parked along the curb frosted and opaque. The wind that howls down the road is bitter. My driver opens the door to the Mercedes when he spots me on the porch, and I climb in, sighing at the heat, and rest my head back on the cushioned headrest as he peels away from the curb, heading towards the city centre and my penthouse.

When we arrive, the driver drops me at the doors where two of my men stand, dressed head to toe in black suits. I know they conceal weapons under their jackets, knives hidden in their boots but mostly, their lethality comes from their hands. It was why they were employed and will remain so.

They nod as I pass, and once inside I stop at my private elevator, noting the security light that notified people whether I was home was green rather than the red it should have been.

There were plenty of people who had the code to my home but most, if not all, are accounted for, either at Crimson or doing various jobs I've told them to do around the city. It could be Isobel, I think, as I withdraw my gun and step into my elevator, flicking off the safety.

When I reach the penthouse, the doors slide silently open, and I step onto the tiles.

The penthouse is dark and quiet. My shoes tread carefully across the marble in the foyer, my body posed to strike, and my mind quiet of all except this task. I delve deeper into my home, watching, waiting.

A rustle of clothing catches my attention and I swing around the corner, leveling my gun at whoever it is in my fucking house.

Isobel sits in the middle of the room, an open bottle of vodka resting on the rug next to her leg and a cigarette dangling from her lips. Her red lip stain has been smeared across her mouth, her mascara leaving trails down her cheeks. She holds her own gun in her lap but makes no move to lift it as her glazed and red rimmed eyes lift to meet mine.

“Do it,” she whispers, “put me out my fucking misery.”

I deflate with a sigh at the sight of my sister and put away the weapon.

“Fucking coward.” She spits.

“Belle,” I placate, carefully walking towards her, “what’s wrong?”

“What’s wrong!?” She mimics with a slight shrill, “what’s wrong is that it’s been six fucking months, six months since you – we – came back from the US. Six months since you got hold of that flash drive and what has happened since!? Nothing. Fuck all.” She sucks in a breath, “you have everything you need, and what are you doing with it!? Leaving it in a safe neither me nor anyone else can access. You’re killing minor players or fucking your way across the city but doing absolutely *nothing* to pay back a debt owed.”

“These things take time,” I tell her. I wasn’t lying. They *do* take time.

It was true though but not entirely. It had been six months since all my plans, everything I’ve been working towards finally fell into my hands.

I had worked for years to find and end the organization that was responsible for my sister's turmoil, and I was putting the plan in motion. But with rushing came mistakes and I could not afford a mistake.

Mistakes were weaknesses and weaknesses got you killed.

Everyone knew Isobel was my weakness and I made a point of proving that she would not be an easy target. But any other weakness was a no go for me. I would not put anyone else I cared about in the line of fire.

Doing this, enacting this plan would put an end to more than just lives. It risked *everything*. I hadn’t realized how far this organization stretched, but now I knew there were some things I needed to adjust.

Three years ago, I was given back the last piece of my family that I had thought lost. When I was Eighteen, my little sister, my fifteen-year-old sister was stolen from her bed in the middle of the night. There were no leads, no clues, and she was gone for six years, six years of searching, six years of nothing until one day I was given a lead.

An anonymous lead which told me everything I needed to know.

I arrived at the time and the place and there she was. With everything I could have ever wanted to avenge her gripped in her frail and pale hands.

It turned out our own uncle was the one who gave her over to this organization, our own uncle who saw me as a ruthless leader, one who was fit to take over from him when the time came but was too weak when it came to his sister. So, he took care of the problem himself, but instead of killing her, which would have been a kindness, he gave her over to an organization so depraved and evil she suffered for years before someone gave me a clue.

I found out it was because he was punishing me. A way to control me.

I killed my uncle.

Slaughtered him.

I remember the feel of his blood as it ran down my fingers, snaking over my hand and my wrist, I remember how hot it was and how the life in his eyes dimmed and then went out as my knife shredded through his flesh, through his muscle and drove into his heart.

He knew why, and the only thing he said was that it was the right thing to do for the future of the empire he had built from the ground up. Little did he know that the city would thrive under my rule, that my reign of the criminal underworld would bring in money and power, and violence, enough that I had some of the most influential people across Europe beneath my thumb. The only thing standing in my way of complete control was this organization, the Syndicate. And once I have ended them, I'll have the satisfaction of avenging what they did to my sister and take everything they own.

The human trafficking will cease to be, the prostitute rings and sex houses will be destroyed. I'll let Isobel do that. I'll give her that, and I'll watch as she burns it all to the ground.

This had been a long time coming, and all the planning, the scheming and manipulating almost came crashing down when my hackers figured out a way into the Syndicate's systems, only to find we weren't the only ones looking for a way in.

The Silver's of Brookeshill were a family I had researched extensively; I didn't know what the connection was until I realized who Alexander Silver was in bed with. Wren Valentine, Marcus Valentine's daughter and a man under the Syndicates thumb. It all started clicking into place until Silver's own hacker got us locked out and then his woman was kidnapped.

Either way it worked out for them in the end, and I got what I needed from him. If one less trafficker now walked the streets, then even better.

“If you don’t do something soon, Kingston,” Isobel staggers to her feet, swaying, “I’ll do it myself, and I won’t be quiet about it.”

“And you’ll get yourself killed in the process, we know what they are capable of, what they will do,” my words leave my sister flinching, “don’t be fucking stupid and wait for my command.”

She snorts, “Fuck you, Kingston and fuck your command.”

I let her leave, my guys downstairs will take care of her and make sure she gets back to her own apartment in one piece.

Rushing would only lead to failure, yet I feel like I have no other choice than to make my next move. Isobel wasn’t bluffing, she would take matters into her own hands, and I didn’t blame her, not really, not with what she had to go through, but I wished she would trust me enough to get this done.

If I’m moving my plan forward there could be no distractions, no diversions from the plan. This is the first step in ending what I started all those years ago, I just had to hope they didn’t see me coming.

When the time comes, I want it to be shock and horror on their faces as I stand before them and watch them bleed.

## CHAPTER TWO

# Kingston

My foot kicks at the prone body in the middle of the kitchen floor, naked save for the towel someone dropped across his hips to conceal his cock underneath. There's red lipstick stains on his chest and stomach and his skin is beaded with sweat, no doubt most of it is the alcohol seeping out of his skin seeing as he drank so fucking much.

I kick him again when he doesn't stir, harder this time, and he startles awake reaching for a gun that he'll find is not at his hip.

"What the fuck!?" Ace grunts when his bloodshot eyes find me standing above him.

He's the only one left in the house save for the staff cleaning up the mess left behind. It'll take a lot of scrubbing and bleach to get the stench of sex and bodily fluids out of the carpets.

"Get up, get dressed, we're moving forward."

He knows exactly what I mean as his eyes widen and mouth drops open, "Now!? Today!?"

"Yes."

"King, mate, *what the fuck!?*"

I shake my head and turn my back, giving him some privacy to clean himself up and get dressed. Ten minutes later, wearing the same suit he had on yesterday, Ace stumbles out of the kitchen, rubbing his eyes.



“If I knew what we were doing today I wouldn’t have got so fucked up last night,” he swallows down half a bottle of water, “why the rush?”

“Isobel,” that’s all I need to say.

“Fine,” he shakes his head, “I assume you’ve got everything arranged?”

A curt nod, “Spare suit in the upstairs bedroom, change. We leave in twenty minutes.”

With Ace busy I take my leave, exiting through the door where I lean against the wrought iron railing that surrounds the porch of Crimson. People bustle up and down the street, sparing little attention on the house or me standing on its porch.

People didn’t know who I was. My enemies don’t even really know who I am. While my name is recognizable to most, not everyone knows my face and while the Syndicate have heard of me, they’ve never once seen me. It was my advantage.

For the most part, the organization have left me alone, knowing I have the power to crush them and that’s not because of the information I hold on them.

They have no idea I have it. They are blind.

Ace comes out fresher than he was before, and we say nothing as we head down to the Mercedes idling on the side of the road.

The drive through the city is slow with the stop start traffic, but finally we pull up outside a huge glass building and climb out.

Tobias and Son Enterprises is a huge and well-established finance company, one of the biggest in London, but it’s run by a man more corrupt than even I am.

“Are you sure now is the right time?”

“It needs to be,” I say and head through the revolving doors. Warm air greets me as I push through to reception and head straight for the desk to announce my arrival.

“Harrison Donovan,” I say the alias name to the girl behind the counter, “here to meet with Mr Franco.”

“Of course, sir,” the girl nods demurely, her manicured nails clipping against the keyboard a few times before she stands, “right this way.”

Ace and I follow her to a wall of elevators, “Go on up to floor fifteen, Eleanor will see you through to Mr Franco.”

She leaves us to it, heading back to her station as we climb in and hit the button to take us up.

“*Mr Franco,*” Ace spits.

“Hold your tongue,” I snap before the doors slide open to reveal a long brightly lit hall with doors to meeting rooms on either side. At the very end a large white desk dominates the space, dotted with greenery and artwork and then further behind a view of the city beyond. *My city.*

A small woman sits at the desk, head down as she works on the computer. I can’t see her face, but her hair is a thick curtain of chestnut locks, glossy in the overhead lighting, and it falls in waves around her face. She doesn’t immediately look up when we stop in front of the desk, and it’s only when Ace clears his throat that her head snaps up. She’s quick to snap the book she was reading closed.

“Fuck,” she hisses under her breath, so quietly I’m sure she thinks we didn’t hear. Ace flicks his eyes to me, a frown pulling down his brows. In her obvious state of distress, I can’t help but quirk my lips and show my amusement on my face. Now that I’m looking at her, now that I’m seeing the face hidden by all that hair, I can’t help but admit that the girl is fucking stunning.

Wide, deep brown eyes are framed by thick lashes without an ounce of make up on her skin, arched groomed brows and high cheekbones where a pink flush is blooming just underneath. Her plump pink mouth is turned down in a grimace, but she quickly straightens up and stands, sliding her delicate hands over the tight blue dress she wears, and my eyes eat her up.

Curves for days, her breasts strain against the material of the dress, so tight over the arches that I'm sure she isn't wearing a bra underneath, not with how tight it is and no visible lines showing. Her dipped waist flares into wide, shapely hips before tapering down to strong thighs, her feet in a pair of nude pointed stiletto heels. I swallow, my mouth dry.

"Mr Donovan, my apologies, I was uh, reading something for Mr Franco and I must have gotten lost in it."

Ace peers over the edge of the desk, "You were reading –" she cuts him off quickly by slamming a copy of the Times over the top and smiles sweetly, though it doesn't reach her eyes.

I just stand there, staring. Taking in all her features, the light dusting of freckles that spread across her nose and cheeks, the small scar on the left side of her jaw and how when she smiles, even if it's fake, one side tips up higher than the other.

"My name is Eleanor, Mr Franco's PA, would you like to follow me?" She asks.

"Eleanor...?" I hedge.

She frowns, "Locke, Eleanor Locke." As if only just seeing me her eyes do a sweep down my body, taking in the tattoos on my neck and hands, the piercing in my nostril and the ones in my ears and with each inch she takes in, her eyes widen and fear leaks into her gaze. Not a stupid woman. She visibly swallows, blanching.

"R-right this way," she stutters, her hand shaking as she flares it out to the side, pointing in the direction of the meeting room. It was never the tattoos or the piercings that scared people, that wasn't the idea of them, but

perhaps it was the way I held myself, how I could command attention without saying a single word. My power was intense and dangerous and human instinct will tell you, you were in the company of a predator when you're around me. I had worked hard to get to this point.

I allow my mouth to pull into a smile, aiming it at her, and she sucks her lip into her mouth, turning abruptly. Perhaps not so smart if she was willing to show me her back.

I want to feed on that fear emanating from her, I want to taste it on my tongue. Her hips sway as she walks, her arse perky and round, and a tempting split runs up the backside of the dress, stopping at a point about halfway up the back of her thighs. All that creamy skin makes my mouth water.

Fuck, I wanted to bend her over the nearest surface and sink so fucking deep inside we'd both be seeing stars. As if sensing my eyes, she looks over her shoulder. I snatch the tongue bar between my teeth and grin.

She snaps her head around so quickly, I'm surprised she doesn't give herself whiplash.

Oh, I could have so much fun with this girl.

My cock twitches at the thought and when she stops abruptly, I continue, stopping only an inch away from her back. Her warmth presses against me and her smell, something sweet and sugary invades my senses. I inhale, committing the scent to memory.

"My apologies, Miss Locke, I hadn't realized you'd stopped," I lie and I don't step away either.

The girl sways and presses on the handle of the door, entering quickly to get away from me. I flick a glance at Ace who is barely suppressing his amusement.

We follow the girl into the room, but I never take my eyes off her. She fidgets with her hands, her eyes looking at everything other than the two of

us standing just across from her. There's something so very innocent about her, from her wide doe like eyes giving away her fear of me like a beacon, to the way she stands so very still, like it'll simply make her disappear. Little does she realize that that's the very thing drawing me closer. She's the moth, I'm the flame, she'll come eventually and when she does, I'll burn her up.

My hand curls around the top of the chair and her eyes dart to it, watching my fingers sink into the soft leather of the back. I wonder if she's picturing all the things I could do with these fingers, how good they could feel if it were her flesh they were sinking into rather than this chair.

"Can I get you any drinks?" She says, eyes on my hand. "tea or coffee?"

"Coffee," Ace says, "Harrison here will have one too."

"Of course."

But she makes no move to leave.

"Eleanor," I prompt, and the sound of my voice startles her. She practically runs from the room, shutting the door behind her.

"Well, that was interesting," Ace chuckles, "the girl almost collapsed from sheer terror alone."

I don't say anything as I take a seat at the table, counting down the minutes before she's back in this room. I'll have to figure out a way to get near her again. I'll have a taste. Just one. Not doing so would likely drive me mad.

I pull my phone from my pocket and type in her name on a message before sending it to my guy with instruction to get me every last bit of information he can about her.

My thoughts are disrupted as the man of the hour heads in. I've already seen what he looks like but seeing him now, in person shocks me. He looks

so clean and normal, he looks *good* and yet, underneath lays the belly of sins so depraved not even hell would want him.

Tobias is younger than I had first anticipated when I got that information from Alexander Silver, mid-forties with dark hair streaked with silver. His face is fresh, handsome even with dark eyes that to most look kind but are in fact not. A calculating man. That's what he was.

"Mr Donovan," he stretches out his hand, "so glad we could finally meet."

The ruse is that I'm the owner of several estates in the Cotswold, manor's and garden's that are worth around a hundred million, and I'm looking for a company to look after the finances.

"Likewise," I nod.

We take our seats at the table, and it's then that Eleanor returns, holding a tray of teas and coffees along with biscuits and cakes and bottles of water. It balances precariously in her hand as she struggles with the weight and the closing of the door. Tobias doesn't move to help. I kick Ace to do it.

He quickly gets up and goes to the girl, "Here."

"I've got it," she snaps, rushing forward and away from Ace but her momentum forces the cups to slide across the tray, and then they're tipping. Coffee and tea spills across the table, splattering me in dark hot liquid that instantly seeps through my white shirt.

"Eleanor!" Tobias yells.

Eleanor gapes in horror and then those eyes fall onto my shirt, at the dark stain of the liquid, then they rise to meet mine.

With the way her face pales one would believe she's just seen death and knows it's coming for her.

## CHAPTER THREE

# Eleanor

“It’s fine,” I whisper for the hundredth time, “he’s just a man in a suit. You see them all the time.”

“Are you talking to yourself?” Someone, I can’t remember her name, I think she’s in HR, says to me in the kitchen.

I wave a hand because, yes, I’m talking to myself.

But he wasn’t just a man in a suit, was he? No. He was not. There was something more. Something dangerous. All the red flags shot up the moment I laid my eyes on him. Granted he was sexy as sin, tattooed and muscled and dark, but with eyes so light in color they could be silver. His face swarms in front of me, all sharp lines. His cheekbones are high and pronounced, the hollows beneath making his jaw that much sharper. Dark, thick brows set low over his eyes of ice that are unfairly framed by the thickest lashes I’ve ever seen on a man. His mouth, lips plump, is framed by a well-groomed dark beard and his hair, longer on top is the color of midnight, tapered at the sides which is short enough for me to make out the lines of a tattoo on the side of his head. A strong, straight nose where a silver ring glistens in one nostril. Both ears are pierced, one on the lower lobe, the other at the top where a bar spears through the cartilage. And his tongue. I glimpsed the silver ball in his mouth as if he were doing it to tease me. I’d heard rumors about how a bar in the tongue could feel on *certain* areas.

Shit.

My hands shake as I lift the tray from the side and head back towards the meeting room, the weight of the tray making me unsteady, especially with how hard my hands tremble. I didn't know who he was other than his name was Harrison. That didn't seem right, not suited to a man like him, but he was here to see Tobias, and I was to do my job. That was it.

I struggle with the door although I manage to get it open, but then the tray tips slightly and my grip on it becomes precarious. I hurry towards the table to set it down. I can see the tray slipping, if I don't get it down now, it'll spill everywhere.

Harrison's colleague, I didn't get his name when they arrived, shoots towards me to help, "Here," he says gently. Far more gently than a man of his size should be able to manage.

But if I let it go everything will fall, "I've got it!" It comes out harsher than I intend, and I lurch forward but too late. The tray tips and the contents go flying. I catch myself on the edge of the table, fingers submerged into the puddles of tea and coffee pooling on the surface.

"Eleanor!" Tobias scolds.

My eyes catch on the dark stain of liquid on the man's shirt. Harrison's shirt. Oh no. I find his eyes.

He stares at me blankly, a cold, terrifying look that stops my heart in my chest.

Whatever this man was here for, it wasn't for Tobias's financial services. I knew it. Those eyes didn't belong to a normal man.

"Mr Donovan," Tobias gently shoves me out the way and I lose my balance yet again, only to be caught by Harrison's co-worker. He grips me by the tops of the arms, holding me steady, and his hands are soft against me. He steadily gets me to my feet and then releases me, "I am so sorry!"

Harrison cocks his head at me, and the move seems almost animalistic.



“Eleanor, get some toweling! Now!” Tobias demands.

“It’s no problem,” Harrison waves a hand, “just a small stain.”

I rush from the room, grabbing all the paper toweling, hand towels, and cloths I can find before hurrying back. They’re all talking when I get there, and I slip in behind them. Maybe I can get this cleaned up and get out before they notice I’m back.

The liquid has cooled now, and I try to clean it up as quickly as I can, but I feel *his* eyes on me, making a task as simple as this hard. “Perhaps Eleanor can go and buy you a new shirt,” Tobias suggests, “I’ll pay of course,” he goes on, “if you would just jot down your measurements.”

“No need,” his voice is a deep baritone that sends a chill vibrating down my spine, “will Miss Locke be joining us for this meeting?”

I stiffen.

Tobias will give this man anything he wants if he’s getting money out of it, even if I never sit in on any of his meetings. That’s what Tate does, but Tate isn’t here.

“Would you like her to?”

My head snaps up, catching the odd gleam in Tobias’ eye that tells me he’s calculating something. I’ve worked for the man long enough that I know he isn’t what he appears to be, but what exactly, I never wanted to find out.

“Who will take notes if she does not?” Harrison asks.

“Very well,” Tobias agrees.

Harrison pulls out the chair closest to him and Tobias jerks his head, silently ordering me to sit.

I finish cleaning up, dumping the wet paper into the bin, and the towels outside the door and grab a pad and a pen from the counter, edging closer to

the table. I try to take a seat further away, but skilled fingers wrap around my wrist and Harrison gently tugs me down into the chair closest to him. His colleague sits on my other side.

Sweat makes my palms slick, but I keep my head down, trying to ignore the wall of muscle on either side of me. Something bumps my knee under the table and a flick of my eyes tells me he's looking at me. Again.

I don't like this.

I don't fucking like this at all.

He terrifies me, and that terror, that *fear* pools like heat in my lower abdomen, it makes my spine ache, and my thighs tremble, and I *hate* it.

For two and a half hours I sit there in that room with them, his presence a steady, haunting heat that never once leaves. My heart pounds chaotically in my chest and my mouth is as dry as a desert and when the meeting is finally over, I practically sprint from the room.

Did I make it far? Of course not.

"Perhaps a tour," I hear Harrison say, that voice rumbling through me.

"I'm sorry gentlemen," Tobias says, "I have another meeting I must attend, but I will let Eleanor give you the tour, she's been working here for years, I'm sure she knows this place as well as I do."

I inwardly groan, keeping my back to them as they say their goodbyes to each other, and then I feel him behind me.

"Do I need to worry about any more coffee being thrown my way on this tour?" He teases.

I ignore him, I can do this. Once this is over, I'll never have to deal with him again.

"Right this way," I rush through the tour, showing the various departments, Harrison keeping his presence at my side steady and

unnerving.

“Well, that’s it,” I say breathlessly, stopping at the elevator. When I turn to the two of them, I choke. It’s only Harrison now, his companion having left already. I search for him, but see no sight of him.

“Walk me down,” Harrison presses the button on the elevator.

“I need to get –”

“Now, come on, love,” he leans in, whispering against the shell of my ear, “I don’t bite.”

Lie. He bites. He *definitely* bites.

Swallowing, he ushers me into the elevator and the doors slide closed behind us. Now trapped with him, I press myself as far into the wall as I can get while he watches me on the other side. He clenches his hands into fists as he takes me in, clearly seeing how terrified of him I am.

“Why are you so afraid?” He asks.

I shake my head.

He crosses the space between us, placing his hands on either side of my head, resting the palms against the wall of steel behind me.

His smell stuffs itself up my nose, warm like whiskey and spicy, a tantalizing scent that leaves heat in its wake. His head cocks again, and his mouth tips up as his eyes drop to my lips, “You are so very tempting.” He admits.

I say nothing. I’m not even sure I’m breathing.

He leans in further, his nose pressed against the side of my face and his mouth moves, “I was telling the truth, I don’t bite.” He pauses, and I feel his smile on my skin, “unless, of course, you want me to.”

He pulls away sharply as the doors open and then, without even a glance back to see if I follow, he strides towards the doors where his friend is waiting. He doesn't look back and I don't follow.

The ride back up to my floor feels like the longest of my life. My legs shake, and my hands sweat, and my heart pounds.

*You are so very tempting.*

I shiver and push it away. I'll never see him again. It's all fine.

When I make it back to my desk, I throw myself into my chair, cradling my head in my hands, but when I can't sit still, I grab my things and stand. "I'm going to lunch," I shout to no one in particular and reach down to get my book.

A small business card falls out, and my mouth drops open at it.

My name has been scribbled in black ink on the left-hand corner, so there's no mistaking it to be for me.



## CHAPTER FOUR

# Eleanor

For whatever reason I keep the invite. I tuck it into an inner pocket of my purse, and it stays there, burning a hole through the leather.

I know who it came from even if he didn't leave his name. Harrison.

Why, I didn't know and why he seemed to be so taken by me, I didn't know either. His presence still haunts me, even hours later when I'm safely tucked away in my apartment.

Tate, my best friend, colleague, and roommate still isn't home. I haven't seen her all day which isn't like her at all. I open the message thread and check if she's read my last text, but the tick is still gray rather than blue. Unread. It really isn't like her.

I didn't see her at the office today and when I left this morning her bedroom door was still closed, but I didn't check to see if she was still sleeping. After all, it was really early, and I was heading to the gym where I'd then meet her later at the office for our morning coffee. She wasn't there. It was our routine, and had been since we met seven years ago.

Maybe she's sick, I think, as I pad down the hall and stop outside the room. The door is slightly ajar, so I push it open, letting the light in the hall flood the bedroom. The bed is made, the pillows organized.

Chewing the inside of my lip I pad back to the kitchen, pouring the last of the wine into my glass.

She always lets me know if she's going to be late. She could be with Garrett, Tobias' son, I suppose. I knew their relationship had developed some in the past few months. I thought it a bad idea to date the boss's son who in turn is also our boss, if not directly, but she ignored my advice. He treats her well, I guess, though I hadn't spoken to him much. I didn't like Tobias, he freaked me out, so I assumed his son was the same way and avoided him.

Shaking off the feeling I take my wine and head to the small cozy armchair that faces the window overlooking the park.

It's late, the streets below empty save for a few late-night dog walkers, which is why it's easy to spot the lone male leaning against a Mercedes parked directly opposite the apartment building. He's wearing dark clothing, boots and a leather jacket, and he's far enough away from the streetlights that his face is shrouded in shadow. He lifts his hand and places his lit cigarette between his lips, the cherry on the end burning bright as he sucks in and then blows out the smoke. His hand catches in the light and the tattoos inked into his skin makes my heart stop. My fingers tighten around the wine glass. Though I can't see his eyes, I know he is looking at me, and he knows I'm looking at him.

He followed me. Harrison followed me.

I stumble away from the window, pulling out my phone to dial the police.

My finger pauses over the green button. I could be wrong. Plenty of people have tattoos on their hands and while this street is quiet, there are plenty of people who live here, walk through here to get to their destination. It was a safer street than any of the others around here. Whoever it was could be waiting for anyone. I needed to make sure it was actually Harrison before I called the police on an innocent man.

Even though all these thoughts are logical, rational, my heart still thumps wildly and continues to do so as I slip a coat over my shoulders to shield me from the cold, and drag my feet into my boots. My legs are bare

thanks to the cotton pyjama shorts I wear, but I'll only be out long enough to confirm his identity.

I stop in front of the door. Do I need a weapon?

I scoff, the sound loud in my quiet apartment, and throw the door open, leaving it on the latch so I can get back in. The building is quiet, my steps loud and echoing down the stairwell as I descend. The front door looms, but I steel my spine and approach. I try to peer through the glass but at the angle, I can't see the part of the street where I last saw him. I'll have to go out there.

It's fine, I tell myself, there are people around, they'll hear me scream.

Everything was always *fine*.

Gritting my teeth, I pull the door open and step out into the frigid air, walking slightly away so I can see the road, and the window into my apartment, but when I get there, the road is empty. No cars. No random, shadowed men. I deflate with a sigh and shake my head. It wasn't him. I was being ridiculous.

I turn on my heel and collide with a hard chest. Hands reach out to steady me, tattooed hands with rings on the fingers.

His palm clamps around my mouth before I can scream.

Icy eyes bore down into mine and an infuriatingly handsome smile tugs on his mouth.

“Hello, love,” Harrison says, “if I let go are you still going to scream?”

Fear is a powerful thing, it makes you weak, vulnerable and at anyone's mercy, but even knowing that, even knowing it's the fear that will likely kill you before anything else does, you submit to it hoping if you make yourself as small as possible whatever threat is there will simply go away.

I shake my head, and he gently releases his hand.

"It's a little late to be going out in nothing but a skimpy pair of shorts." He grins, eyes raking over my bare legs as if it were a caress. Fire begins to pool low in my stomach, a warning surely, not at all what I think it could be, especially not as my body, my *thighs* shake. His tongue wets his lips as he meets my eyes again, the steel ball on his tongue catching in the light. The glint in his eyes tells me he knows exactly what's going on, and he is thriving on it.

"Are you following me?" I blurt, ignoring all the red flags and warning signs.

"Me?" He gasps in mock shock, "I was going for a walk."

"Here? On my street?"

"A coincidence." He shrugs. "It just sounds like you're paranoid."

My brows tug into a frown. I didn't believe it was simply a coincidence, but I knew where my strengths were, and I had little when he was around.

He could crush me so very easily.

I shake my head and step around him, hurrying back towards the front door.

"Put more clothes on if you're leaving your apartment," he tells me, his voice holding more authority and seriousness than it did a few moments ago.

I glare over my shoulder. His mouth kicks up, "wouldn't want you to catch a chill." He purposely eyes me then and all the skin I have on show. The heat his gaze leaves is more disturbing than even catching him here.

I rush in and don't look back until I'm safely behind my front door, and the bolt is locked.

My throat feels closed, and my heart feels as if it's trying to break through my chest and when I go back to the window, hiding around the corner and only peering out, the street is completely empty. I risk stepping



out further and leaning, looking left and right, but he's gone. I can pretend none of that happened. I can pretend that my fear was only that, *fear*, it was nothing else.

I go to bed with a knife under my pillow.

I wake in the morning, groggy and exhausted, my hand is curled around the handle of the kitchen knife I had hidden under there. I roll onto my back, glancing at the clock on the side. It's five am, still dark outside and the usual time I get up to go to the gym, but I'm too tired to do anything other than try to get a few more hours of sleep.

At eight, I climb out of bed, still exhausted, limbs heavy. I place the knife back in the drawer as I hit the button on the coffee machine. I look around the apartment, hoping to see some sign that Tate came home, but there are none and when I glance back over my shoulder to her bedroom, her door is open and her room empty.

With a cup of coffee, I trudge back to my room to get ready for work. I dial her number which goes directly to answer phone.

Worry gnaws at my stomach, overpowering the lingering fear Harrison left in me. Where was she?

—

I hang my coat on the back of my chair and drop my purse into the bottom drawer of my desk before I go in search of Tate. She wouldn't miss two days of work, not without telling anyone. Her desk is empty, her computer turned off, so I try the kitchen but don't find her there either.

I head down to the HR department, poking my head through the door and call to Josie, "Have you heard from Tate?" I ask.

She frowns, "I was going to ask you the same. She hasn't clocked in today and didn't yesterday, but she hasn't booked time off. You live together, right?"

I nod my head, “Yeah, but she didn’t come home last night, and I didn’t see her yesterday.”

The worry blooms something fierce inside my gut.

Josie’s brows lower in concern, “Do you think she’s okay?”

“Yeah, yeah,” I nod, not believing myself, “I’ll try calling her again.”

I leave the HR department and head back to my desk, dialing her number again but again, it doesn’t ring and goes straight to answer phone.

“Tate, where are you? I’m worried sick. Just message me or something, let me know you’re okay.” I leave my message and then hang up, slumping back in my chair. I spot Garrett walking through the office heading towards his father's office, so I scramble to my feet, hurrying over.

“Eleanor,” he greets and turns his back on me, continuing on his way.

“Have you seen Tate!?” I rush out.

He stiffens, “This morning.” His voice sounds strange, like the words pain him, “she was still asleep when I left.”

“Wait, she stayed with you? She’s not picking up the phone, and she always messages when she isn’t going to be home.”

Garrett turns to me, eyes dropping down my body and then back up, leveling his dark stare on me, “she had been drinking. Maybe she forgot.”

He was lying.

“Right,” I say, “okay.”

Something was very wrong. I watch Garrett enter his father's office and then head down, slipping out onto the street to dial the police. I’d report her missing despite what Garrett is claiming. I didn’t believe she was at his house. Just before I can hit the call button a message pops up on my phone.

**Tate:** Hi Eleanor, sorry, I'm taking some time out. We'll speak soon.

Everything was wrong. *Everything*. I stare at the message as my blood turns to ice. Tate was missing. Someone had her phone, someone who doesn't know how she and I talk, even when we are being serious. She never calls me Eleanor. She never just disappears without a word. Tears well in my eyes, spilling over and down my cheeks.

My best friend was missing. Possibly in danger and I had no idea what to do.

## CHAPTER FIVE

# Kingston

Tears streak down her cheeks, her mascara leaving tracks on her pale skin. She holds her phone to her ear, speaking quickly even as her sobs make her chest heave. I can't hear what she is saying or who she is speaking with, but I want to get closer. I want to touch her. Comfort her.

When she puts the phone down her eyes scan the street, but she doesn't see me where I'm sat in the front seat of the car, watching her.

Being near her is a craving I cannot deny. It's what had me turning up at her apartment building last night, it was the need to see her that had me leaning on that car watching up at her apartment. She feared me and that only fueled it more.

I hoped she would accept my invitation to come to Crimson. I wanted to see all that innocence seep out of her, I wanted to swallow it down and make her scream.

I would corrupt her. Ruin her and I'd smile while doing it.

She disappears into the building, wiping furiously at her tears. What could have happened to spill those tears? What did her sadness taste like?

I would have her. There wouldn't be a question about it. She may fear me, may want to stay far, far away which of course is the smart choice, but I'll follow. She won't escape me.

With a sigh, I hit the button on the dash and start the Mercedes, pulling away from the curb to head across the city. She wasn't a distraction, I tell myself, having Eleanor will do nothing to my plan. If anything, she's going to be my salvation, quite possibly the thing that will finally help me release all this frustration, if how she makes me feel now is anything to go by. My cock has been semi hard since the moment I saw her in those tiny little cotton shorts, all that creamy leg on show, her face flushed and pinked in the cold, skin pebbled with goose bumps.

Images of her wide, frightened eyes gaping at me on that quiet dark street flash before me, her lips parted in shock. It took everything in me not to back her against the wall, to press myself against her just so I could inhale that fear. I don't think she realizes it, I don't think she even notices how her thighs tremble as that fear courses through her veins, how she mistakes the feeling as terror rather than what it most likely is. Arousal.

Her fear of me turns her on. I know it.

It would be such a fun game to play.

The car is quiet as I flow through the traffic of the city. I've only known a busy life, a chaotic and bloody life so the traffic and the hordes of people on the street does nothing to me. Little fazes me anymore, not when I've experienced every heartbreak, every horror one person could possibly survive. But I did survive, I did more than that. I conquered.

As my car idles in a line of heavy traffic in the city, I use the time to remember why I am here. Why I am doing this.

It had been a normal day, or as normal as any could be when raised by a man who not only killed your parents, but stole you away to raise you himself. My uncle, my father's brother, was a criminal mastermind, he had plots and plans and schemes. He ruled the city of London underground, kept the cops in his pocket, the officials on his payroll. He moved drugs and guns and money without even a flick of an eye, but my father, he wanted to be better. He was a threat, so my uncle killed him, and then killed my mother to prove that he could. To show that he had no mercy and no soul.

Once he had murdered them in their own bed, he found Isobel and me hiding in a closet downstairs, huddled together, crying and shaking. He lifted us out, shoved us in a car, and then burned the house down with everything, including my parents, inside.

From there our life was a whirlwind of witnessing all the horrors and violence the world had to offer. My uncle wanted us to be strong, to take on his legacy, but as we grew, Isobel and I only became closer. She was my best friend and me, hers, and we would have always chosen each other over anything else.

I didn't shy away from death, I didn't shy away from murder. If my uncle told me to pull the trigger or slice someone's throat, I did it. I didn't ask questions. I knew what he wanted from me, and I gave it to him.

I would hold out and keep going until the time came when my uncle was either too old to continue his reign or dead because one of his schemes backfired – though that was unlikely seeing as nothing he ever did went wrong. Once he was gone, once I was in control, I would have let my sister go. That had been the plan. I didn't mind being the monster, the killer, not when I had a clear goal. She would have been free from this hell and free to do whatever she wanted with her life, while I remained here, looking after the city like our uncle wanted.

My uncle made it a point of not having weaknesses, of any kind, he took women to bed but only ever once, he never married, never had children, after all we were his heirs, he didn't even care enough about his own family to keep them alive. His men were just bodies to be used to his bidding, and Isobel and I were much the same. Soldiers on his lines to maintain the delicate balance of ruling a city.

He saw more in me than he did in Isobel. She was good, or as good as this life would allow her to be. She used to second guess her decisions, her kills, she would try to get out of them if she could, and if our uncle told her to make it slow, she made a point of making a kill as quick and as painless as possible.

Too soft, he used to say, too weak. Not worth the air she breathes.

I remember the night he came to me, it was late summer, the evening air humid with a suppressed storm that had been promised for later. I sat on the hood of a car overlooking the Thames, watching the boats pass, sucking on a cigarette. My uncle stood close to me, watching the water.

“I want you to do something for me,” he said, voice quiet even though no one was around to hear us. I was only eighteen at this point, forced to grow up quickly and yet still a child in so many ways. Eighteen wasn’t old enough to rule. Eighteen wasn’t old enough to understand every single situation and decision, “a test if you will.”

“What is it?” I asked without looking at him.

Truth was, I resented the man, I hated him for what he had done to us, to what he had done to my parents.

“Isobel,” his voice never wavered once, a toneless sound that revealed no emotion. That was a lesson too, show nothing on your face. Show nothing in your voice. Have people questioning whether you’re even human.

My back stiffened and my hand paused halfway to my mouth, the cigarette dangling between my fingers, the end still burning.

“I want you to kill her, she’s become a liability and a weakness for yourself. Kill her and prove to me that you are ready for this. Ready to fill my shoes.”

For a long while we were silent, his words echoing inside my head like the sound of war drums. Me. Kill my own sister. I couldn’t. I couldn’t do it.

“Let her go,” I said, “If she’s a liability and a weakness,” I spat the words, “let her go.”

“She knows too much to simply just let go, Kingston. She doesn’t have the backbone to do what is needed to keep us Heart’s on top and has too many secrets to be set free. This is the only way.”

“I will not.”

The backhand to the face was unexpected but not unusual. We were often beaten when we disappointed. Belts, burnings, fists against faces or boots into stomachs. My head whipped to the side as pain flared across my cheekbone, my skin splitting under the impact. I felt the blood trickle down my face, felt the thin stream of hot liquid run a river over my cheek and drip off my jaw, landing on my denim clad thigh to seep into the material.

“Then I’ll kill you both,” my uncle spat, “you are nothing without me, boy, when I tell you to do something, I expect you to do it. If I ask you to throw yourself off a cliff, you’ll fucking do it!”

“Then kill me!” I yelled back.

I didn’t care about my life, it was worthless anyway. I didn’t want to inherit this filth from my uncle, I didn’t want to kill people or hurt people, so he could kill me and put me out of my misery.

If he didn’t kill me now, I had to get Isobel out. I had to get us both out.

He didn’t kill me.

He didn’t raise another hand against me, as if a thought settled into his head and he’d planned everything he would do to her, to us, right there and then.

He turned from me, and he left me there, staring out at the water, me forming my own plan.

My uncle was too protected, he was guarded twenty-four seven, and they were loyal men. I would be dead before I even stepped foot into his manor house, so I had to be smart about it.

I formed the plan, it took time, time I didn’t have. Every day that passed was a day closer to an early grave and I worried for Isobel more than anything else. He wanted her erased and he would do it. She was my



weakness. I didn't know what he had planned, and the not knowing was worse than everything else.

The night I planned to put it into place was the night it all went wrong.

Isobel and I still lived together, my uncle rented us an apartment in the city centre, a well secured building that was pleasant and lavish, but we didn't have security like he did. It was early morning, the sun had yet to rise, and the streets were quiet as the city still slept. A huge bang was what startled me awake, like a wall had been blown out. I jumped from my bed, grabbed a gun from the drawer and raced out to meet a wall of muscle.

I trained a lot, I was building my body, but I was still small compared to these guys. I'd never seen them before. The bang was in fact the door being blown open, it hangs off the hinges in the doorway, a large crack splintering the wood.

I tried to fight. I shot one of them but not before I was knocked out with a swift and calculated punch to the side of my head.

When I woke hours later, the sun now sitting high in the sky, the apartment me and my sister shared had been obliterated, and my sister was gone.

At the time, I didn't see it. I didn't see my uncle's plan in this. Why not just kill her and me where we lay in our beds? Why have men break in and steal her away? It didn't make sense. He wanted her dead not kidnapped, not taken. Perhaps it was naivety and damn hope that made me blind at the time, hope that somewhere deep inside the last piece of our family he cared enough not to do such a thing.

But I was wrong, and he used me.

He used my sister's abduction as a turning point for me. He honed my anger, my rage, my need to avenge her to his advantage. He vowed he had nothing to do with it, that he wouldn't allow one of his own to be taken this way, but he had no idea which one of his countless enemies could have done it, according to him no one knew about us.

We were his secret weapons, children raised to be monsters and only when he was ready would he unleash his creations onto the world.

I played into his hand, I allowed him to use that rage in me to create the man I am today. The man that kills without a thought, that deals drugs and money and commands an underground army so great no one dares to fuck with us.

For six years my uncle profited on my need to find my sister. He trained me, he taught me everything I needed to know. He whispered his fake plans of taking out whoever it was who had hurt my sister. He told me he was getting close to figuring it out, and I stupidly believed him. No one takes what belongs to him. He would never allow it.

I became everything he wanted me to be. I became the thing he saw in me right at the start. A ruthless leader, a man with no morals, with no fear and a man who was fit to take over from him when the time came.

After a few years I gave up hope that Isobel was alive and everything after that was just revenge. I gave up searching for her.

Right up until I received a note.

A simple folded piece of paper ripped from a notebook and all that was on it was: She's alive. The words were followed by an address and a time.

Part of me believed it a trick, a plan to take out the heir of the empire before he had even taken the throne, but a part of me, that long lost part of me that had me saying no to him in front of that river when I was eighteen, told me it was the truth. Isobel lived.

Three years ago, I followed the instructions left on that note, I went to the address at the time specified to find a man, covered in black clothing, a mask concealing his face and behind him, looking thinner than a skeleton with bruises and blood covering her skin was my sister. My baby sister.

“You want answers,” he said, “look to your uncle and find the Syndicate.”

Isobel was shoved into my arms, and they left. I didn't think to ask anything else. My sister was back. My baby sister who I thought dead, was back.

Little did I realize at the time that the sister I knew was no longer alive.

I killed my uncle three days later. I shot him three times in the abdomen and then when he was on his knees, I ran him through with my knife straight into his heart. I kept my hand there, letting his blood coat my skin to remind myself of what had been done. I still feel that blood.

He orchestrated her abduction, he made her suffer for years as a sex slave to this organization, the Syndicate, all to teach me a lesson. All to train me into being as heartless as he was. It worked. I was heartless. I was a monster. And now I was making them all pay.

After I killed him, I took control of London, and then I spread it. I have men in enemy cities, I have men in government offices and in police stations and political parties. I am everywhere.

My uncle did me a favor by not revealing too much about us. Most only know that I am a Heart, but I make it a point not to show my face or wave around my power so that when I finally take down this Syndicate, they wouldn't even see me coming.

No one questions my authority, the people who matter know who I am and what I will do.

It's been a careful path for three years, and now we were reaching the end and the only thing on the horizon was blood.

## CHAPTER SIX

# Kingston

Isobel leans on the counter, eyes narrowed in my direction while she sips champagne from a flute. She's wearing a flowing pale dress not suitable for the frigid temperature and her makeup looks professional, her sleek black hair straightened, so sharply there's barely any movement in the strands.

Gone was any sort of vulnerability she showed the other night when she downed vodka and cried on my living room floor, but that was Isobel.

There was nothing left of my sister at all. The six years she was missing ensured that and the three years since, training her, strengthening her only solidified that fact. Sure, she had times when she slipped back into her past, where her nightmares became so real, she had no other option but to let it out, but it was only ever in front of me. No one else. No one else saw what she deemed a weakness.

"Ace tells me you met a woman." She clicks her tongue and downs the champagne, "Eleanor Locke."

Even her name stirs a desire so hot inside me, it threatens to burn me alive where I stand.

When I say nothing and head through the manor she follows, her high, pointed stilettos clipping against the tiles on the floor, "Another hole or someone you're actually interested in?"

"Mind your business," I snap.

Isobel whistles, “And here it all goes wrong.”

“I didn’t realize you were in the business of fortune-telling, sister, but go right ahead, predict what’s going to happen.”

“Don’t fuck this up, Kingston, I have been patient, I have waited and sat on the side lines while you planned this to let you have the control, but if you fuck this up for some fucking little whore employed by the very people who screwed me so thoroughly, I will kill you myself.”

“You have very little faith in me,” I reply coolly.

She scoffs, “I had faith, but then you fucked it up that first time with the hacking and now, I have very little.”

I stop dead in my tracks, spinning so quickly she has no choice but to stop too. My fist slams against the wall.

She was right. I did fuck it up that first time. I waited too long. I knew someone else was in the system, but my curiosity got the better of me and I watched them as they took the information about the Syndicate that rightfully belonged to me, and then I was locked out before I even got a whiff of that precious data I needed to fulfil my promise to Isobel.

“I got it back, didn’t I?” My voice is quiet, steady, showing not even an ounce of anger despite my show of rage.

She quirks a brow, “and how long did that delay us, Kingston?”

Granted, having to fly all the way to America was a setback. Having to recalculate and strategize again was a setback but it worked in the end. After I watched that information be stolen from me, I learned all there was to know about the family that had taken it from me. The Silver’s, namely Alexander Silver and his people. It had been Ainsley, a hacker under his payroll that had got into the Syndicates servers before I managed it, it had been her that had triggered the alarm and had all the systems shutting down. I had to get it back.

I'd spent months planning and plotting our way into those servers that I wasn't going to let it slip away that easily, except, when I finally reached the US I found out that Ainsley was on the run, Alexander Silver's woman, Wren Valentine had been kidnapped by her father, Marcus, who was under the Syndicate's thumb. He didn't have the information and his city of Brookeshill was going to shit because he was killing everything and anything that stood between him and his woman.

A weakness is what my uncle would call that, but in some cases, I supposed, it's a strength.

I had to change my plan. I was originally going to kill them all, kill every last one of the Silver line and his men, including this precious little Wren and her father but after I heard the whole story, saw it for my own eyes, I realized him and I were not so different.

So, I used him.

I used his woman to get what I needed and made a bargain with her father. My resources, which were plentiful, in exchange for his daughter. She was stunning, and feisty, and alluring so saving her from him was worth it, and then I double crossed him.

Men like Alexander Silver live by a code. They will pay back a debt and, in this case, the debt was Wren. So that's what I did, I exploited his weakness to get the information I needed. After I held that flash drive in my hand, I didn't care what happened to them, even if Wren reached out to offer her support. This was my war, my fight, and it was one I would do alone.

I didn't mind helping out Wren and taking down Valentine, after all he was a despicable human being, using women as sex slaves and trading them like cattle and with what happened to Isobel, I would never tolerate that kind of shit.

"I will end this," I tell her, emotion now coating my tongue. Rage mainly. "I will kill them all and once I'm done if you want to bathe in their blood go right ahead, but if you continue to threaten me and continue to

imply that you'll somehow sabotage this entire thing, you won't be happy with the consequences."

My sister shrinks back, her eyes, so similar to mine, widening with her fear. "You're just like him."

The words are whispered, barely a breath but I hear them.

I don't let her see what they do to me. I slam my way through the house and meet Ace in the kitchen. I pin him with a glare, "Say one more thing about what I do in my spare time to anyone, and I'll be the one who cuts out your tongue."

All he does in return is give me a cocky smile and a quirked brow.

Arsehole.

"Bring up the cameras," I wave a finger, ordering the laptops to be brought out in front of me, showing every single camera in Tobias' building.

The information I managed to get from Alexander Silver was bountiful. Tobias was one of three heads in charge of the Syndicate. Well protected and unsuspecting and he would lead me to the other two who had yet to be mentioned in any of the reports.

The meeting the other day was more than just seeing his face, it was to use the time inside the building to implant my hackers and now I have unlimited viewing of everything that goes on inside that office building of his.

I have people installing trackers on his cars and that of his sons, I have people in his house. I was taking him down from the inside out, and only once he realizes he's lost it all will I strike the killing blow.

I watch the morning's feed, seeing all his employees filtering into the building, going about their day, unsuspecting of the man they work for, and then I see Eleanor. Her back is stiff as she walks down the hall, dressed in a

well pressed pantsuit, her feet in a pair of stiletto heels. Despite the clothes I see her curves underneath, the way the suit jacket tucks in at the waist, showing off her hourglass figure and her trousers stick to the intimate curve of her hips, hugging her arse, the soft flesh begging for my hands.

“Stop it,” I order as I watch her march up to Garrett, Tobias’ son. Unfortunately, the cameras have no audio so I can’t make out what she is saying but, whatever it is, she feels strong enough about it that her anger shines in her eyes. The emotion is not alone though, concern, fear, they are evident in her expression. Garrett dismisses her as quickly as the conversation started and that’s when she went outside to make her phone call, the moment I caught her crying on the pavement outside.

What happened, and what did she know about them?

Perhaps Eleanor wasn’t as innocent as she looked? Maybe she had more to do with this than I had given her credit for. Anyone can wear a mask and maybe her fear for me was a deep-rooted instinct that told her that I could be the one to end whatever plan she had in place.

It was a long shot but, at this point, I wasn’t going to rule out any options.

“I want a tail put on the girl,” I tell Ace.

He grins knowingly.

“Not for that, dickhead,” I growl, “there’s something going on here, with Garrett, I want to know what it is.”

“Not feeling like sharing your toys this time round, brother?” Isobel sneers.

“While you’re at it,” I say, ignoring my sister, “Get me access to her phone, I want everything about her, all her contacts and who she has been talking to. I want a live stream of everything she does.”



Ace nods and pulls his phone out, putting it to his ear as he dials the guy we need for the job.

“She’s a threat,” Isobel shrugs, “Kill her.”

“You don’t know that.”

“But you’re thinking it,” she narrows her eyes, “anyone else and you would have already neutralized it but her, you’re not. You’ve met her, what twice, and you’re already losing your head. Do what is needed and kill the fucking girl.”

“I don’t make it a habit of hurting women,” I say nonchalantly, giving her a pointed stare, “I could be wrong.”

“You’re thinking with your dick,” she snaps, “perhaps I’ll do it instead.”

My temper boils quicker than I can contain, “You won’t fucking touch her, Isobel.”

She smirks, “We may be on the same side brother, but don’t believe for one second that I won’t exploit *your* weakness to get what I need. Uncle dearest taught me that much.”

Eleanor wasn’t a weakness, Isobel was wrong there. That didn’t mean I wanted to see the girl harmed though, at least not before I figured out how she tied into all of this, and I had had my fun with her.

But I wasn’t going to call my sister's bluff, she would do it, as savage and ruthless that she is. It didn’t matter that I was her brother, being family suited her when she needed it, and mostly every other time being family hindered her, but she could never deny that she needed me to see this through.

The years when she was locked up, I learned how to rule this city without being caught. I knew how to bargain and blackmail and threaten, and all she knew was how to kill. She was an asset to have but also a

liability. But I wasn't my uncle, and my sister would remain to have a place in my city until the day she decided it was enough.

Isobel leaves me alone in the kitchen, eyes on the screen, watching the girl in question.

Was there something more to her?

I didn't think so. I was right in saying that anyone could wear a mask, but I've been watching people my entire life, learning who I could trust and who I couldn't and everything about her told me she was innocent in this. Whatever tie she has is completely coincidental, but that doesn't mean I can't use her, or it, to my advantage.

No, Eleanor Locke could be a key I didn't realize I'd need, and I planned to use it until the very thing crumpled in my palm.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# *Eleanor*

The police won't do anything.

She isn't deemed as missing, no matter what I say or how I plead. She's active on her phone therefore not at risk. Her family are satisfied that she isn't missing, work has signed off suddenly on late annual leave, paid for even when she has no more holiday days left to take. How the police didn't see this as unusual was strange to me.

I go through the rest of the day in some sort of trance. I'm stuck in my head, working but not really focusing. I attend meetings and I greet visitors, I do my reports and I file my paperwork, but if you asked me how it went and what I actually did, I couldn't tell you.

Finally, when the clock strikes five, I pack my stuff into my handbag and join the file to leave the office. Once outside I take a large breath of fresh air and hurry back to my apartment. I don't expect Tate to be there, but I have a little bubble of hope that she will be. When I get there, dropping my coat and bag at the door that bubble bursts. She's not home.

I couldn't figure this out on my own, but I knew, for a fact, that something had gone wrong. She was missing and no one was taking it seriously.

Tate had been my one and only friend. After I moved to the city all those years ago, she had been the only one to guide me through the chaos, the only one to offer me her helping hand and I would not brush this under the rug.

I make myself a coffee and sit on the couch, crossing my legs underneath me as I think everything through.

What could I do? Realistically, what could one girl do in this situation? What if she wasn't really missing and her text was true earlier?

No, that wasn't right. She calls me Ellie and always has, even in our disagreements, and there had been plenty over the many years of friendship we've had. Then there was the formal, cold text message which didn't sound like her at all and the fact that it happened only after I had called out Garrett.

Could Garrett have something to do with this?

He was a billionaire, successful and surely doing something like hurting his girlfriend would be too risky for him, but he snagged my attention, and I couldn't shake the feeling that he had something to do with this.

I take a sip from my coffee and pull my phone from my pocket.

I needed to do something, find out something, just something *more*, so I could take it to the police so that they would take this seriously.

I hoped I was wrong. I hoped with a deep-rooted need that Tate was safe and well, and she was just taking time away even if that hurt me. I needed her to be safe. She may not be my blood, but she was my family.

I open google and chew my lip, what can I do?

My fingers type automatically, and I put Garrett's full name into the search bar. The results are endless.

*Garrett Franco: Heir of Tobias & Son enterprises. Intelligent, Kind and Fair.*

I scoff at the first result and continue scrolling through the results. There are countless articles praising him, articles telling the world about how generous he is, how he helps charities and people in need, how he employs

a number of people from all different backgrounds but with each word I read, I can't help but think that it is all a lie. A ruse.

I've worked with his father, Tobias, for long enough that I know not everything is as it seems.

On the seventh page of google I come across an article that must have been suppressed. They had a lot of money, enough that they could suffocate bad press, but nothing, no amount of money could take it away.

*Garrett Franco in cuffs*, is what the headline reads.

I click it and open an article dated six months ago.

*Garrett Franco, heir of Tobias & son enterprises was tonight arrested on accounts of domestic violence and false imprisonment.*

The article goes into detail about one of Garrett's former girlfriends who had been beaten so excessively you could hardly recognize a single feature on the girl. It says that she had several broken bones, bruising, swelling and lacerations, but also that she had been kept in a cold dark room for a number of weeks, that she had been dating Garrett for a short time before he had her held and beaten.

I couldn't understand how someone could get away with it. How was he still walking free if they had this evidence against him?

*Money.*

Money made the world go round. If you had it and enough of it, then all your wrong doings could go away. It was a lesson no one taught, a lesson that life could only give you. I had never seen it in true form, but perhaps that was because I wasn't willing to see it.

Garrett was released only a few days later without a single conviction, no warning. All charges against him were lifted, and the incident was forgotten and then buried. The girlfriend, her name not mentioned in any article was forgotten. I couldn't find out her name or where she lived to figure out

whether or not she was still alive. There wasn't a single thing about her online.

I knew there was a reason I didn't like Garrett. Just like I didn't like his father.

I needed more though. An arrest that proved false wouldn't help me here.

I delete my search and replace it with Private investigator.

Perhaps someone else can help me. Get enough on Garrett to convince the police to look into Tate's disappearance.

I go through several before I pick one at random and dial the number. I have no hope of them answering so when they do, I'm stunned to silence.

"Hello?" They answer.

I sit with my mouth open slightly before I snap back to it and respond, "Hi! I need your help!"

His response is automatic, "What can I help with?"

I explain the situation, I tell them about the article and the company and the names of the people I think are involved. Silence greets me on the other side of the line.

"Hello? I hedge.

"I can't help you."

"Wait, what?"

"If I were you, I would let your friend go, she's gone and there's no bringing her back."

"What do you mean?"

An audible swallow on the other end of the line, “Miss, I don’t know what you’re playing with or who, but you’re in deep enough as it is, get out while you can. Forget about your friend. Walk away. If you value your life, walk away.”

“So, you won’t help?”

“I value my life, you should value yours too. I’m going now.”

“No! Please. Wait!”

The line goes dead, the dull beep ringing in my ear.

I stare at the phone, but I can’t waste this time. I try several different investigators and companies, each one have a similar story. They either hang up on me the moment I mention names, or they try to deter me from my path. After the tenth call, I groan in frustration.

What am I supposed to do now?

The police won’t help. Private investigators won’t help and I’m not good at this. I don’t know where to look or what even to look for.

But after all these calls, hearing the various warnings, I understand now how dangerous Tobias and Garrett truly are.

I wasn’t so naïve to believe they were completely innocent and good men, but I had hoped that I hadn’t been working for complete monsters.

But what is hope when you’re swimming in a sea of corruption?

I wanted to see the good in people. I wanted to see the things that made them shine under a light rather than the things that cast them in shadows, but all this tells me is that there are only a few that are good and whole lot of bad.

Maybe Tate was already dead.

Maybe she had been murdered, tortured and cut up, made to suffer.

The thoughts make me shiver and my gut to churn.

I had to hope she was alive. I had to hope she was surviving.

*Surviving is not the same as living.*

The thought slams into my head without permission, and it's enough to have me gunning for the bathroom to throw up the contents of my stomach.

—

I go to work the next day, thankful that it's Friday. For the next two days I didn't have to think about Garrett or Tobias or their involvement, but I did have to think about the invitation burning a hole in my purse.

The eighteenth of November was this Sunday, a masquerade ball and I was truly debating on going. A small part of me believed Harrison had something to do with everything, where exactly he fit in, I didn't know but, there was something.

The man terrified me.

Even knowing that Tobias and Garrett were evil, even knowing that Tate's disappearance had something to do with both of them, and I could be their next victim, that fear had nothing on me compared to the fear that Harrison compelled in me.

I wasn't sure if it was because he made every nerve inside of me light up like a live wire, or that he had my heart pumping hard enough to give me a heart attack, but he made me *aware*. Aware of my weaknesses. Aware of my size and weight. He made it so very clear without lifting a single finger how he gained, and I lacked.

Perhaps it had something to do with the feelings he invoked in me. The fear mixed with the arousal.

I never thought it possible, but when he's near I've never been so turned on before.



It helps that he's as sexy as sin with all those tattoos and piercings, a far cry from the safe man I'd usually go for, but maybe that's what scares me.

Maybe it isn't that he has something to do with this. Maybe it isn't that he has something to do with Tate's disappearance.

Maybe I'm afraid of him because of what it says about me.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

# Kingston

“Well, isn’t this interesting,” Ace comments as I listen to each and every phone call.

I quirk a brow. Interesting indeed. Little Miss Locke was hunting down a friend likely missing at the hands of the very people she works for. A dangerous game she’s playing. The investigators were right in warning her off her search, though I wasn’t going to be as kind.

I type out the message from my phone and send it to her number. A time to meet, today, alone.

She’ll come. Of course, she will, without a single doubt, and that says a hell of a lot about her. So innocent, so naïve, I could almost taste it on my tongue. A savior complex is a sure way to get yourself killed and yet she’ll run face first into that fire.

The likelihood of her friend still being alive was slim, when women go missing because of Tobias or his shithead son it didn’t usually end well for them. My sister got lucky that she survived for as long as she did.

Having Eleanor involved could make this easier for me. A person on the inside to get me the rest of the information I needed, and in return I’ll help her hunt down her friend. It wasn’t part of the plan, but we adapt.

I rest on the hood of the car, the air brisk as it howls through the bare trees boarding the private park. No one comes here, not that they could anyway, not with the ten-foot wrought iron gates at the entrance and the dozens of security cameras watching the place. To anyone else, this is just a rich man's private garden, but these greens have seen more bloodshed than a battlefield. There were probably a couple of bodies buried here too though that would have been from before my time. We didn't shit where we ate.

My hands are buried in the pockets of my jeans and a cigarette sits between my lips. Glancing at my watch, I see Eleanor is five minutes late, but here she is, walking hesitantly towards where I told her to meet me. She can't see me yet, not with the angle of the path but I see her.

I see her alright, in a tight nude colored pencil skirt that hugs her hips and thighs and a blouse that flows around her torso in the wind. Her dark hair is pulled up and away from her face and her eyes give away her fear. That fear pulses out of her like a wave when she spots me. A deer caught in headlights is what she resembles as her dark eyes widen and her lips part. Too slowly she spins on her heel and begins to speed walk away, her heels won't allow her to go any faster.

It baffles me how women will hinder themselves so much by wearing those ridiculous shoes, but then I remember my sister, and how likely it would be for her stab you with one rather than be a damsel.

Eleanor could use some training, I think as I catch up to her and grab her at the tops of her arms, stopping her abruptly and hauling her back against my chest, "Running away so soon, love?" I whisper in her ear, relishing in the shiver that quakes through her body. "We haven't had a chat yet."

"What are you doing here?" She stammers.

"Is this not where we were supposed to meet?" I let her feel my smile as I press my face against her cheek. Her sharp intake of breath is amusing. "You are entirely too trusting."

"How did you get my number?"

“That’s what you’re worried about?” I shake my head, “How disappointing.”

She jerks out of my grasp and spins on me, holding her purse as if she’ll hit me with it. I suck my tongue against my teeth, not hiding the desire I have for this woman. My eyes do a slow, calculated graze over her body.

“What do you want, Harrison?” She growls.

“It’s not really about what I want,” I tell her, circling her. She stands stock still, her throat working with a swallow, “but about what you want and if I so happen to get something out of it, then I guess we both win, although, if we’re going to be working together, you should know my real name.”

“Your real name?” She questions, her head snapping to watch me as I walk around her body, “What do you mean?”

“My name is not Harrison, Eleanor,” I stop, “Come, let’s sit.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“Not even if I can help find your friend?” I smirk, “Tate, isn’t it?”

Her slap is so sudden I don’t see it coming until she’s reeling away from me, and I’m left with a pounding cheek. The bitter wind bites at the sore skin that I know will be reddening as she recoils in horror. She begins to back away, but I don’t let her go far. I lunge, grabbing her around the waist and hauling her over my shoulder. She screams and it only makes my grip on her harden, my hands wrapping around the backs of her creamy thighs, warm skin branding me.

“Let me go!” She wails but there isn’t anyone around to hear her. I throw her into the passenger seat of the car and slam the door, locking it from the outside and hurry around to the driver’s side. I quickly hit the button so I can get in and she uses it to her advantage, slamming the door open so hard something in the hinges snap. She doesn’t get far, I grab the back of her blouse and yank her back. She falls hard against the seat.

“Close the door, love,” I say in an eerily calm voice.

“Please,” she begs.

“Your pleas won’t help you here, Eleanor. Close. The. Door.”

With a little whimper she slowly pulls the door closed.

“That wasn’t very nice, now, was it?”

“I’m sorry,” she backs as far away from me as the car will allow.

“You’re so afraid of me when you’ve been working with monsters for years.”

“They’ve never thrown me in a car or stood outside my apartment in the middle of the night!”

My grin is nothing short of animalistic, “Are you truly afraid of me, or are you more afraid of what’s happening between your thighs right now?” I drop my eyes and she stops squirming, a blush stealing over her cheeks, “Sweet little Eleanor isn’t so sweet, is she?” I tease.

“What do you want?”

“Well, before you so rudely hit me, I was going to introduce myself formally and tell you how we could help each other.”

“I don’t want anything to do with you.”

“You might rethink that after what I’ve got to say.”

She remains quiet and when she relaxes a touch, I sit back in my seat, watching the doe eyed girl in the passenger seat.

“My name is Kingston Heart, you can call me King.”

She scoffs and then widens her eyes, realizing what she had just done. I grin.

“Okay, *Kingston*,” she spits my name, “What do you want?”

“As I said, we can help each other.”

“I’m sure you’re a man of many resources, what could someone like me have that you could possibly want?” Her eyes jump around, looking for an escape, a weapon maybe.

“You have an in at Tobias and Son, unlimited access to every single room in that building and there are things I need.”

“You plan to steal from the company, what, money?”

I laugh, “I don’t need his money. What I do need is his heart, beating in my fist.”

Her eyes go saucer wide, “*Who* are you!?”

“A man with many resources,” I repeat what she said, “and no issue spilling blood when needed, you’ll be wise to remember that, and if you tell *anyone* who I am, it won’t just be your boss I come after.”

She swallows. “I can’t help you.”

“Oh, I think you can, love, and you will, especially seeing as I’m the only one who can get Tate back to you.”

“The police will help!”

“Will they? You’ve called them already, have you not? That’s why you’ve been reaching out to PI’s to help you.”

“How do you know that!?”

“Resources.”

“You’re as bad as they are!” She snaps.

“There are two types of men in my world, Eleanor, the likes of Tobias and Garrett are one breed and me and my men are another. Where they steal and take, we build and control. They have to force themselves on people and well me,” I roll my tongue bar between my teeth, “the women who come to me do so willingly.”

“You don’t need me.”

“No, you’re right, I don’t,” she freezes as I lean forward and tuck a tendril of dark hair behind her ear, letting the tips of my fingers graze her cheek, “but working together could be so much fun.”

“Do you know what they’ve done with her?”

“I can guess,” I watch her face, seeing the unshed tears lining her eyes, “It won’t be pretty.”

“Is she alive?”

“I don’t know, but you’ll never find her. Not without me.”

“Who are they truly?” She asks, “Tobias and Garrett.”

“Men who have too much power and the anonymity to get away with it. I plan to stop them.”

“But how?”

I press the button to start the engine, “By killing them all.”

## CHAPTER NINE

# *Eleanor*

“I’ll have a car pick you up at eight thirty Sunday,” Kingston says as he pulls up to my apartment building. I wasn’t going back to the office, I had already made sure to take the afternoon off the moment I got that text message this morning.

If only I had known who it would have been waiting for me.

“I’m not going.” I tell Kingston, opening the car door.

“You will be.”

“So, is this how it’s going to be?” I pause with one foot out and turn back to him, taking in all of him.

He was tattooed temptation, a man built for sin dressed in leather and denim. His eyes sparkle as he catches me staring at him.

“See you Sunday, Eleanor,” he dismisses me, “and don’t go digging any further, you wouldn’t want to be the next girl to go missing.”

The threat lingers between us and is enough to snap me from my admiration and get out the car. He waits until I’m through the door and sees me staring down at him from my window before he pulls away and disappears around the corner.

A few minutes later my phone buzzes.



**Unknown:** I'll know if you do something stupid, Eleanor. See you soon. K.

I turn the thing off and throw it onto the sofa before kicking off my shoes, and throwing myself down next to it as I grab the blanket off the back, and bury myself under it. What the fuck have I done?

The real question though, *what the fuck did I do!?* My hand still stings from the slap and the evidence of my strike was still on the side of Kingston's face. It was an instant regret, but I had hardly any time to really react before I was forced into his car.

This was going to end horribly, I could already sense it. I'd already guessed Kingston was dangerous, but my imagination hadn't gone in this deep. It was so much worse than I could have ever truly known.

Serves me right, I suppose, always wanting to see the good in people.

I shake my head, how could I have been so stupid!? What good can I do to help Tate if I'm dead or kidnapped?

I was sure that was going to happen to me today, I was sure Kingston was going to haul me off somewhere to never see the light of day again.

I don't care what he says, I'm not going to his stupid party on Sunday. Just because he was forcing us to work together doesn't mean I have to give him but the bare minimum.

The fact that my body lights up around him, that he brews a heat so damning in my core is more proof that I have to stay far, far away. Who knows what this traitorous body of mine will do in prolonged proximity to the man built for sex and sin?

I was no virgin, but I could bet all the money in my bank that my experiences and his were two entirely different things.

I couldn't help but wonder what he looked like beneath those clothes, how much of his skin was covered in those dark pictures? Where else was

he pierced? He was fit, I know that for sure having felt the hard lines of his muscles as he manhandled me into the car, and I could only imagine what he looked like in the flesh.

I groan as a new wave of heat slams into me.

“Shit,” I hiss, throwing off the blankets to trudge through to the bathroom where I then run a scalding hot bath, complete with bubbles and bath bombs. The smell of jasmine and lavender floats in the steam as it fills the small, tiled room and I strip out of my clothes, dumping them in a pile before I climb into the hot water and hold my breath letting my body get climatized to the heat.

Thoughts of Kingston swim through my head. What would it be like to have a man like that? To have a taste of the dangerous, even just once.

It’s thoughts like that, that will likely kill me. You don’t climb into bed with a man like that knowing what I know. It’ll be like laying down in front of a lion and hoping not to get eaten.

But even knowing that, my hand still travels down the plains of my stomach, following the curve of my hip to dip between my legs, the feel of his hands on my thighs, his fingers grazing my cheek the only thoughts that compel me to continue doing this.

I find my release with the rasp of his voice echoing in my ear.

I go to bed early that night, but sleep doesn’t come easy. I toss and I turn, one hand constantly beneath my pillow, the same knife I had in here previously back under there, and my fingers wrapped around the handle. I’m sure it’s useless, I’m sure if Kingston or even Tobias or Garrett wanted to do me harm, they would be able to do so, far quicker than I would be able to react. I probably wouldn’t even know until I was in the middle of it, being dragged away or murdered in my own bed.

The thoughts drive me from my sheets. A glance at the clock tells me it’s a little past midnight and, in this moment, I’ve never felt quite so alone

with Tate missing. Her darkened bedroom, the door open, showing it unused and empty, haunts me as I stand in the kitchen, staring at it.

It feels selfish to be scared of something happening to me like it happened to her. I chew my lip until it hurts, pouring some milk into a saucepan to warm for hot chocolate. My grandmother said hot chocolate fixed everything and I used to believe her, even at my age of twenty-six I still believed it, until now. Hot chocolate wouldn't help Tate.

My phone buzzes.

**Unknown:** Why are you awake, Eleanor?

My brows draw down and my heartrate spikes. I turn the heat off the milk and creep towards the window, holding my phone in my hand as I peer around the curtain.

My phone vibrates again, making me jump.

**Unknown:** You can stop looking out the window, you won't see anyone unless I want you to.

**Me:** Why are you watching my apartment?

**Unknown:** Answer my question and I'll answer yours, why are you awake?

**Me:** I couldn't sleep. I'm making hot chocolate. Now you.

A few minutes pass and I sigh, of course he won't answer my question. When my phone buzzes and I see the message, I just stare, mouth parted slightly.

**Unknown:** It isn't me watching your apartment, Eleanor but one of my men, they report into me when something seems suspicious. I'm watching your apartment to make sure you stay safe. We're working together, I will always take care of my belongings.

Another message comes in as I stare at the screen.

**Unknown:** So, you can go on back to bed, love, you're safe. For now.

I hate him.

I turn my phone off and leave it on the kitchen side, abandoning the milk on the stove, and head back to my room, slamming the door. Just to be sure, I shove my drawers in front of it. It's not the safest measure with fire hazards and all that, but it's a risk I'm willing to take. I make sure all my windows are locked and my curtains drawn tight before I climb back into my bed, hand closing around the knife again.

I sleep fitfully and when I wake the next morning, sluggish and exhausted it takes all my strength to haul the drawers out of the way so I can go in search of coffee. My bare feet pad against the wooden flooring and a yawn is stretching my jaw when it gets stuck and I stand with my mouth agape, staring at my kitchen table.

There, sat right in the middle is a large black box, delicately wrapped with a black silk ribbon. The saucepan I had been using the night before, left with the milk still inside was no longer on the hob but washed and turned upside down on my drying board, and a coffee mug sits next to the machine, waiting to be used.

Someone was in my apartment last night.

I check the door, yet find it still locked and secure.

How is this my life?

I skirt around the box as if it has teeth and will bite.

There is a note.

*Eleanor, be sure to be ready for when you are collected. It is a black tie after all, and we wouldn't want you showing up in those tiny shorts. King.*

My teeth grit to the point of pain. Coffee first.

I go about my routine, adding a pod to the machine and hitting the button, swapping out the cup that was left out in favor of one from the cupboard. I didn't trust him. He got into my apartment for heaven's sake.

Once I have a fresh, steaming cup of coffee I sit at the table, staring at the box.

"Open it," I whisper to myself, cradling my mug in my palms. "Just open it."

I gently tug the end of the ribbon, the soft swish of the silky material the only noise in my apartment. It gently falls to the table and with both hands, I lift the lid of the box.

I'm not able to hold in my gasp at what is inside.

## CHAPTER TEN

# Kingston

She would have gotten my package by now, if my eyes on her apartment were correct, she's been awake and moving around her home for the past hour but without going inside, which none other than me were permitted to do so, they couldn't tell me if she had opened her gift. I had other ways of checking anyway.

I'm sure it comes as a shock to her that I have managed to invade her space, but she'll learn soon enough if I want something bad enough, I'll go to any means necessary to get it.

I slouch back in my chair, sipping my coffee as I flick through the new reports coming in on Tobias' corporations. He had a lot of money, most of it dirty and spread into several bank accounts across the world. I planned to take it all. It won't be hard, not with the intelligence I had on my side. I order the guys to put the necessary actions in place ready for when I'm to strike. The elevator doors slide open and Isobel struts in, her eyes hidden behind a large pair of sunglasses despite the foul weather outside. She's not dressed in her usual designer clothing, instead her legs are clad in gray sweats and she's wearing an oversized jumper with a fluffy coat over the top.

"You just can't keep your dick in your pants, can you?" She sneers, crossing the room to go to the kitchen, searching through my cupboards until she finds the pain meds and pulls a bottle of water from the fridge.

"If you don't like how I'm doing things Isobel, you can go sit your arse on the side and wait for it to be over."

She rips the glasses from her face and pops the pills into her mouth, glaring at me as she swigs from the water bottle, “What is your plan exactly?”

“The less people who know, the better,” I tell her.

“Including me?”

“Especially you.”

“And this girl, Eleanor, she’s a part of it now?”

“I have use for her.”

“More than just sticking your cock in her, you mean?”

“Go do something useful, Belle, you’re no good in this state.”

I loved my sister, truly I did but she was a pain in my arse. I would forever have her back and she’d always come first, but she needed to learn to back the fuck down. I leave her to nurse her hangover as I head through the penthouse, changing into my workout gear before hitting my personal gym.

I spend a few hours in there working off steam and when I come back out, I’m blissfully alone.

Unable to help myself, I pull up the feed of Eleanor’s living room. Planting a camera in her living room may have been a step too far, but then when did I learn not to cross a line?

The box I left her sits open on the kitchen table, it’s not moved, only been opened and I can’t tell if she’s taken the dress and accompanying mask out of it to try it on. The girl herself sits on her couch, wrapped in a thick blanket with a book in her lap.

Seeing inside her apartment solidified how our lives are worlds apart. Cozy and comfortable is how she lives, books lined neatly on shelves, candles of various scents planted on every flat surface. The dust on the TV

and remotes told me how very little she used it. She preferred solitude. From what I can tell Tate is her only friend apart from the people she speaks to at work. Her routine is basic, gym, work, home. No play.

Fuck, the girl needed to live a little.

With my eyes still on her, I see her freeze with a hand on the page and glance over her shoulder, staring at that box. She would be going tomorrow night. Her curiosity and confusion over me will demand it so.

She was playing right into the palm of my hand.

Shaking her head, she goes back to the book, but it isn't long before she is looking back over to it. Pinching the bridge of her nose she climbs from the sofa and pads over to it. I'm drawn into all the leg she has on show, wearing only a tiny pair of white panties and a tank top that covers barely anything.

Looking at her makes my mouth water and my cock harden.

How would she feel knowing I could see her right now? That my dick was straining at the zipper of my jeans, aching to be buried inside her.

Her fingers brush over the dress inside the box before she snatches back her hand and grabs her phone. My own buzzes a few seconds later.

**Eleanor:** I'm not wearing this dress.

I grin, adjusting my cock, **Me:** You don't like it?

**Eleanor:** It's beautiful but I'm not wearing it.

I don't bother texting back, instead I hit the call button, watching her on the screen as she decides whether or not to answer me. With a sigh, I see her roll her shoulders and then she puts the phone to her ear.

"Hello?"



“You will wear the dress, Eleanor, it’s rude not to accept gifts from friends.”

I was taunting her, pushing her, nudging her closer to that edge that once she tumbles over, there will be no saving her.

“We’re not friends.”

“You’re right,” I follow the curve of her arse with my eyes, imagining the soft flesh yielding under my fingers, how it would feel to sink my teeth into that sensitive flesh on the insides of her thighs, “we are not friends.”

“Why did you tell me your real name?” She asks.

For a long moment I’m quiet, captivated by her body, picturing those legs wrapped around my waist, my fingers tangled into her hair and then I answer.

“Because when you scream my name, Eleanor I wanted to be sure it was the right one you were calling. When you’re begging me, I would have you use my name, and I can assure you love, you will beg.”

A flush spreads up her chest, up her neck and cheeks and she presses her thighs together. I palm my cock through my jeans, watching her.

“That’s never going to happen,” she breathes.

“Oh, it will, love,” I suppress a groan as I squeeze, “and it’ll be happening very soon. See you tomorrow.”

I hang up before I use the sound of her voice to get off to. She grips the edge of the table in front of her, her chest heaving, that flush still evident on her pale skin.

I don’t get off. I won’t fuck myself with images or videos of her. I want the real thing. I want to see the way her eyes darken with desire and how her lips will part as I fuck her and taste her and claim her. I want her flesh under my palms and her pussy dripping for me. Once I’m done with her,

there will be nothing left for any other man. I would have ruined her so thoroughly, so completely, she'll never want another.

Clicking off the feed before I do something stupid, I get up and stalk to the shower, turning on the water and stepping under it before it's even warmed. The shock of the icy water is enough to calm the arousal burning through my system, but this is what I get for not getting this shit out of my system. Killing, plotting and ruling go hand in hand with sex. It had been too long, but I was putting an end to that, and I could think of no one better to take that edge off than sweet little Eleanor Locke.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN



My palms sweat, and I'm practically hanging out of the window to keep cool and stop my makeup from melting off.

This was a bad fucking idea. A terrible idea. Especially with what Kingston *promised* yesterday. I tell myself I'm only wearing the dress he gifted me because I don't have anything else to wear, and I certainly don't own a mask to go with it. At least with what he has given me, the dress and the mask are a complete outfit, and it was beautiful. Stunning actually.

How he got my measurements spot on is a question I don't want answered, just like I don't want to know how he got into my apartment in the first place to plant the dress. God knows what else he has done in here.

The thoughts are both thrilling and abhorrent. I shake my head. This was stress. This wild, heady mix of emotion was as addictive as a drug, and could only be this intoxicating because it was a thrill to go along with the stress. A way to stop myself from going crazy. It's the only explanation as to why a man like Kingston could get this kind of response from me.

Once I've cooled enough where I'm no longer worried my makeup will run off my face, I pad across the carpet to where the dress is laid out on my bed. The dress isn't black but maybe I shouldn't be taking the whole *Black tie* so literally. I wouldn't be the only one not wearing black.

I gently lift the satin material from the bed, holding it by the thin straps and press it against my body, turning to face the mirror. I hadn't had the nerve to try it on yet, but from the measurements on the card it came with, I'm sure it'll be a perfect fit. The mask to accompany it sits on my vanity,

the white feather sewn into the left side glittering as the small crystals catch in the light. It would sit across my eyes and cover most of my nose, leaving only my lips on show which I guessed was a good thing. I didn't know what sort of party this was, or who would be there, but best to be safe and with the mask, no one will recognize me, especially since I never wear makeup or clothes like this.

I strip the robe from my body, leaving me in just a strapless bra and pantie set, so flimsy you could hardly call it underwear, but I couldn't get away with anything else.

I don't think about what I'm doing, and I don't look in the mirror as I slide the zipper down and step into the dress. The material is soft, a faint whisper against my skin as I pull it up and over my hips, sliding my arms through the straps and securing them in place. I reach around and pull the zip up, the dress pulling and molding to the shape of my body as if it had been made only for me. The v neckline plunges deep, and the material hugs my breasts, pushing them together and holding them firmly in place before it flows down to the waist, tucked in with an invisible belt. From there the dress flows into a wrap skirt that follows the lines of my hips and thighs and splits all the way to the waist, only pure luck and careful maneuvers would ensure I didn't have a wardrobe malfunction. The dress from the back is tight, curving to my shape, but it's longer than I expect, hitting just below the knee though that hardly mattered when a gust of wind going the wrong way will open it right up anyway.

I pick out a pair of strappy, rose gold heels and slide my feet into them. I can't think about what I'm doing and who I am doing it with because if I do, I'll either empty the contents of my stomach into the toilet and in turn ruin my make up, and the dress, or I won't go at all.

I place the mask on my face and then secure it with a neat ribbon at the back, smoothing my hair which I have left down and curled so it sits in soft loose ringlets around my face and bounces against my shoulders.

I finally turn to look at myself in the mirror.

The woman that stares back at me is not the same one I know. This isn't me, they aren't the same deep brown eyes looking back at me, not my curves or legs or mouth.

The dress is stunning and fits flawlessly, the mask a perfect match. Simple elegance but the whole outfit packs a punch I'd never thought I'd be able to pull off.

I can do this.

I can pretend for a few hours. For Tate.

And maybe for myself a little too. There's no denying I live a safe life and maybe it would be good to get out a little more though, I'm sure I could find safer company if I truly wanted to do that.

Right on time the buzzer for my apartment rings and my heart drops into my stomach. I inhale deeply and exhale, grabbing my purse as I slip out the door and carefully take the stairs. A large black SUV is parked against the curb, the windows blacked out but a huge man, dressed pristinely in a black suit and tie nods at me, "Miss Locke." He greets.

"Hello," I respond.

"I'm Micha," he gives me barely a smile, I guess to try and ease the situation, but there's no mistaking the air of violence and danger that surrounds him like a halo. He's attractive, big, with muscled arms larger than my thighs and a whole two heads taller than me. Broad shoulders and green eyes, his skin a deep bronzed color.

He steps up to the door and opens it for me.

I'm not expecting to see Kingston, I assumed I'd be meeting him at the party, but there he is and there right with him is the colleague that joined him the first day we met. I barely look at him though as Kingston slides from the back seat and stands before me. His black suit is perfectly tailored to fit his body, the lines molded to the shape of the muscle underneath. His shoes clip on the pavement as he stops and looks down, eyes raking over

every inch of my body, taking in the deep plunging neckline, the high slit in the front of the skirt. My body lights up, a bloom of heat that makes me want to squirm as he continues his slow appraisal.

With one finger he traces the outline of my mask before he leans in and kisses my cheek. It's such a gentle brush of his lips I almost believe I imagined it, but then his warm breath tickles against the shell of my ear as he whispers, "you look beautiful, love."

Blooms of color spot on my cheeks as he steps to the side and sweeps out an arm, inviting me into the car. His friend stares at me, a brow cocked and a smirk pulling up one side of his mouth.

He seems to be the complete opposite of the other men in the car, except for his size. His hair, golden blond, is long, hanging around his chin, but he's swept it back and a thick dark blond goatee frames his mouth. Like both men, his suit is black.

"I'm Ace," he holds out a hand, "I don't think we've been formally introduced."

"It's Abel," Kingston corrects, "not Ace."

He chuckles.

"Why Ace?" I ask, trying to loosen my shoulders and muscles as I settle into the car. The inside is huge and plenty big enough, but when there's three in the back and two of them are big enough to take up two seats on their own, it becomes a little cramped. Before anyone can say anything, Ace or Abel, or whatever his name is hops out the car and jumps in the front.

"Ace because I'm a gambling man, Eleanor, do you like to gamble?"

There was more to that sentence, "No."

I slide across the seats and take the one Abel just vacated. Kingston remains where he is on the other side.

“None of you are wearing masks?” I say, fingering the one covering my face.

“We’ll put them on,” Kingston looks out the window.

“Is there anything I need to know about this party?” I ask, if only to keep the quiet from unsettling me. The men seem to be content with sitting in silence.

Kingston glances over at me, a secret smile tugging on his mouth, and then he simply responds with, “You’ll see.”

We’re only in the car for about twenty minutes, and then we’re stopping at a nondescript white house, it’s large and detached with a stone porch and rose bushes beneath the windows. Certainly not something I was expecting.

“Are we picking someone else up?” I ask, staring at the large black door.

No one answers me as all the doors open, and then my door is opened by Micha who is suddenly donning a simple black mask. He offers me his hand, but I refuse, using the edge of the car instead to steady myself and climb out.

“If you run,” the voice is whispered from behind me, the deep baritone causing shivers to run down my spine, “I’ll chase, I do love a good game of cat and mouse.”

I spin to find Kingston looming over me, his own mask secured to his face. I’m not able to stop the sharp inhale of breath as I take in the brutal beauty of it. It’s a half mask, the left side of his face concealed. It’s gothic and disturbing, the one half resembling the face of some demon with spikes around the eyehole and the features sharply carved, what one would assume to be brows furrowed low and the cheekbones pronounced and protruding. It appears to have been molded for his face only, with the way the nose curves and sits flush against the bridge of his, the end coming down to a point. A horn juts out from the head of the mask that sits just below his hair line, the end sharp enough to cut. The mask itself is an obsidian black, so

dark it seems to absorb the light but as the light of the house catches his face, I see tints of red shining through. His eyes are a stark, brutal contrast against the blackness of it.

Fear, very real and yet mixed with something else, injects itself into my bloodstream, coursing through my veins like a rampaging bull.

I'm in a whole heap of trouble and doubted anyone could help me now.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

# Kingston

Even beneath the mask on her face I can see her eyes widen as she takes in every detail of my own, the very sharp point on the horn, the brutal lines and edges. I expect her to recoil, what I don't expect is for her to lean forward, closer to me and lift her dainty hand, her fingers running over the details of the mask, the tap of her manicured nails scraping against the surface.

I catch her hand as it drifts lower, closer to my mouth, and she sucks in a breath as I bring it away and then drop it.

Gently, I coax her to turn and urge her towards the stairs, Micha and Ace falling into step behind me. The door opens before we hit the top step and grasping Eleanor by the elbow, I tug her a little closer. Lest she slip away and get lost in the house.

I almost smile at that possibility. I was already buzzing to find out her reaction.

A couple of security guys show us through, their heads nodding in my direction, and both Micha and Ace pluck red bracelets, embossed with the Crimson logo, from the basket at the front of the house. Game for anything is what that color resembles.

“What are they for?” Eleanor asks.

“You don’t need one,” I tell her, guiding her further into the warmth of Crimson.

She glances around, noticing everyone else is wearing a wristband of some sort. “Why does everyone have one?”

Pretending not to hear, I guide her towards the bar. It’s early still, so the main area of the house is calmer than what it would be later on. Low music plays from a sound system that has been set up to run through the house, and can be heard on all three floors.

I had the house converted a few years back now. There are seven bedrooms underground, well bedroom is a term used loosely, the walls are made of glass so everything can be seen as you’re walking through the halls, each cube furnished with a large bed and silk sheets. There are other pieces of furniture in the rooms, chairs and such, but the bed is the main feature with links and rings for restraints and other tools to be used. Crimson has no judgement on people’s preference, as long as all parties are willing and in agreement, rules have been discussed and safe words exchanged. I guessed I was breaking my own rule by bringing Eleanor here without her knowing what she was walking into.

At the bar I order myself a bourbon and get Eleanor a glass of white wine.

“Maybe I wanted a bourbon,” she scowls.

I laugh, “Is that what you would prefer?” I lift a hand, ready to signal the server to change her order.

“No, but don’t just assume,” she snatches the glass from my hand and turns from me, showing me her shoulder. Fuck she looks stunning tonight. The dress I picked out perfect for her tight little body, all the curves begging to be touched.

I can see the usual faces in the crowds, even when their faces are covered by the masks, hands already drifting for touches and gentle

caresses, bodies leaning closer as words are whispered and promises made. The tension grows with each minute the clock strikes.

It wasn't a usual thing for us to do a formal theme, but the clients of Crimson appreciated a little variation every now and then, and masquerades had always been a favorite.

"What is this party for?" Eleanor asks, her finger idly tracing the Crimson logo on the napkin in front of her, tracing the gold letters and then the border of leaves and vines that surround it.

"So many questions, love," I find Ace and Micha utilizing their time off, both having found willing girls to spend the night with, though I doubted it would be them they left with at the end of the night.

"And no answers," she huffs, snatching her hand from the napkin, "are you going to tell me about the bracelets?"

We were the only two people not wearing one. I didn't need one, people knew who I was and what my *preferences* were but her, the reason she didn't need one was because she was with me and in white. The only woman here in white. Only I could touch her. Only I could please her unless I gave permission for someone else to do it.

Anything was a possibility.

How long would she last?

There were lines I wouldn't cross, lines that, even with my questionable actions by bringing her here would only be stepped over *if* she was willing.

"No," I answer her. I knew if I told her she'd make a scene, and I wasn't quite ready to let her leave.

"Then what am I doing here?"

I glance down at her, "Learning."

She places her glass down on the bar and crosses her arms, pouting, the movement causing her breasts to squeeze together. Such basic things that a man can be distracted by.

How long had it been since a woman had interested me to this degree?

“I expected something more,” she says.

I grin, “The night has yet to begin.”

—

Slowly the crowd in the front areas of the house begin to filter out, disappearing down the halls and into private rooms for those who want the space, others heading up to the more open areas for group activities or below, to the glass rooms. I remain with Eleanor in the bar, watching.

Her brows pulling down makes the mask on her face move, “Where is everyone going?”

The volume on the music is increased, a slow, seductive rhythm that seems to vibrate the very walls. It drowns out the noise from the other parts of the house, but if we were to step a little closer to that hallway the sounds won't be so easily disguised.

Ace and Micha are nowhere to be seen. Several of my guys are stationed as security through the house.

“Drink your wine, love, and then I'll take you for a tour.”

She doesn't eagerly down the drink, she sips it, keeping her dark eyes on me. Trying to figure it out, trying to figure me out. I let her look, I let her see.

“Are you going to hurt me, Kingston?” Her voice is soft, tentative, unsure, but I'm captivated by the way her red stained lips move, how her tongue darts out to capture a drop of wine caught on her lip.

She goes to speak again when I don't answer, but I don't have the patience for more words. I coax her hand to her mouth, edging her to finish her wine, and she obliges, taking the last few mouthfuls before placing her glass on the bar.

“A tour now?”

I step closer to her, leaning down until our mouths are barely an inch apart. I can smell the wine on her breath, the scent of her shampoo and perfume.

“Stay close to me,” I tell her, our lips brushing. Her breath fans against my mouth, and fuck, do I want to taste her.

Not yet.

Soon, I tell myself.

She sways, leaning closer but I keep her at a distance, close but not close enough, “Don't wander off. Don't go into any of the rooms and don't talk to anyone.”

I'm sure she has questions, several of them but she doesn't voice them. I tuck her arm into mine and head towards the hall where the music isn't loud enough to cover the moans of pleasure leaking out from each door. Women cry out and men grunt, the sounds chaotic and erotic all the same. Her hand on my arm tightens.

“Are people having sex here!?” She shrieks. “What the fuck is this place?”

“Keep walking, Eleanor, there's still plenty to see.”

I had planned to take her upstairs first but I can feel my desperation ripping at my patience, so I divert and open a large red door that opens up to a well lit stairway. She hesitates but a gentle tug gets her moving again, and we take the stairs slowly.

The music is purposely quieter in this section of the house.

The glass rooms for viewing also have microphones that record and link to speakers outside each room so people watching can both see and hear what is happening inside.

You can't decipher which room is making what sound at this point. It's just a riot of wet skin slapping together, of moans and groans and cries.

We come to the first room, a red theme flowing throughout where two bodies writhe on the bed. The woman is restrained by her wrists to the headboard, a blindfold across her eyes and her hips are pushed up by a pillow under her arse. The guy fucks her on his knees, fingers biting into the fleshy areas of her hips. Her head is tipped back in utter ecstasy as she climbs higher and higher, finding her release. One of many, I'm sure.

I glance over to Eleanor. Her head is turned towards the scene, her mouth parted in shock or awe I can't tell without seeing her whole face.

I urge her on, coming to the next room. In this one there's three of them, two men, one woman. She's on her knees, palms flat to the mattress but her head pushed back, a cock in her mouth and one behind.

At this, Eleanor completely stops. Her body is stiff, but goosebumps have pebbled her skin and her legs are pressed as tight as possible.

Well, well, well...

Unable to stop myself I reach forward and run a finger up her exposed back, feeling that creamy skin under my hands. I press into her back, leaning down to push my nose into the soft spot where her neck meets her shoulder.

She lets me, angling her head subconsciously. I feel the sharp edges of my mask cut into her skin, hard enough to leave red lines on her soft skin. A small, barely there, whimper escapes her lips.

"Does this turn you on, love?" I whisper.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

# Eleanor

“Does this turn you on, love?” His voice is a smooth caress against my suddenly feverish skin. The rumble of his voice sends jolts of electricity down my spine before settling into something hot and heavy, too heavy and too demanding between my thighs.

I want to be revolted, to be shocked and embarrassed and ashamed, repulsed at what I’m seeing and how my body is reacting to it.

I’m a good girl. I do good things. I don’t let men with shady lives and questionable motives lead me around, and I certainly don’t let them lead me into sex clubs and yet here I am. With a man likely more lethal than the devil himself standing at my back while I stare into the glass room and the three people inside.

I’m watching them... I’m *wanting*...

Kingston’s hand does another run down my spine before it stops at the base, just above my arse. His touch may as well be skin to skin with how I react to it. A brand. That’s what it was.

“I shouldn’t be here,” I try to add as much conviction to my voice but fail, letting it come out breathlessly and shaky. My legs tremble and my heart races.

“Oh, love,” I feel King’s tongue on my neck, “I think you’re exactly where you should be.” His fingers curl around my hip, and he tugs me back hard, hard enough that I slam back into his chest and feel his own arousal press against me, “I think you’re exactly where you *want* to be.”

I shouldn't be here. I shouldn't be wanting. I don't know him. He's *bad*. He tricked me into coming here, he kept me in the dark. Fuck, he threw me into his car and practically bribed me into working with him.

But my head is fuzzy and my thoughts jumbled. I know what I should do, I know I should hit him and scream and lash out and then run. Run as far and as fast as I can, and yet I don't. Instead, my lips part and I lean into him.

He growls against my neck, teeth grazing, that damned mask biting into my skin. It hurts but feels so fucking good. "Kingston," I moan.

"Just say the word," he rumbles, "we can leave."

Is he giving me an out?

*Take it*, a voice in my head screams, *tell him you want to leave and never see him again*.

"I don't want to leave."

I feel his grin on my skin, and damn if that doesn't turn me on more, "Then what do you want?"

"Touch me."

Abruptly he moves us forward, grabbing my wrists and forcing my arms, flattening my palms against the glass, his hard cock pressing into the base of my spine, "keep watching them," he orders.

As if I could take my eyes off them. The man pounds into the woman so hard she jerks forward with each thrust and while the other guy has now taken his dick from her mouth, he still loves on her, kissing her mouth, her neck, her breasts. Her face is twisted in pleasure, her cries echoing through the speaker above me.

It feels so fucking wrong. So fucking dirty.



I feel King slide his hands down my hips, then my thighs, fingers curling under the hem of my dress. Shit, I'm doing this. The satin material is soft against my legs as he slides it up, bunching it in his fist and then his hand dips into the front of my underwear and everything leaves my head. All thoughts, all hesitations, gone as his fingers slide through my pussy. He smears my arousal over my clit. The first touch against that little bundle of nerves leaves me breathless and aching, my walls clenching around nothing. It had been a long time since a man had touched me.

“So wet, love.”

With his hand still in my underwear, he leans forward and presses his face to my neck, his kisses greedy and rough.

His deft fingers swipe through me, the heel of his hand continuing that slow torture against my clit as he teases my entrance and then inserts them slowly. So god-damned slowly.

“I've never wanted to taste something as badly as I want to taste you,” he rasps, his fingers a steady rhythm, and he pumps them in and out of me, building me higher and higher but never letting me get close to that edge.

“Kingston,” pleasure coils all my muscles tight.

“Tell me I can.”

“Yes!”

He spins me suddenly, the loss of his fingers leaving me cold, but then my back is pressed to the glass, and he's shoved the mask away so he can lift my leg to rest it over his shoulder.

He's not gentle as he tugs my panties to the side and buries his face in my pussy, tongue lashing at me.

I see stars as the silver ball of his tongue piercing flicks against my swollen clit. His fingers bite into my thigh as he keeps it upright, giving him easy access to me while the other draws lazy circles higher and higher

up the inside of the other. He laps and flicks his tongue, the pleasure unlike anything I've ever known.

My eyes roll back in my head and all other sounds, all other movement around me becomes a blur. He suddenly spears two fingers inside, my pussy clamping around them as he fucks me with his hand and licks me expertly with his tongue. My hips roll against his face and his low growl of approval only spurs me on as I chase that rising high and that edge I know I'm about to go tumbling over.

"That's it," he rumbles, the vibration of his voice reverberating through me, "Ride my fucking face, love."

My release barrels through me, so quick and violently my scream bounces off the glass walls.

I don't feel it when King slides my underwear back into place or rights my dress, I don't feel it as his hands steady me to keep me in place.

Slowly, as if rising from a fog, my senses come back. First, it's the sounds, the noises of other people chasing their pleasure and their skin slapping together and then my eyes focus and bodies, so many writhing bodies.

Embarrassment has my cheeks heating as I notice the bodies now turned to me, eyes still watching, and I have no doubt they had seen it all.

Tears prick my eyes.

What the fuck did I do?

"Easy now, love." King rasps, his mouth still wet.

"I hate you."

His mask is back in place and all he does is smirk, "Had enough, Eleanor?"

"I want to leave."

“You’ll leave when I say you can leave.” He rolls his shoulders, and his eyes go over my shoulder, “quite frankly, if I’m not going to have the favor returned,” he runs his hand over his mouth, wiping me away, “I’m going to need a minute to enjoy the show.”

“You’re sick.”

“You’re learning,” he turns his back to me, and I use it, breaking left and back the way we came. I kick my shoes off, I don’t care about them, and I’ll run bare foot all the way home if I have to.

I hear Kingston’s laugh even over the music and my heavy panting.

“Did I not warn you how much I enjoy the chase, love?” He’s closer than I expected.

I run harder, faster, skidding around a corner, my bare feet squeaking on the tile. I hate how my body reacts. I hate how even as fear grips my muscles and seizes my mind, I feel a rush of lust swarm right alongside it.

“Run, Eleanor,” King shouts behind me, accompanied by a deep laugh, “run.”

He’s not running though, he’s following, I can feel his presence, but he isn’t running, and I figure out why a moment later when my legs barely bring me to a stop before I collide with a wall of muscle. The security guard does nothing but stand there, arms folded looking at me with no form of emotion at all. King’s footsteps behind me are a leisurely pace, the tap of his shoes on the tile whipping through me and making me flinch and still, I’m burning for him.

I won’t let it consume me this time. I won’t be that helpless moth.

I dart left.

There has to be another way out. They can’t keep me here.

I scoff inwardly, I’m sure Kingston has every resource available to him if he wanted to keep me here against my will.

That damn chuckle follows me.

I'm so fucking stupid.

I take the stairs two at a time, holding my dress so I don't trip over it. There are doors all the way down the halls and the sounds from each one tells me what the hell is going on in them. How did he trick me into coming to this place?

I mean, I'm all for people getting what they want and how they do it isn't my business, but this isn't me.

I come to the end of the hall and consequences be damned, I ram the door open and go inside. There's only two people inside. Their heads whip around to me, eyes widening at my clear state of distress. Thankfully they look to be getting dressed. The room smells like sex and sweat, even if the bed looks to be untouched, but I don't care enough to come up with all the creative ways they could have done their *business*.

"Are you okay?" The woman asks. She's pretty, blonde and her dress is a dark emerald green, so dark it could pass as black. There's a flush to her skin, a satisfied gleam in her eye. "Is someone bothering you?"

"No," wait, why am I lying? "I just needed a minute, I'm sorry, I thought this room was empty."

"No that's --" She gets cut off as the door slams open so hard it bounces off the wall and Kingston fills the doorway.

"Out," Everything about him commanded respect, obedience and the girl no longer looks at me like she wants to help. She appears to pity me as she slinks past, eyes down and slips from the room, the guy quickly following.

The door slamming makes me jump.

"I was very clear in my instructions, Eleanor."

"I want to go home." My voice shakes.

“And I said you can leave when I say you can leave.”

“You can’t do this,” I clench my fists to hide the shake. Where was the out he offered not so long ago?

“Have you not already figured it out, love? I can do *anything*.”

“You’re no better than them, are you?” I spin on him, “Maybe you’re even working with them, and I’m about to find out exactly what’s been happening to Tate. Is that why you brought me here? To fuck me and kidnap me?”

My heart pounds furiously. My whole body is on alert and every nerve awake. I know I’m wet, I know the fear is doing fucked up things to me.

“I can assure you, Eleanor, I am a lot of things and I have done many questionable things, but that is not one of them.”

He cocks his head, eyes roaming over me, still dark with his desire for me. I see the evidence of it straining against his trousers. He was hard chasing me, hard for the game we were playing. He’s fucked up. He’s a fucking monster. He wants my fear.

No, he didn’t want it. He already had it.

I tilt my chin up, nostrils flaring.

“You like it, don’t you,” he steps towards me, I step back, “You like the fear. It gets you off. Being scared, running, wondering how something will play out, it makes you wet, doesn’t it, Eleanor.” It isn’t a question.

“I want to go home, Kingston.”

“I’ll take you home,” He agrees, closing the gap between us. I hold very, very still as he curls a finger under my chin to keep my eyes on him, “But if you think you’re free, you’re wrong. I won’t be letting you go, love. You’re mine.”

And then his mouth slams against mine.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

# Kingston

My mouth slams down against hers hard. I grip her head, tangling my fingers into her hair and tugging her head back, opening her up for me. Her lips part and I waste no seconds as my tongue sweeps into her mouth.

Her nails dig into my biceps as she grips my arms, but she kisses me back. Her teeth nipping my lips hard enough to draw blood which drips onto my tongue.

I move us through the room until the backs of her legs hit the bed, and she falls back, my body following. The dress falls open as her thighs part, letting me in.

This wasn't how it was supposed to go, yet I cannot deny myself any longer.

I needed to be in her, to *feel* her, but I wanted another taste first, though she wouldn't be getting that release I know her body was craving. I leave her mouth to favor her neck, her collar bones, tasting her skin, the salt of her sweat on my taste buds. I graze my teeth across the mounds of her breasts and her spine arches, pushing her chest out for me. I grip the straps of the dress and yank them down, hearing something rip, but if she cares she doesn't tell me, and I don't give a flying fuck. With the top of the dress down, I make quick work of tearing the bra from her body, leaving her bare and exposed before me. Rosy nipples peaked greet me first, and I latch on with my teeth, biting. She screams and arches further, pushing her breast harder against my face. A hand pushes her back down, holding her there. I leave her nipple and continue my way down.

“Spread your legs, love,” my voice is a growl, “spread them and show me that pretty pussy.”

She groans and widens her thighs.

“You’re fucking dripping,” I praise, “I can fucking smell it.”

She goes to close her legs, color blooming on her cheeks, but my hands are quick to hold her in place.

“Oh no,” I tut, “You won’t hide from me.”

The string of her thong is flimsy and snaps easily, and then I throw the material over my shoulder and bury my face between her thighs, sucking her clit into my mouth. Her arousal coats my tongue.

She writhes under me, but I hold her steady with a hand to her stomach, keeping her in place as I devour her.

“You taste fucking divine,” I grumble against her flesh, scraping my teeth over her, “like fucking heaven.”

Her pussy clenches, her body pushing higher, “Please.” She begs.

“Not yet,” she whimpers when I come away from her body. Our masks are still on but neither of us make any move to remove them.

I shrug out of my jacket and then reach forward, grabbing the dress and tearing. The flimsy thing falls apart under my hand. It seems such a shame to waste such a pretty dress, but what’s underneath is perfection. Soft skin and curves, shapely hips and thighs. I take in every inch of her exposed flesh, committing her to memory. Her perfection forever burned into my brain. Her lips are parted, and a flush reddens her skin.

“Come to the edge of the bed,” I tell her, “feet on the floor.”

She swallows and complies, watching me as I unbutton my shirt and slide it off my shoulders. Her eyes take in my chest, my abdomen, sweeping over the tattoos that are inked into my flesh. I flick the button on my

trousers and tug them down and then my boxers follow before I stand naked in front of her.

I've never been ashamed of my body, but I've never felt so exposed before. Her eyes widen as she bites her tongue, watching while I take my cock in my hand, pumping it before I swipe my thumb over the Apadravya piercing, the spike of pleasure it causes me making my teeth grit. Her eyes widen further at the steel I have through my cock.

“You have *it* pierced!?”

I smirk, “For your benefit,” my eyes dip to her pussy, “and mine.”

I continue to fuck my hand, watching her watch me as I stalk forward, bumping her legs further open to stand between them. Her chest heaves with each breath she takes and her fingers curl into the sheets.

“You're even more perfect than I imagined,” I praise, removing my hand from myself to lean down and run a hand across her stomach, down over her pelvic bone. My fingers spread her open and a whimper escapes her lips.

“Beg me, Eleanor.”

Her eyes widen behind the mask.

I flick her clit and then pinch it between the tips of my fingers and her spine arches.

“Beg, love.”

She cries out, “*Please*, Kingston.”

“Aren't you a good girl,” I comment, pushing her towards that edge. She moans loudly but then I stop again.

“Stop it!” She growls.



“Why would I stop it?” I ask, nudging her to crawl back onto the mattress, “when the reward will be all that much more if you wait.”

I drop into the cradle of her thighs, my cock sliding through her wet pussy. Fuck she feels good, so fucking good. Her warmth and wetness smears across my dick as I grind into her, the balls of my piercing rubbing up against her.

“Yes, fuck,” she lifts her hips and the head of my cock slides down, teasing at her entrance.

My muscles go tight as I restrain myself from pounding forward, from spearing her on my cock the way I want to. I want this to last. I want to savor each minute I have her beneath me.

I let myself slide in only an inch, fucking her with only that much. Her thighs shake, heels digging into my arse as she tries to get me in deeper.

“Not yet,” I grind out.

Her warmth grips me like a vice, her pussy spasming around the tip of my cock, around the piercing that makes *everything* more sensitive. Fuck I won't last.

“Please, Kingston,” she cries, pushing harder with her heels.

My restraint snaps and I slam so hard into her, she jerks up the bed. Her scream bounces off the walls.

“I told you I'd make you scream, love,” I hold her face, forcing her to keep her head up, “open your eyes, Eleanor.”

She doesn't.

I jerk my hips, slamming in hard, “Open them!”

Her eyes snap open.

“Scream for me again.”

I quickly get to my knees, letting go of her face to grip her hips, jerking them off the bed and in this position, with her hips higher I can get in deeper, go harder, faster. My hips piston as I fuck her, fingers bruising.

“Oh God!” she moans.

“God can’t help you now, love,” I slow my hips, sliding in deep, rubbing the piercing against the sweet spot just inside, the rough texture of it rubbing against the crown of my cock, “now, scream!”

I run my thumb over her clit, slow, careful movements, watching her face as the pleasure grips her every being, watching the way her body moves, how it writhes beneath my touch.

“Shatter for me,” I tell her, my stroke turning punishing as I push her between the lines of pleasure and pain.

She erupts.

Her scream of pleasure rips through my very core, and her pussy clamps around my cock, convulsing as her orgasm takes her away.

“Fuck,” I rasp, my hips slamming into her, our skin slapping together, and I come with a roar, spilling myself in her, her walls still clenching, slowing as her body calms.

I land on top of her, holding my weight so as to not crush her. Her breathing is a sharp, quick rasp in my ear.

That wasn’t enough. I need more. I need more of her.

Slowly, I withdraw from her body, feeling the loss of her instantly.

“You didn’t wear a condom,” her voice is quiet, small, incredibly small compared to how she screamed just a few moments ago.

“I’m clean.” I turn to face her to find her own turned away from me, “I know you are too. And you’re on your birth control.”

I expect a reaction to that, I expect her to lash out at the invasion of privacy, but she only sighs and curls up, covering herself with her hands.

“Eleanor,” I say gently, “love.”

She turns slightly but still doesn’t show me her face.

“Don’t be ashamed of your desires or of what you want. You owe it to yourself to take what pleasure you can no matter what form it comes in.”

“I’d like to go home.” She says.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Eleanor

Kingston hands me a shirt, but that's all I have. My dress is in scraps, my underwear in much the same state.

When the shirt covers me, he gently places his suit jacket around my shoulders.

I don't meet his eyes or thank him for it.

I want to feel guilty, to feel ashamed of what just happened, but I don't and that's the problem.

This isn't me.

And while Tate is out there suffering, I'm doing this. *That* I do feel guilty for.

I follow Kingston through the house, blocking out the sounds of everyone's pleasure. I'm sure they heard mine too.

I've never had an orgasm like the ones Kingston drew from my body, never felt a man go so deep or so hard. He was feral, precise. He knew how to work my body, like I was an instrument, and he'd been learning how to play me his entire life.

My muscles are weak, my stomach in knots. My feet are bare, my shoes somewhere downstairs, and I wasn't about to go back down to get them. I feel Kingston's presence looming over me from behind, but for once he's

quiet, no taunting or teasing, no bringing out shit I'd much rather keep buried, if only for my sanity – and my safety.

No one guards the door now and the cold air hits me, raising goosebumps across my bare skin. The ground is cold under my feet.

Before I can take a step down my legs are swooped out from under me.

“Put me down,” I keep my emotions in check, no anger, no desire and certainly no fear. He feeds off it like some fucked up incubus. He holds me bridal style, but ignores me completely.

“Take her home,” he says to a guy I haven't seen before, dressed like the rest in a suit. When the door is opened, he deposits me in the backseat and closes the door, but I don't miss the threat he throws the guy, “I expect her home in twenty minutes, a minute more I'll have your head.”

The guy just nods. I cross my arms and stare out the opposite window even though I can feel Kingston watching me through the window. They're tinted so it's likely he can't see me, but I'm not risking it.

Not one word is spoken as the guy drives me home, the car is silent, not even the radio to drown out my thoughts.

What the fuck have I done, and most importantly, how do I forget it ever happened?

I run a hand over my face, forgetting I'm even wearing the mask still as my fingers bump up against.

Anger, hot and raging has me ripping the thing from my face.

How dare he!?! How fucking dare he trick me into going to that damn party!?! For using my own body against me!?!

I mean, I wasn't exactly complaining at the time and even if it was the *best* sex I've ever had, he *tricked* me. And I don't even want to think about the fact that he didn't wear a condom or that he knows personal details about me like my sexual health and birth control!

“Hey, do you have a pen?” I ask the driver, unable to take the bite out of my words even if my anger isn’t directed at him.

He meets my eyes in the mirror, frowns but leans over and takes a biro from the glove compartment and then hands it back to me. I recognize the street we’re driving down, and I’ll be home and safe soon.

It does nothing to dissipate my absolute rage at Kingston.

Holding the mask against my bare leg, I put the nib against the front and write in big angry letters, FUCK YOU.

When the car pulls up to the curb the driver makes to get out, “I can get my own door, don’t worry about it.” I push Kingston’s jacket from my shoulders, leaving it on the seat as I slide across the leather, the backs of my legs chaffing against the material. I lean between the front seats, “Can you make sure this gets back to Kingston please?”

The driver takes it from me, looks down at it and hardly contains his amusement, even if nothing about it is funny.

“Sure, miss.”

I climb from the car and slam the door hard.

That was a bad idea. I’m just provoking him. I turn to ask for it back, the regret instant, but the driver is already away from the curb and disappearing down the street.

I groan loudly and stomp towards the building, thankful I, at least, managed to get my purse before I left that damned place. My hands shake when I unlock the door and my legs are heavy carrying me up the stairs.

Maybe I’ll wake up tomorrow and all of this would have been a dream. Tate would be there, Kingston wouldn’t exist, and my life would be back to the normal, mundane routine I’m used to.

That’s what was safe.

Easy.

My apartment is a warm embrace when I finally drag my arse through the door, but the silence is deafening. It's late, I'm tired and sleeping is better than thinking about what I was doing with Kingston only an hour ago.

I don't bother changing as I fall into my bed, tuck myself under the blankets and go to sleep.

— Kingston —

I don't stay at Crimson, not when her scent is on my skin, and the sounds of her pleasure haunting my every thought. My phone buzzed a few minutes ago letting me know she was home safe. Fucking her, tasting her, that wasn't part of the plan tonight. Getting under her skin, getting her needy and wet and ready was, but I had planned on making her wait.

So much for my own control.

I step out of the house, dressed only in a pair of suit trousers seeing as I gave Eleanor my shirt and jacket when the car pulls up to the house. Josh, the guy who took Eleanor home rolls down his window and leans over to get something from the passenger seat before he holds it out to me.

Eleanor's mask, "She asked me to give this to you."

I take it, turning it around in my hand.

FUCK YOU.

I suck my tongue against my teeth, nostrils flaring. I had planned to give her a bit of space, let her gather her thoughts after what had just happened,

but she wants to play with fire.

I tuck the mask into my pocket and climb in the back of the car, “Take me back to the penthouse.”

He complies. I’ll give her tonight, one night, a few hours before I’m back at her side.

I feel my mouth tug up as I go through all the things I’m going to do to her. What she’s going to *let* me do.

Back at the penthouse I tell Josh to take the rest of the night off and head up, cold, tired and slightly pissed off with myself.

“Get it out your system?” Isobel says from the kitchen, a glass of red wine in front of her. She takes a long look at me and then turns, grabs another glass and pours me one.

“We’re not talking about Eleanor.”

I accept the glass of wine and down half of it, “That’s a seven hundred pound bottle of wine!” Isobel screeches, “You’re supposed to savor it!”

“Who pays seven hundred pounds for a bottle of wine?”

She huffs, annoyed.

“I’m going to bed.” I tell her, leaving the half glass on the counter, “show yourself out.”

“King, wait!”

I pause in the threshold, “I’m sorry.”

I sigh, looking over my shoulder to where my sister runs the tip of her finger around the rim of the glass, “I’ve been a dick to you, but you’re not the enemy.”

“What’s going on, Belle?”



“I just expected it to be over by now, after we got back from the US, I had hoped it would be over. Wren –” Alexander Silver’s wife, “is settling the houses over in the US for us, and it’s all going according to plan. They’ve left us the Syndicate, and we’ve done nothing.”

“Not nothing, Isobel.” I tell her, “I’m in with Tobias, I have a way of getting the rest of the information and once we have that, we’ll strike. You’ll get who you need, and we’ll end this.”

“Why not strike Tobias now?” She presses, “You have him right there.”

“Because cutting down Tobias doesn’t solve the problem. There are two others like him, they’ll only continue, and we would have only taken out one head before another grows. All our hard work would have been for nothing, and your revenge would be wasted.”

“This Eleanor, she’s your in to get this information.”

I nod.

“You trust her?”

“She’ll only be given the bare minimum of information.” I tell her honestly.

“What does she get out of it?”

I think of her friend, Tate. The likelihood of finding her friend was slim. It will take us years to fully hunt down every house and ring owned by the Syndicate, and I couldn’t guarantee I’d get them all. We may take out the heads, but it doesn’t mean everything just goes away.

“She wants something in return.”

Isobel nods, “Please don’t let it go wrong, King. I need this.”

There was nothing to say, no words I could speak to make it better.

“Good night, Isobel.”

I leave her in the kitchen and head through to the bedroom, unbuttoning my trousers and leaving them on the floor.

I still smell Eleanor on my skin, embedded there, reminding me of what it had been like.

I had told myself once would have been enough to satiate the burning need for her but once hadn't been enough.

I needed more.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN



I groan as I wake, muscles stiff and head foggy. For a minute I lay there, staring up at the ceiling. I fell into bed so abruptly, I didn't even pull the curtains, thankfully though, the sun is being suffocated by a thick layer of deep gray clouds, the promise of rain hanging thick in the air. I can hear the bustle of the street below.

With a sigh, I push the blankets off, my finger's running across the material covering my body, hitting the buttons. I don't own any pyjamas with buttons. I inhale sharply, getting a strong smell of Kingston's aftershave.

Oh shit. *That* happened.

I glance at the clock. Ten thirty AM.

"Shit!" I yell. It's Monday. I have work. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

I don't have time to dwell on my activities last night, I don't even have time to think about how sore I am down there. I throw the shirt from my body, leaving it on the floor and throw myself into the shower, washing quickly before I rush back to my room, throwing on the first pair of trousers I find, and pair it with a thick, wool jumper. Brushing out my hair I decide it's too far gone to do anything with and shove it into a ponytail. It'll have to do.

I find my phone in my purse discarded on the kitchen table and see six missed calls from Tobias, three from HR, and not so shockingly several text

messages. My eyes snag on the latest message received from Unknown. I hadn't saved his number and hadn't planned to, I didn't need to, seeing as he was the only one who text from an unknown number.

I ignore them all and lock up, heading out into the bitter wind. Once on the train, I dial the office.

I interrupt before Josie's even halfway through the basic office greeting, "Josie, it's Eleanor!"

"Where are you!?" She hisses, "Tobias is spitting mad that you've not arrived and his big meeting with those execs starts in half an hour! With Tate gone he has no one!"

"I'm coming, I, uh, had an emergency and my phone died," I wince at the lie. I wasn't about to admit I'd slept in because of my activities last night.

"Is everything okay?"

No. "Yes, fine now, tell Tobias I'll be there in fifteen, please explain it was a family emergency."

"Sure."

I hang up and then check through the rest of my messages. Tobias asking where I am, mum checking in, I reply to her quickly, thumbs swiping over the keys. When I come out of that message my breathing stops.

**Tate:** Hi Eleanor, just checking in. I'm all good. Hope you're well. Tate.

How they could ever think this was how Tate text was beyond me. They didn't know her clearly, not like I did. Guilt sits heavy on my chest. I dial the number the cops gave me the other day.

"This is Officer Daniels, how can I help?"

“Hello, officer? My name is Eleanor, I called a few days ago about my friend being missing. They gave me this number to dial if I had any more worries.”

“Yes.”

“Well, she still isn’t home.”

“Have you heard from her at all?”

“I’ve had a text, but it’s not like how she usually speaks to me, I find it odd.”

I think back to all the things the PI’s said to me, how finding her was a lost cause and then remember what King said, how he could help. But getting King’s help was like selling my soul to the devil. He wanted me to get information from Tobias, but I doubted his requests would end there.

“Have you thought maybe this is a breakdown of your relationship?”  
The cop sighs impatiently.

“No, we were good.”

“Miss, there is nothing we can do. We always follow up when someone claims a person is missing and reached out to other friends and family of Miss Stone, and they’ve all heard from her. There is no case here.”

“You’re wrong,” I snap.

“If that will be all, Miss Locke, I have other matters to address.”

“No, wait!” I call loudly, garnering a few glares from other passengers on the train, but he hangs up. “Fuck!” I hiss.

The lady next to me gasps audibly, clutching imaginary pearls. “What!?” I snap. She tuts.

I press my fingers to my forehead, massaging away the blooming headache before I open King’s message.

**Unknown:** Your message was cute. Was one round not enough?

**Unknown:** I'm ready to call in our bargain. I'll see you after work.

I ignore them both, even if the first message has spots of color flaming on my cheeks.

Once I get to the office, I manage to talk Tobias down enough for him to stop yelling at me, and get the meeting room ready for when his guests arrive, laying out pitchers of water and setting up the coffee machine in the room.

By the time the task is complete and I'm heading back to my desk, his guests have already arrived.

I stand, "Good morning, my name is Eleanor," I drone through the usual greeting, "I'll take you to the room and fetch Mr Franco for you."

There's three of them. They're not faces I've ever seen before, but Tobias has new clients all the time, yet there's something about these guys that screams *off* to me. I push that feeling down even as I feel one particular pair of eyes studying me a little too hard.

The two men at the front are graying, mid to late fifties I would assume, with lines appearing on their faces, around their eyes and mouth. One is short, rotund. There are burst capillaries at the end of his nose and his eyes are so bloodshot and tired looking, the other however appears healthier, handsome even with his clean-shaven face and styled gray hair, but the last guy, he was young, maybe mid-thirties if I was to guess. His hair is black, cropped short and groomed. A handsome face, if not a little cruel, and he wears a thick pair of black rimmed glasses. His suit is pristine, fitting him like a glove and as he shifts, bending his arms to place his hands in his pockets, the jacket of his suit lifts, just enough that I see what he has concealed underneath. A gun.

No, that can't be right. I'm just seeing things. My paranoia is winning, and I shake my head, but I can't stop glancing back at his hip, as if I can see

through the material of his clothes. He catches me watching and quirks a brow. I snap my eyes away and spring into action, “right this way.”

The shorter of the two older men eyes me slowly, following my body. I shove away the cringe. Too many men have gawked at me over the years working here, and I’ve had to learn to deal with it.

They follow me down the hall to the meeting room I had set up for them and show them inside, “Mr Franco will be—”

“Clayton, Derek,” Tobias’ voice overpowers mine, “How was the trip?”

The shorter man answers, “Long.” His accent is American, southern by the sounds of it. Neither of the other two say anything as Tobias ushers them into the room but the young one glances back over his shoulder, cocks a brow and smirks right before the door closes.

I hurry back to my desk, my stomach churning. It wasn’t a gun. It couldn’t be.

In my hurry into the office and the preparation for the meeting, I hadn’t noticed the presence of IT engineers scattered around the office. Their machines beep as they move through the space, checking walls and floors though for what, I had no idea.

I ignore them all.

“Get a grip, Eleanor,” I mumble, turning my laptop on and loading up my emails. As the loading circle swirls around and around on the screen, my mind drifts back to last night, at Kingston moving over me, sweat glistening on his skin, tattoos rippling. I hear his low growl in my ear, *scream for me, shatter for me.*

Desire, hot and heavy has me clamping my thighs together.

I am not okay.

*Not okay!*

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

# Kingston

I park the car at the curb and cross the street, staring up at the illuminated window. I can see her shadow pacing on the other side of the curtain. I press her buzzer even though I have had a key made to let myself in.

Too far? Probably.

There isn't much I couldn't do in this city. I'm sure if she understood the full extent, she'd change her name and move countries.

She doesn't use the call function, instead she buzzes me in. I take the stairs slowly and when I get to her floor, her door is already open for me. I find her in the kitchen, two bottles of wine on the table, one empty, the other halfway there. She sits on the chair, the stemless wineglass dangling from her fingers as she looks up at me from beneath her lashes. Her lids are hooded, but she doesn't appear drunk, at least not yet.

I snatch the glass from her hand and then pour the glass and the rest of the bottle down the drain.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing!?" She screeches.

"I need you wholly present," I seethe, "that means no more alcohol."

"You could have just put the lid on," she huffs, crossing her arms.



I take her in then, the tight leggings covering her legs and the oversized sweater concealing her curves from me. Her hair is wet and in a messy bun atop her head. So very normal. My complete opposite. Innocent. I'm sure she could live a normal happy life if I left right now, if I forgot she existed and she me, but I wasn't prepared to take my claws from her.

There was something about Eleanor Locke, something that has buried itself under my skin. She was becoming somewhat of an addiction and that was only after a few days, what could happen if I had her with me for a prolonged period of time?

I'd ruin her.

This obsession, it would destroy her. Tear her apart and blacken her soul. What kind of man did it make me that even knowing that, I still wasn't willing to let her go?

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Well, I was enjoying a glass of wine and my own company, but you just had to show up and ruin it, didn't you?"

"You wound me," I mock, "Does someone need to let off a little steam?"

I know I did.

"Fuck you."

"We've done that, I wouldn't mind reliving the experience."

Her eyes narrow and the muscles in her jaw jump as she grinds her teeth, "Say your piece and be done with it."

"Do you truly believe it would be that easy?" I cross the room, stopping across the table from her where I then plant my hands, and lean over. I'm close enough to smell the fresh scent of her shampoo and the moisturizer on her skin. Close enough to notice the freckles on her nose and cheeks. She wets her lips and leans further away.

There would be no escaping me.

She tries to jump up and move away but I'm quicker, I'm around the table and grabbing her by the arms, pinning her to the chair before she can fully lift herself from it, "We had a bargain, there's no backing out now, Eleanor, I own you."

She turns her head, breaking my stare. I pinch her chin, forcing her to look at me, "We can do this all night, love, it's down to you. If you want to continue acting like a brat, I'll happily wait. Perhaps we can teach you a lesson in the meantime."

Her nostrils flare, "Just get it over with, Kingston."

Before I do, I let her go, heading across the room to make coffee. She sits stiffly in the chair, keeping her eyes forward, never once looking over to me where I hover behind her. When the coffee is made, I take the seat next to her and turn to face her. She doesn't offer the same, so I force it, grabbing her chair to spin it, the legs grinding on the floor, the noise of it loud and violent in the quiet of the room.

"You're a fucking animal." She hisses.

"Get used to it."

This side of her, this fiery temper, it was almost as good as the innocence, almost as sweet.

I nudge the coffee towards her and hold my own in my hands, "Your boss, Tobias, we have already established he's not who he says he is."

A barely there nod.

"He and his son belong to an organization, one not listed on any website or in any books. They thrive on blood and money. Their main source of income is the sale of women. Girls."

Eleanor pales.

“They have Tate.” She whispers.

“It is likely, but keep listening.”

It didn't matter what I told her about the Syndicate, it wasn't me I was incriminating. If she chose to leak it all, none of it would fall on my head, but I doubted it would do much to them either, and she would be silenced just as quickly as the news was extinguished.

“The Syndicate are bigger than just Tobias, there are three men in charge, they headhunt and take in powerful people across the world, I'm talking cops, politicians, CEOs. They corrupt and bribe their way in until these people live and breathe the Syndicate. More girls are going missing each day.”

“Why do you care?”

My growl is the only warning I give, “Someone close to me was hurt by them. I would have my revenge.”

She scoffs, “of course it's revenge. You can't just let it go.”

“Why would I let it go?” I say calmly, “When plenty more girls continue to suffer?”

“Don't pretend to care, Kingston when we all know you don't.” she glares at me, “Who's the someone? Your wife? Girlfriend?”

I don't rise to the bait.

“I want to end it,” I tell her truthfully, “nothing I will do or can do will ever take away this particular disease, but I can take out the biggest player, let the authorities deal with the rest.”

“So *where* do I play in exactly!?”

“You have access to Tobias' building, his office, his schedules, I need more information about the other two people involved.”

“You’ll kill him? Them?”

“Yes.”

She swallows, “*what* are you, exactly?”

“What and who I am is irrelevant.”

“Tobias wouldn’t just leave that kind of information lying around.”

“You’ll be surprised what men with that much power will do. They think themselves undefeatable. Gods. Kings. They’ll likely hide their shit in plain sight, disguising it as one thing but it’s something else entirely. The Syndicate are old, and were raised on old money. From what I have learned, the three in charge are heirs, the *throne* if you will, passed down from generation to generation.”

She chews at her lip, staring down into the dark liquid of her coffee as if the drink holds all the answers.

“I don’t know how I’m supposed to do this.”

“You’ll figure it out,” I swallow, bile rising to my throat as I say the next sentence, “my help in rescuing your friend depends on it.”

Her head snaps up and anger flares. “You make me—”

Her words are cut off as my phone rings loudly. I pull it from my pocket seeing Ace’s name on the screen.

“Yeah.” I answer.

“We have a problem.”

I glance at Eleanor and stand from the table, heading out towards the hall, I close the door.

“What is it?”

“We’ve lost the feed for the building, all cameras are down.”

“What the fuck do you mean, all cameras are down!?”

“I mean,” Ace growls, “That someone knew where I planted the bugs and disabled them!”

My eyes lift to the closed door as if to see the woman waiting within.

“How long until they’re back up!?”

Ace is silent for a moment, “the IT guys are on it but no ETA at the moment. How did they figure it out?”

“I’m about to find out.”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Kingston opens the door so roughly it smashes against the wall, knocking off the pictures hanging there. The frames hit the floor, smashing into pieces.

I'm instantly on alert, up from the table and keeping my body firmly planted on the other side so it stays between us. His face is full of rage, but it's a cold kind of anger, like his face shows no sign of the emotion but his eyes, oh his eyes are burning hotter than the sun as he glares at me.

“What did you do!?”

“Excuse me?”

“Did you tell Tobias about me?”

“What's there to tell, I don't fucking know anything!”

“Did you tell him who I really am?”

My head snaps back, “why would I do that?”

“Oh, I don't know,” he casually walks towards me, “your idea of revenge for what I've done.”

“So, you admit what you're doing with me is wrong?” That was the wrong thing to say.

His mouth twists up into a cruel smile, his eyes dancing down my body, “Wrong?” He asks, “so you’re telling me the way you screamed for me was wrong? How I made you come so fucking hard you saw stars? You’re saying what your body *craves* is wrong?”

I grit my teeth.

He rounds the table and I move with him, further away.

“Have you not learned your lesson by now?” He mocks, “I’ll chase you, Eleanor and when I catch you, I’ll fuck you so fucking hard the only thing you’ll remember is my name as you scream it over, and over again.”

“You won’t ever touch me again,” I wish that were true.

He tuts as if scolding a child, “Aren’t you just a little liar.”

“Fuck you, Kingston! Get out of my house!”

“Did you tell them!?” He growls.

He keeps stalking forward and I keep edging back, eyes never leaving his. “No.”

“Well, you’ve just proved you’re a liar so why should I believe you?”

“I didn’t fucking tell Tobias anything,” I scream at him. I’ll just leave, get out and let him do whatever the fuck he wants to my apartment, he wants to believe something that isn’t true then fine, but I won’t stand around and let him accuse me of shit that I haven’t done.

I could tell Tobias, I could tell Garrett, let them deal with him but the thought cuts off just as quickly as it comes. I didn’t want them to know who he was, I didn’t want to purposely hurt Kingston even though I had every right to.

Kingston lurches forward and I back up too quickly, straight onto the pile of glass. Pain lances through my foot, hot blood instantly gushing from

my heel, and I cry out, stumbling to the side. A huge shard of glass has embedded into my foot, the clear shard stained red and dripping blood.

Kingston forgotten, I drop to the floor, cradling my foot, fingers gently pinching the glass. The pain intensifies and I let go, falling back against the wall.

“Eleanor,” Kingston is suddenly in front of me, crouching. “Shit.”

“Don’t fucking touch me!” Tears prick my eyes and then spill over, running down my cheeks.

I snatch my foot away when he tries to grab it, and the pain makes me scream.

“Stay fucking still, Eleanor!”

He grabs my foot, holding it firmly but not roughly as he dips his head to inspect where the glass has stabbed me.

“Just take it out!”

“It’s not just this piece,” he murmurs, “But it’s not too deep, you won’t need stitches.”

“Kingston, just take it out, it hurts.”

His eyes flash up to mine and then he tracks the tears down my face and his jaw goes tight, “Come on,” he lays my foot down and comes towards me, “Let’s get you over to the table and I’ll get it out.”

I let him help me up and guide me to the table, his warm body pressed to my side, arm wrapped around me. I slump into a chair and lean back, letting him grab towels and hot water, “Do you have a first aid kit?”

“Bathroom,” I tell him.

He disappears for a minute and comes back holding the green box.



We don't speak while he lays the supplies on the table and then gently lifts my foot, placing it up on the top, the towel underneath.

"There's about six or seven shards in your foot as well as this big piece, I'll take out that one first and then the little bits, okay?" His voice is gentle, so much more gentle than I've ever heard him speak before. Almost normal.

I watch his tattooed hands work, his long fingers picking out tools and wipes from the kit as well as bandages.

I watch him as he examines the area, trying to figure out the best way to remove it, but that's lost on me as I take in his face. All the harsh lines, the rough edges, the mess of dark hair on top of his head, concealing the tattoo down the side of his skull. The nose ring in his nostril glints in the light and the piercing just reminds me it's not the only thing that he has done. His tongue, holy shit his tongue and that cock piercing, now that was something else.

I didn't get to look properly at all the tattoos that paint his body like a canvas though now I'd like to. I'd like to explore each one, inspect the details, trace the outlines. The thoughts are banished from my head the moment he yanks the piece of glass from my foot. Hot blood runs rivers down the sole of my foot, dripping onto the towel.

I hiss through my teeth, throwing my head back as the pain makes more tears run from my eyes. "Fuck!"

His deep chuckle shouldn't be a balm. It should not!

"That was the hard part," he says soothingly.

"It's all hard!" I snap back.

His eyes flash up to mine, and he quirks a brow.

"Oh, shut up." I hiccup, crossing my arms.

I wince and flinch as he gets the tweezers out and begins to pull the smaller shards of glass from the sole of my foot. He drops them onto the cloth he has aside with the larger piece, and they ting against it as he drops them.

“That’s the glass done,” he murmurs, picking up an alcohol wipe to clean me up, and then he wraps my foot in a bandage and straightens. We stare at each other for a long moment, the air around us crackling with tension.

“Did you tell Tobias about me?” He asks with a sigh.

“No, Kingston, I didn’t.”

He narrows his eyes and then stands abruptly, going over to the sink to wash his hands. He faces me afterwards, “I had bugs planted in the office, they were linked to the security feed which gave me access to all cameras, including any hidden ones in that building. Tobias found them and disabled them.”

My mouth forms an O, “We had IT in today, they were scanning the walls and floors, I didn’t think anything of it.”

Kingston nods, “Regardless of how, I no longer have access to that building from the outside until I get those bugs back up and running, you’ll be on your own for a while.”

“I don’t even know what I’m looking for Kingston,” I sigh, “I don’t think I can help.”

“You can, and you will,” He steps forward and plants his hands on the table, leaning towards me. His face hovers in front of mine, so close we share breath, “There’s no getting rid of me Eleanor, find that information, we find Tate and maybe after this is done, I’ll consider letting you live your life.”

“And if I can’t?”

“Then I guess Tate will stay missing and girls will continue to suffer.”

“That’s not fair,” I snap, “I never asked to be a part of this.”

“Well now you are, and while we’re at it, I want you in training, you need to learn to defend yourself better.”

“So, you’re in control of me now!?”

“Get some rest, Eleanor.”

He doesn’t give me a chance to respond as he stalks towards the door. Right before he closes it, he looks over his shoulder, eyeing me where I stay seated at the table, “Oh and Eleanor, if you betray me, it won’t just be Tate’s life you have to worry about but your own too.” He slams the door on his way out.

Fear has my heart pumping, but I scowl in his direction as if I can see him behind the closed door, but after a few minutes I realize he isn’t coming back, and I have a mess to clean up.

I wince when I put my injured foot down and limp to grab my dustpan and brush. I doubt I’ll sleep much tonight, just like every other night since Tate went missing.

I didn’t know how my life became so confusing and busy, and I didn’t know when it was going to end but the more time I spend with Kingston, the higher the chance of being broken by the end of it.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

# Kingston

“I want them up and running as soon as physically possible,” I growl, anger buzzing in my veins. I tell myself it’s because I need eyes on Tobias and any visitors that go into that building, but I know the real reason. Eleanor. On her own without any backup or support, no eyes on her.

My hand tightens around the glass of bourbon in my hand. Fuck.

I leave the guys in the house we use as a base, a large mansion with several rooms and garages on the outskirts of the city. It’s where all my security is, where we meet and talk through any decisions about the city, where we plan attacks and revenge.

Ace follows me out, close to my heels, “Your little pet have anything to do with this?” Ace asks.

“She’s not my pet,” I growl, “She’s an inside source to the company.”

“Who you’re fucking.” Ace presses.

“Fuck off, Abel.”

“Well did she have anything to do with it?” He continues.

“No, she didn’t.”

“Are you sure?”

I stop dead, back straightening, “Are you questioning me, Ace? Do you not trust my judgement?”

“Well, it was never part of the plan to bring in an outsider, this shit is sensitive.”

My fist hits the side of his face with a deafening crack. He stumbles back, hand going to his mouth to touch the blood trickling out the side.

“This is my fucking city! I fucking decide how it is done! I own you!” I bellow, “Don’t fucking question me!”

“King, mate,” Ace straightens his back but doesn’t cower. That was why he was my second, the only other fucking person, other than Isobel, I truly trusted. Micha was a good man, a loyal one, and he was earning his spot in my inner circle, but this fucker has been here since the beginning and will likely be here until the end. “We’re not fighting about this. I am just making sure you’re not looking through rose-tinted glasses. Outsiders don’t work for us, we know this.”

“We trusted the Silver’s enough,” I retort even if he was right. But Eleanor, she was different. I didn’t trust her, but I also didn’t think she’d stab me in the back either.

It was a tough call.

“Just watch your back,” he wipes the blood from his lip with the pad of his thumb, “she seems like a nice girl, but I wouldn’t want you to end up with a knife between your shoulder blades.”

“I can handle Eleanor.”

He smirks, “Can you?”

—

I sit at the desk in the office in my penthouse, what footage we did manage to get before the bugs went dark playing on the screen. The files from Alexander Silver lay open across the desk in front of me, the images

of Tobias and his son at the top of the page. All the reports on the Syndicate and its members mention two other entities, two other men who control the whole thing. It looks like a mistake that Tobias had been leaked but I wasn't going to complain. After receiving the information, nothing at all shocked me. Not the images of the politician beating a woman, not the mayor with his head buried between the legs of a girl or the pictures of the countless murders or the girls being kidnapped, tied up and gagged.

But this missing piece, this black area where these two heads were supposed to be was bugging me. Who were they?

I needed that information, I needed it to enact the full scale of my plan on taking these fuckers out quickly, and effectively.

I had been lucky for the most part that they hadn't come for me yet, but even if they did, I'd be ready for them. I knew they had men in the city and across the country and Europe, and I'll deal with that after I've dealt with them.

Wren had pulled through on her end, freeing the girls over in the US. The rest was on me.

I massage my temples, the footage showing me nothing but a normal every day working environment. Tobias filters in and out of meetings all day, Eleanor trailing him, bringing him coffee or his lunch, scheduling his appointments and that makes my fucking blood boil.

Garrett does little to nothing other than sit in his office and stalk down the halls.

I had everything on these two, their address, accounts, I had access to everything.

I needed fucking more.

I slam the lid of the laptop down and stalk from the office, leaving everything on the desk. I needed an out. I needed fucking something. Without thinking about it, I grab the keys to the Mercedes and head across

the city, taking the roads blindly before I'm pulling up to that familiar building. I had been here only a few hours ago, but it's now the early hours of the morning, the majority of the city sleeps and will remain that way for the next couple of hours. Her lights are off, curtains drawn, but it doesn't stop me as I leave the car and let myself in, taking the stairs up quietly. I hesitate outside her front door, but continue on. She's right there.

A body to forget everything with, warmth and innocence wrapped in a sinfully delicious body ready for the taking.

The click of the door closing behind me echoes through the dark living room. My shoes tap against the hard floor, and I push open her door, finding her curled in the middle of her big double bed, half buried under the sheets.

What stops me half-way to the bed is the clothes she's wearing, no, not clothes, shirt. She wears nothing but the shirt. White. Creased and clearly worn.

My shirt.

I need to go. But I don't.

This is a mistake.

But I still don't leave.

She stirs, rolling onto her back, her dark hair sprawled across the pillow, lashes fluttering against the apples of her cheeks. Her bandaged foot rests on top of the blankets.

Exhaustion weighs heavily on me, confusion warring with desire, anger with lust. I needed to leave.

Eleanor rolls and her eyes open, half lidded and drowsy, but she finds me as if she knew exactly where I was. Seeing me doesn't scare her, instead she sighs heavily and rolls onto her side, watching me where I stand.

"How did you get in?" She mumbles.

I don't answer.

“What do you want Kingston? I'm tired.”

*Leave now.* The warning rings clear, yet my legs carry me forward. She watches me the entire time, and without hesitation, she lifts the blankets on the other side of the bed, moving over slightly to allow room for another person. To allow room for me.

I swallow, my stomach suddenly knotting.

I haven't done this, slept in a woman's bed, ever, not even after sex. It's intimate and implies a certain level of trust. Neither of those things are what's between Eleanor and me. But still, she invites me into her bed.

And for some fucked up reason I refuse to acknowledge, I strip out of my clothes, leaving me in just a pair of boxers and climb inside. She throws the duvet back over me and stays on her side, her back to me and the smell of me mixed with her own scent wafting past my nose.

It was a heady, intoxicating mix, one that fogs my senses and makes all thoughts other than Eleanor leave my head. She's in my skin, buried so far under the surface and I have no idea how she got there or how it came to be.

Her back rests against my arm, her breathing evening out as sleep once again claims her and surprisingly, despite the frustration and the anger, two things that usually leave sleep a foreign concept, my eyes grow heavy, and I fall asleep to the soft music of her breathing and the scent of her in my nose.



## CHAPTER TWENTY

# *Eleanor*

I thought it was a dream, or nightmare, I suppose, where the star of the show turned up in the middle of the night. Not to maim or hurt, but to seek comfort and solace. I thought it was a hallucination brought on by the lingering scent of his aftershave still clinging to the fibers of his shirt I stupidly chose to wear to bed.

But it wasn't a dream because that's a hard body behind mine, that's warm breath on my neck and a solid arm banded across me, holding me firmly against a chest made of solid, male muscle.

I don't recall going out last night so the possibility of the person behind me being a random hook up is pretty slim. The thought is completely eradicated as my eyes drift down to the arm holding me in a way I've never been held, to find it covered in dark ink, the swirls and patterns etched into his skin, all the way down to his long fingers.

Slowly as to not wake him, I turn onto my back, keeping it steady. He doesn't stir and while the sun has yet to rise, there is still enough dim light shining through the window that I can make out his sleeping face, as shrouded in shadow as it is. He looks different like this, not as cruel or wicked but merely a man. He looks peaceful, all those sharp edges softened by sleep.

I slowly lift a hand, careful to keep my movements gentle, so I can trace the curve of his face, from his temple, all the way down to his cheekbone and sharp as marble jaw, through the scruff that scratches against my

fingertips. I'm almost at his mouth when his hand darts up and captures my wrist.

It's a matter of seconds before I'm pinned to the bed, the movements so sudden and jerky that the pillows are knocked to the floor and my hands are thrust against the mattress, held down by his hands. His icy blue eyes boring down into mine.

"What are you doing?" His voice is raspy from sleep.

"Touching you."

His fingers flex, and a frown tugs on his brows, "Why was there a knife beneath your pillow, Eleanor?"

"For protection," I admit, my voice a whisper.

"From whom?"

"You."

My breath rattles from my chest, and that delicious warmth that appears only when he is around, rushes through me as I feel all his hardness against all my soft.

*Stop*, I tell myself, *not again*.

But that little voice of reason is snuffed out as my body demands what it needs, and my hips grind against the rigid length of him pressing against that sensitive flesh.

His eyes shutter closed as I grind against him and his own hips move, pushing into me harder. My thighs fall apart further, allowing him in closer. I wanted him closer, I wanted him in me.

"Eleanor," he cautions, but he doesn't stop as if he's just as helpless as me, caught in this riptide between us, drawing us and snapping us apart all the same. He keeps that grinding rhythm going, rubbing at my clit through

the thin material of my panties. I'm wet and hot and so fucking turned on it *hurts*.

I push onto my elbows and press my mouth to his, his lips pillowy and soft, much softer than a man of his harshness should be. He sucks in a sharp breath.

"Don't." Kingston warns.

"Don't what?" My lips are an inch from his, the wetness of his mouth still against my lips.

"Kiss me."

"Why not?"

"Because if you kiss me, Eleanor, I'm not going to be able to stop. If you kiss me, I'm going to kiss you back, and then I'm going to fuck you."

My breathing halts, my heart speeding.

"If you kiss me, Eleanor, I'm going to *keep* fucking you and claiming you, and I'll ruin you, love. I will destroy you."

My eyes bounce between his, mind processing his warning, but then they jump down to his mouth, his jaw tight, teeth gritted together and restraint barely holding on by a thread.

My eyes still on him, planted firmly, so I can judge his reaction, I lean forward and kiss the side of that delectable mouth. He growls.

I kiss the other side. Teasing, chaste kisses.

But not chaste enough. Kingston snaps.

He pushes me down into the mattress and completely shatters me with his kiss, tearing me apart and putting me back together all in the same breath. He kisses me until all I can see and think and breathe is him.

His tongue sweeps through my mouth, his teeth nip at my lip while his hips push against me hard enough that a bite of pain shoots through my body.

When he pulls away roughly, he grabs the shirt and rips, tearing apart the buttons that hold it closed and the buttons scatter, pinging off the floor and walls and then his mouth is on my breast, nipple caught between his teeth. My spine arches, giving him more, giving him *everything*. I allow him to take it all. His hand dives into my underwear, fingers pushing through my folds, circling and pinching until I'm panting and sweating, putty beneath his hands.

I'm so fucking wet I feel it soaking through my panties.

He leaves my breast with a wet sucking noise, and lifts onto his knees, grabbing at my underwear to peel it off. He's surprisingly gentle as he unhooks it from my injured foot, but then he's staring at my pussy, tongue wetting his lips and pupils devouring the icy blue of his eyes like a man starved.

"Look at this dripping cunt," he rasps, "all for me."

My breath comes in heavy, desperate pants, and when he grips my hips and urges me to turn I do so willingly. With a hand beneath my body, fingers spread over the intimate top section of my pelvic area, he lifts, shoving my face down into the mattress with zero gentleness, leaving my ass in the air.

I feel vulnerable and exposed, but then his hand glides down my spine and his hands squeeze my arse cheeks before he spreads them to see.

"Kingston," I'm not sure if it's a moan or a hesitation.

"Shh," he murmurs, running a digit over the slick entrance before abruptly thrusting it inside. I stifle my groan with the mattress, teeth grabbing the fabric.

He's barely removed it before the thick head of his cock is pushing into me, the piercing rubbing against the soft tissue on the inside. He's slow, purposeful, as he only fucks me with the first few inches of his dick. I try to push back, try to get more just to satisfy this deep-rooted *need*, but he keeps me at bay, holding my hips still.

"Just fuck me," I demand.

"Such a greedy girl, aren't you, love?" He chuckles, "So desperate for my cock. Will you beg for it like you did before?"

"Yes!" I reply shamelessly, "*please.*"

He slams forward so hard my head hits the headboard, but he doesn't care nor does he stop as he pounds forward again, and again, his hips slamming against my arse so hard I feel the vibrations of it in my bones.

"Fuck you feel so good, baby," he rasps, the sentiment clearly slipping out in the heat of the moment, "So fucking good, so tight on my dick, love, it's like your pussy was made for me."

My fingers curl into the sheet, my teeth still gripping the thin cotton between them to stop the scream from bubbling up my throat.

He's rough, and harsh, and it's so good, I can hardly think straight.

When his hand suddenly strikes me across the backside, the biting sting mixed with the hard, punishing thrusts of his hips I'm not able to stifle it anymore.

"Kingston!" I scream.

"That's right, love, scream my name!" He praises, "Scream it until it's the last one you remember, until it's the only thing you remember."

He grips my hips and tugs me back to meet his every blow and I come apart. Stars burst behind my eyes, and I moan loudly through my orgasm, my pussy clenching and convulsing, and yet he continues through it,

prolonging the exquisite torture until his own release stills his hips, and he bellows my name.

I still hear the echo of it as he collapses to the side of me, pulling me down with him and for long, quiet moments we lay there in the early morning light, as dim as it is, with skin drenched in sweat and breaths coming in hard, fast huffs.

The peaceful truce between us however can only last so long.

“Eleanor,” King breaks that silence first.

My head tilts to look at him. To look at the man that is a literal nightmare made flesh, that holds a room and commands attention, everything I could possibly hate.

His eyes meet mine, satiated but heavy, like the weight of a thousand worlds rests there, and maybe it does. God knows I knew he was into a darker kind of business, one that obviously dealt in blood and money, and I had managed to ignore that for now, but it was there. That threat. The knowledge that was not knowledge at all, but an incline that this man had no problem hurting people. He vowed to kill Tobias and everyone surrounding him for their crimes, and I couldn't blame him for that, but I was also a woman who believed in justice.

*It was justice.*

He doesn't continue with what he was going to say, seeing clearly in my eyes my response. I didn't want to know, I didn't want to be involved further than what I needed to be, and that settled everything else.

After all this was done, after Tobias was gone and whatever vendetta Kingston held was settled, him and I would be nothing but a memory.

And that was okay.

*That was okay.*

We couldn't be anything more than this anyway, not with his life like it is and mine the complete opposite and I tell myself that's how it should be, how I *want* it to be but a small part of me, a part of me that screams the loudest, told me that was a lie.

He terrified me.

I wouldn't entertain the idea that him suddenly not being there terrified me more.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

# Kingston

“I need to shower,” Eleanor abruptly climbs from the bed, the shirt still hanging from her frame, covering all the parts my eyes wish to devour. She walks with a limp thanks to the injury to her foot, but she doesn’t look back as she exits, pulling the door to as she goes. I hear the bathroom door click closed and then lock before the sound of the shower running fills the apartment.

The sun has barely risen above the horizon, bathing the city in a dull orange glow.

I couldn’t say fucking Eleanor, sleeping with her like we just did was a mistake, but it wasn’t the norm for me. Having her there, taking the comfort she offered, the tests and temptations, it was something I avoided.

Weaknesses were a death sentence. Not for you. But for them.

They were used and abused, manipulated and tricked. They could be your downfall

And that’s what *she* was becoming.

I couldn’t get my head around it.

I’d seen men more powerful than me get taken down because of the women they loved. I didn’t love Eleanor, but it could get there. And then she would be taken, like all good things in this life.



They get ripped from you as punishment for all the misdeeds. Why should a sinner get a saint after all?

It was some fucked up divine justice that it was always the light that was snuffed out rather than the darkness. That it was always the good that died so the evil could suffer the consequences.

It seemed odd to me that someone who I had known for such a little time could become so important. It was something I'd never admit for fear of the retribution, but I was sure I'd rip the world apart just to have her in my bed.

Sleeping with her again, especially like this, intimate in this way, where it was just the two of us, breathing the same air, reveling in each other's bodies until the only thing we knew was the other person, until we couldn't figure out where one ended and the other began, it was something I never should have done.

I knew it when I arrived here early this morning, when the city still slept, I knew it when I climbed into her bed chasing her comfort, and the way she chased away the impending darkness.

But that was what she was. The good to the evil, the light to the dark. This sweet, innocent girl, who had been thrown into a world of corruption and ruin because of me. Her friend may have been taken, and it was likely she'd never be seen again, but I had given her a hope that didn't exist.

My soul was tainted, but this seemed to stain it black.

I had no hope that Tate was still alive, no hope of ever finding her, instead I used my selfish greed to get her where I wanted her. I used her weaknesses to my advantage.

I laugh to myself in the quiet of the bedroom. How the tables have turned now that she was becoming a weakness that would likely destroy me.

It had to be a punishment, to give me something this good.

I knew Eleanor could fall in love with me, even after all is said and done, even with her fear and hatred of me, she would love me.

And I would kill her.

I throw the duvet off and pull on my clothes, the shower still running.

At least she was smart enough to know that what she was doing would be her ruin. At least she understood that I was the bad guy, not pretending that I was anything other than that, despite my promise to help her bring back her friend.

She tried, she really did, to push me away, but the body wants what it wants, and hers wants me. The opposite to her in every single way.

I needed to not care. She wasn't part of the plan, but she could get the information I needed, and I had to focus on that. For my sister. For this family and crew.

I already had a weakness that was used against me, what made me the man I was today, and I couldn't afford to have another, no matter how much I craved her touch, and smell, and presence.

I don't say goodbye as I slip from her apartment, I only leave a note that will surely have her hackles rising after what we did this morning.

Let her think I was using her body to get what I needed, let her think that the only thing important to me was this task. It was better this way.

And just like that, only a few blocks away, and the knowledge that I was destroying what *could* have been sends me right back over the edge.

Soon I would hit an abyss so deep there was no going back.

The mind can only take so much. Habits become ritual, rules become religion.

Some day, I'd become the very thing I hated, I'd become the monster my uncle was, and I hoped that when that day came, the people around me

would do the right thing and put a bullet between my eyes.

Love was a weakness and a salvation.

But life was no fairy-tale and there would be no happily ever after.

So, I'll continue to wreck and ruin because it's the only thing I know how to do. It's the only thing I am good at. Chaos was my foundation and revenge my path. Tobias and his shithead son were only the start, the two other heads as well, and then once they're gone it'll be a steady sweep to rid the world of the disease that is the Syndicate.

I had built this city and my crew with violence and no mercy, when people hear my name it's not a threat but a promise. They fear me, they fear my reach, and they know I will not hesitate to cross those lines others are not so willing to do.

It's probably why the Syndicate have never even so much as tried to take me down. They may be big, but I was bigger and meaner. They had no idea who they were fucking with when they had my sister, when they tortured and abused her for their own sick pleasure. I had used my rage to fuel my rise to the top, allowed it to fester and spill over, making me the man I was today.

With me was no place for a woman like Eleanor.

But it didn't stop me yearning for it. The further I get away from her apartment and her, the more I feel a cold hand squeezing my chest, it's claws in deep. This anger, this hatred, it had been my friend for as long as I can remember but with her, it was only warmth that I knew.

I slam my fists against the steering wheel, "Fuck!"

How was I to stay away when I craved her this fucking badly? How was I to let her go when everything inside my body screamed to be at her side. To have her at my side, in my house, my bed, protected and safe.

I've tried hard *not* to think about what would happen to Eleanor if Tobias were to ever find out she was working for me. She wouldn't last a second if him or the Syndicate grabbed her and forced her into the depraved world of sex and violence.

I somehow manage to get through half my day without thinking too hard on it, but now I'm back at the compound, my IT guys working to fix the bugs. I just needed eyes on her. At least, if I had eyes on her and Tobias or his son found out what she was doing, I'd have a heads-up. I'd be able to do something. I think back to the note I left her this morning, the lies I spilled to ensure she never wanted another thing to do with me, other than get her friend back.

I'd let her believe those lies, even if those very lies would eat me alive.

Isobel sits on the couch in the compound working on the laptop, filtering through articles and reports on the Syndicate. I knew what she was doing, what she had done countless times since we got that drive from Silver.

I don't know how many times she has to do it in order to convince herself that the man she was looking for is no more than a ghost.

I was sure she didn't care what happened to the Syndicate, I think she was more interested in getting her hands on this guy. The man that both saved and shattered her all the same.

But there was a reason he was known as the Ghost, he wouldn't be found unless he wanted you to find him. And if he wants you to find him, it would be for two reasons only, payment or death.

He would be a strong ally, but he's deep within the Syndicate, and loyal to the men that pay him a handsome wage. Blood money was still money, and at the end of the day, money made the world go round.

Her eyes jump up to meet mine. A soulless stare. She was getting increasingly more on edge every day we didn't end this, and I didn't blame her.

Revenge is all she's known since she was freed, it's the only thing that has motivated her enough to keep going. Maybe that's another reason I've let it go on for this long because once it's said and done, what will happen to her?

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

*Eleanor*

*Thanks for the fuck.*

*Find me when you get some information & Eleanor, if you get caught don't expect me to come looking. You're on your own.*

K

“Asshole,” I mutter even if the words sting. Sleeping with him again was a mistake and it was a mistake I’d keep making, because clearly, I’m a sucker for punishment.

*You can't help the draw of good dick*, Tate would say, usually as an excuse she told herself when she kept going back to her toxic exes. *Why is it the ones that are best in bed are always the crazy ones?* She joked one night over a tub of icecream and red rimmed eyes from an hour session of crying. She always did have bad taste in men. I guess that’s rubbed off on me some now too.

Thinking of her sends a twinge of pain into my chest, my heart squeezing. God, I missed her.

She was strong, a fighter, she was – no – *is* going to be okay. I just needed to get this done for Kingston, and he’ll help me bring her back. Even if I had no idea what the hell I was looking for.

I get dressed for the day, ignoring all the delicious aches and pains this morning’s round of activity has left me with. I swear I still feel his mouth

and his hands and his body, still smell him on my skin even after showering.

I tug a pair of suit trousers on my legs and pair it with a tight light blue sweater and my beige flats, leaving my hair down. I don't attempt to make the bed, I'll change it later anyway and this way the smell of him won't get stronger. I throw the note in the bin and leave, trying to think up plans on how I was going to get what Kingston wanted.

I arrive at the office before most, there are a few staff loitering in the kitchen gossiping, and a couple already stuck into their work, but they ignore me as my shoes clip through the halls, heading towards my desk. The surrounding offices are empty, the noise from the other people muffled this far into the building and after dumping my bags in my drawer, I head towards Tobias' office. A quick glance over my shoulder tells me the coast is clear and using my keys, I unlock the office and step inside, shutting it quickly.

The wall of windows behind the giant oak desk shows me the city, Tower Bridge far off in the distance bathed in the golden ambience of the morning light. I need to make it quick, Tobias was due into the office in about twenty minutes, but I wouldn't put it passed him to arrive earlier. I start at his desk, filtering through the stack of paperwork he keeps on the right side, contracts that need to be signed mainly, but a few other bits are here, all company related with the logo at the top of the page and the standard jargon underneath.

Tobias' office didn't look like it belonged to a criminal gang leader, it was normal with bookshelves and old bottles of whiskey, certificates and awards framed and hanging on the walls. He even has a picture of him and Garrett from a few years back framed on his desk. Nothing in here tells me he's the leader of a ring of sex traffickers but then, what did I know about any of this? I'm sheltered, I have no shame in admitting that. I am good, and kind and this life, this darkness, it's a far cry from where I usually stand.

I move to the drawers but of course they're locked, so I change direction and head to the filing cabinet. King had said men like him will

hide things in plain sight, but there is nothing here. All of the clients and the names I recognize, there are no shady business transactions, no names or addresses I haven't seen before.

"Where are you hiding it?" I murmur, stepping towards the bookshelf. I'm halted mid-stride by the door opening and Tobias filling the door frame, his son a step behind him.

"Eleanor?" Tobias frowns, looking at me and then the room, scanning it, no doubt, for anything out of line.

"Tobias!" I jump, "I—" I needed an excuse. But what? Internally, I kick myself, I should have thought this up *before* I decided to come in here, in the event of something like this happening. Shit.

Garrett stares at me with narrowed eyes while Tobias cocks a brow.

"I'm sorry, I left my diary," they both know how much that diary is a bible to me, "somewhere yesterday, and I remembered coming in here with it, I thought I might have left it in here!" The lie is good, even to my ears.

"Your diary is on your desk, where it always is." Tobias says.

Shit, and that's why I didn't lie.

"No, it isn't!" I blurt.

It was, right next to the filing draws I keep on my desk, and on top of it sat my pen, my favorite pen, with the little birds on it.

*Not helpful*, I scold myself.

"It is, Eleanor," Tobias steps towards me, "are you feeling okay?"

That's genuine concern on his face, a warmth in his eyes that I have seen before, and always directed at me.

Garrett however continues to scrutinize me, though he'll never say anything in front of his dad.



I press my fingers to my forehead, “I didn’t sleep well.” Not a lie.

Tobias touches my arm, and I can’t stop the flinch it elicits. Knowing what I know and what they do, I can’t help it.

*Where’s this reaction when Kingston is around!?* That internal voice screams. He was dangerous too, if not more for what he could do to my heart!

Tobias frowns and withdraws his hand, “Go get yourself a coffee and take ten in the breakroom, you’re clearly not feeling like yourself.”

“You’re right,” I sigh. He gives me a gentle smile, and ushers me from the office. Garrett takes a step to the side, watching me as I go. I keep my hands fisted to stop them from seeing them tremble.

“Does she know something!?” I hear Garrett whisper before the door is fully closed.

Only when I know they can’t see me do I let the panic out a little. First time trying and I almost got caught. I’m not built for this, I *can’t* do this.

I rush back to my desk, my heart thundering in my chest, and a lump the size of a golf ball wedged in my throat.

I grab my phone and fire off a text, my thumbs whizzing over the screen.

**Me:** I can’t do this!

My heart skips a beat when only a minute later his name pops up on my screen with a new text message. I’d changed his name in my phone to stop the ominous *unknown* from popping up, but seeing his actual name seems almost worse.

**Kingston:** What happened?

I shouldn’t have texted him. I slump down in my chair, and cup my face in my hands. So many shouldn’ts that I keep doing. Am I just trying to self-

sabotage at this point!?

The office is filling out now, empty desks becoming occupied, the loud chatter drowning out the silence deafening me.

How could I let this happen? How could I let my life become this!?

For Tate, I tell myself, this is all for her.

A part of me hates her, and even the thought of that makes me sick. None of this is her fault, she didn't ask for this but still, a part of me hates her. I'm in this now, I have no choice. No one will help me, no one will look for her. Only me. Her family believe she's safe and are convinced with whatever Garrett is sending to them. They're her family, surely they would recognize when the messages aren't the same usual ones, surely they'll notice that she hasn't called, or face timed, when she used to do that at least once a week.

Garrett made a mistake, a big one, one he probably doesn't even realize he's done. Tate has people who *know* her and he, *he* doesn't know her like I do.

He'd never be able to match her energy or light.

I couldn't let them win. I couldn't let her be lost forever. My friend, my *only* friend, and she deserved better than this.

With a deep breath I open my laptop. My hands still shake, and my stomach still knots, but I *have* to do this.

I answer a few emails before diving into the files. Being Tobias' PA had its advantages. I have unlimited access to his calendar, his emails and phone, not to mention a lot of the files saved to the main server that most didn't see. I needed it in order to do the menial tasks he was too busy for.

I check through the calendar first, noting all the meetings both past and present. Those names pop up again, Clayton and Derek plus one. No name on that plus one. That's weird.

I open the server and type Clayton into the search bar.

A huge list of documents pop up. Clayton owns a chain of bars and restaurants across the globe, and is on the books as a client, Derek is his business partner. Scratching that, I close the files and check the calendar again, but nothing jumps out, no weird meetings or names I don't recognize. Nothing in the files is odd either.

Everything is up to standard.

Kingston might be wrong, Tobias wasn't going to leave anything out in the open like he assumed.

I believed he was who Kingston said he was, but getting that information wasn't going to be easy.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Eleanor

I'm tired, cranky and in need of a glass of wine, a book and a bath. I run a hand down my face before I pull my keys from my pocket and unlock my door, stepping in and immediately kicking off my shoes at the door, foot throbbing, before dropping my bag and coat right there. I don't even bother hanging it up.

I trudge through the apartment, the silence especially haunting with my lack of findings today, but what could I do?

"What happened?" The deep voice startles me enough that a small yelp comes out before I glare at the intruder.

"I'm getting the locks changed," I growl, shoving past where he stands in the threshold of the kitchen, knocking his shoulder with my own. He doesn't move, but he lets me pass at least.

"You know that won't keep me out, Eleanor, if I want in, I'll find a way."

"What happened to me finding you?" I pull a glass from the cupboard and the bottle of wine from the fridge, not bothering to offer one to Kingston. He's not invited to my pity party for one seeing as *he* is part of the problem.

I fill the glass to the rim with the white wine, keeping my back to him. I feel his eyes on me, burning holes right through my spine.

"What happened?" He repeats.

I take a large gulp of wine, “Nothing, Kingston. Please leave.”

“Why did you text me?”

An abrupt laugh shoots from my mouth, “Why the fuck do you care!?” I scream. Maybe this is part of the problem, the damn *sting* his leaving this morning caused, only tripled by that fucking note.

I spin on him, clutching my wine, “Get the fuck out of my apartment,” I growl, “Get the fuck out right now!”

His eyes widen, only slightly, but enough to reveal I’ve caught him off guard.

“I’m on my own, remember!” I bellow, my rage filling the spots pity just stood in, “I’m just a good fuck to keep the edge off, right?”

“Eleanor,” he holds his hands up placatingly.

Fuck that.

I down half the wine, trying to satiate the urge to throw it on him.

“You know what, *Kingston*,” I say to him, “I don’t want your help anymore. I don’t need you. I don’t want you turning up at my apartment whenever you fucking feel like it, I don’t want your threats, and your mind games.” His jaw is clamped tight, his teeth grinding, the muscle in his cheeks jumping. His eyes are full of icy blue fire, which only flares brighter as the next words leave my lips, “but most of all, Kingston, *I don’t want you.*”

I take casual steps towards him, inhaling that intoxicating scent, but for once it doesn’t put me under some sick, lust filled haze. I stop when I am inches away from him, my breasts brushing his chest, our breaths mingling, “Get. Out.” I say.

He licks his bottom lip, teeth following to scrape the soft flesh as his eyes bounce between mine, “Look at you, Eleanor, finally growing a backbone.”

“I hate you.”

“Do you, though?” He smirks, “Do you hate me because of what I can make you feel? Is it because I can fuck you like no other man can? Is it because I’ve opened your eyes to a whole world of pleasure that you’re too scared to explore?”

“No.”

“No?” He quirks a brow.

“No, Kingston, I hate you because you’re cruel, and you’re wicked. You manipulate and take without consequence. I hate you because you are everything that is wrong with this city. This fucking world.”

“Is that right, love?”

“Yes.”

He steps forward an inch, closing that gap between us, so close that his lips brush mine. I don’t back down, I can’t now. He has to take me seriously, if he doesn’t, I’ll never have a normal life again.

Normal.

*Normal.*

Everything was always normal.

Mundane and routine.

I stop that train of thought immediately. I will not hesitate.

For a few long seconds we stand staring at each other. I can feel that anger ebbing, but I clutch at it, holding onto it with an iron fist.

“So, my note upset you?” He asks gently.

“Yes, Kingston,” I admit, my words biting, “I’m not going to be used and discarded like a fucking toy. I’ll do it on my own.”

“You’ll get yourself killed,” he replies.

“I’m on my own either way.”

The fire in his eyes dulls, “You’re not.”

“Don’t Kingston,” I warn, “just...leave.”

“I’m not leaving.”

Tears prick my eyes which makes everything ten times worse. Anger gives way to frustration, and without thinking about what I’m doing, my arms shoot forward and I shove him, I shove him as hard as I possibly can, using every ounce of strength I own.

He stumbles back but I follow. “Get out!” I plead, my fists thump into his chest, “Get out!”

He lets me pound into his chest.

“Leave!” I growl.

My hands slam against his pecs but this time, he doesn’t let me do it again. He captures my wrists and yanks me forward, hard. I slam against his chest and then his mouth descends onto mine, his tongue diving between my lips. Fire erupts in my veins.

My fingers curl into his shirt, in a push or a pull, I have no idea. My back hits the wall, his chest pinning me there as his mouth continues to explore and claim mine.

“I’m not leaving,” he whispers against my lips, “I’m not leaving.”

I don’t say anything as I drag him back to me, planting my lips against his, feeling every hard inch of him against every soft part of me. He cradles

my face, his tongue bar clipping against my teeth as his kiss turns hungrier with every second.

That's how it was, hot and angry, like wildfire and a crushing tidal wave. I couldn't take it, I couldn't be without it either, not now I'd had it. He was right, I hated him for what he had awakened in me. I hated how fucking weak he made me, and I dreaded to think what would happen the longer we spent time together. It's been barely any time at all, and he has consumed me, what will be left of me when he grows bored and moves on?

But I still don't stop him as he grinds his hips forward, pressing the hard rigid length of him against the apex of my thighs, telling me exactly how I made him feel.

Lust and desire were dangerous.

It clouded your judgement, fogged your senses, those red flags and the toxicity become second to the fiery need that devours your body. It makes you *need* rather than want, like without it would be to be without air in your lungs.

You lost control. Lost your senses.

And I was letting it. Still letting it because there wasn't enough. Once, twice, it's not enough.

He was addictive.

He groans into my mouth as my hands move to his shoulders and my fingernails bite through his shirt and sink into his skin.

The noise only serves to make me wetter, needier.

As if sensing it, he steps back, rubs his hand across his mouth and demands, "Strip."



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Kingston

I can barely see straight let alone think straight. I can't fucking stay away, she's a drug, and I need more, always need fucking more.

"Strip, Eleanor, before I do it, and trust me, I won't take care of those fancy clothes."

She visibly swallows, hooks her fingers under the hem of her sweater and peels it away from her torso, revealing all that creamy skin, the mounds of her perfect tits, nipples peeking through the sheer lace. Her chest heaves with each breath, and her hands shake as she goes to the button of her suit pants, popping it open clumsily before she lets them drop, and she steps from them, leaving her in just her matching bra and panties that cover nothing and show me *everything*.

Fuck, she's so fucking perfect. Her plump lips are parted, her eyes hooded, the desire there fueling the need to be in her, under her skin, claiming her and never letting her go.

"All of it," I order, "I want all of you open for me, love."

I keep myself rooted to the spot, my feet planted on the floor as I watch her unhook her bra, and let it fall with the rest of her clothes, and then drops her panties and I snap. I break. Shatter into a thousand pieces with no hope of ever being put back together again.

I move on her, pressing her back against the wall with a thud, claiming her mouth while my hands cup her breasts, kneading the soft, pliable flesh,

rolling the hard peaks of her nipples between my fingers. I wanted every inch of her burned into my brain, I wanted to own her in every single way, ruined for everyone else but me.

She whimpers against my mouth, but I don't stop kissing her as I pull at my jeans, barely having them down before I'm hoisting her up with my hands on the backs of her thighs, spreading her open and pushing my cock into her pussy. Slick, wet heat meets the crown of my dick and I slowly, *slowly*, slide in, careful not to hurt her. Her fingers bite into my shoulders, her teeth nip at my lips, and by the time I'm fully inside, we're both sweating, my breathing more of a pant as my restraint pulls tight.

I grind into her, barely moving in and out as I push my pelvic bone against her clit, working her up until she starts to roll her hips, chasing that high. My fingers sink into the fleshy parts of her thighs, hard enough, no doubt, to bruise, but she doesn't complain about the rough hold or my cock buried deep.

"Move," She moans, "Please."

"Just give me a minute," I grind out, the sensation of her tight pussy enveloping my cock almost enough to have me coming on the spot.

"Kingston," she pleads, grinding herself against me.

I move slow, sliding out and then back in, torture and ecstasy all in the same breath. The piercing rubs against her inner walls, pleasure for both of us, and if the way her eyes roll back, and head tilts until the back of her skull is resting on the wall is anything to go by, it's enough for her for the time being.

It's blissful agony, this steady pace. My heart pounds inside my chest, my muscles shake but she feels so damn good. I roll my hips, pushing in at the same time I give her friction against her clit, my mouth finding hers, tongue dancing to the same rhythm.

"Fuck me," she whispers into my mouth, "*fuck me.*"

“Love,” I warn.

*“Please.”*

My fingers curl into her thighs, biting harder and she cries out, but I take away that pain as I pull my hips back and slam forward, so hard she thumps against the wall. I do it again. And again. Our bodies slap together, her fingers turning to a bruising hold, and I continue to fuck her like she asked. Hard and rough and unforgiving.

“Like this, love?” I growl.

“Yes, God, yes!”

With each pound of my hips I roll, rubbing her clit, finding that sweet spot inside but also stimulating that bundle of nerves that’ll have her seeing stars.

She begins to pant, her moans getting louder, her chest heaving, and I stop.

“Not yet,” I tell her. I want us both there. I want to see the same stars, I want to feel the earth shake with her, feel our souls shatter.

She cries out, but I continue to give and take, coaxing her closer to the edge before pulling her back.

And I wanted more. I always wanted more.

But when she meets my eyes and I see that blatant need, that wanton desire and the pleas unspoken, I can’t deny her any longer, and I fear that’ll continue to be the way it goes.

Me pushing, her pulling, and me breaking every time.

It hadn’t taken much to break me again and like her, I can’t deny it.

There’s a rope tethered between us and no matter how much either of us try to pull, it only snaps tight and springs back, forcing us together.

I was her damnation, but she was my salvation.

It wouldn't end well.

This time when she reaches that peak, I let her fall over it. Her scream bounces off the walls, her pussy convulsing around my dick, squeezing me and I erupt, unable to hold it and I empty myself inside her, her walls like a pulsing vice, pulling every last drop.

When we're spent, I keep myself inside, just to let myself feel it for a little bit longer, my forehead resting on her shoulder, her breath whispering against the nape of my neck.

She rests her cheek on my shoulder as I pull from her and then awkwardly shove myself back into my jeans, not willing to let her down in case we break this calm truce between us yet again. I carry her, legs still wrapped around my body into the bathroom, where I then gently sit her on the counter before I turn to the bath and twist the taps, plugging it so the tub begins to fill and steam blooms from the hot water.

Her eyes hooded, body slack, she watches as I pick up bottles, checking the labels until I find the one I'm looking for. Bubbles instantly form on the surface of the water.

"What are you doing?" She whispers.

"Shh," I order. I didn't know what I was doing only that I needed to do it. To take care of her, wash away the hurt I left her with this morning, even if it was for her own good.

Turning up, yet again, was a mistake but one I was willing to make. *She* wasn't the mistake but letting her become something was. It was unforgivable, a sin so dark and deadly, I doubted hell would even want me.

I knew full well dragging her into this would do more damage than good and yet, I couldn't stay away, I couldn't even last a day.

And here I thought I was controlled. Here I thought nothing could distract me.

I internally scoff. What a fool I was.

She wasn't innocent.

No that's not right, she *was* innocent and a magnet, drawing me in. A siren singing, a light beckoning. How was I to stay away when everything I needed had been embodied into this woman sitting behind me.

She was everything I didn't know I needed or craved.

Everything I didn't deserve but would take. When the bath is full, the bubbles covering every inch, I walk over to her, not allowing myself to meet her eyes. She should have better. A good life, a good man, something more, and yet I wasn't willing to let her go.

I could. I wasn't in love with her, how could I be, I didn't know her, not properly but this root, it had grown into something fierce, and those thorns were deep.

Letting her go would be giving her up, and I wasn't willing to do that.

I lift her from the counter.

"I can walk," she tells me.

I don't answer, instead, I carry her towards the bath, placing her feet in first, and then lowering her until she's submerged.

"Let me take care of you," is all I say.

"I'm fine, I can take care of myself."

"Let me."

She goes quiet and I still don't meet her eyes. I kneel at the edge of the bath, smoothing my hands down her curves beneath the water, tickling and

kneading until her breathing evens and her eyes close, head resting against the rim.

It's dangerous for her to feel safe with me, dangerous for her to allow herself to do so, but I knew I wouldn't hurt her. I tried that and I came back. The moment that text hit my phone earlier, four simple words that screamed so loud inside my head it broke something.

I didn't know what it said about me, what it said about her, but for whatever reason, I was drawn to this woman, and she was drawn to me, and I wouldn't fight it.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

# Kingston

I lay awake, her curled on her side next to me, her breathing even, deep, dark hair fanned across the pillow, and lashes resting on her cheeks.

Her body is bare, all the smooth curves and intimate lines bathed in the silver glow of the moon that shines through the open curtains. It was a rare clear night, the moon fat and round, the stars bright, but it would likely mean a frost in the morning.

After she let me care for her in the bath, letting me wash that sensual body, and then tangle my fingers in her hair I took her back to bed and worshipped her some more. I kissed every inch of her, tasted her skin on my tongue and felt the way it yielded as my teeth sank in. I drank in her moans like wine, reveled in her gasps and whimpers like it was the sweetest music. I watched her face as she came and then swallowed it down, tasting that ecstasy on my tongue, each time I didn't give her time to recover, and like a good girl, she didn't complain. She let me taste again and again, and I got the pleasure of having her come on my hand, my tongue, and my cock.

I wanted to show her what it could be like if she just freed herself. I wanted her to taste the forbidden, and enjoy the guilt. We are all so restrained, so caught in the trap of wanting to be socially accepted that we deny ourselves of the pleasures that the human body needs to be able to thrive.

I wanted to be the one to allow her to explore that side, to let her use me, to let me see all the ways she draws and gives pleasure, what gets her

going, what doesn't. I could give her that, if I couldn't give her anything else, I could give her that.

I was not a good man. Not a kind man. But with her, I could try to be something *more*.

Even if it left all else in ruin.

I roll onto my side, curling myself around her frame, dragging her back until her spine rests on my chest and my hand rests on her lower abdomen, her warmth branding me. She sighs, still sleeping and sinks in further, letting her head fall back enough that I rest my chin there, inhaling that sweet scent of hers.

I manage to sleep, even if it is light.

—

My hand slips between her legs, her breathing still an even inhale and exhale, and gently I swipe the middle finger up the length of her seam. Her breathing hitches, even in sleep she reacts to me.

My lips kiss her shoulder, the nape of her neck as my finger finds her clit and begins to circle, slow and gentle to begin with, just enough to rouse her from her dreams.

She presses her perfectly plump arse against my hard cock, eliciting a groan as I slip between her cheeks, Fuck, I want to take her there, in that flesh I *know* no man has ever been.

She breathes heavily as I continue the slow, torturous assault on her cunt, her arousal making her wetter and wetter with each second that passes.

Her hips begin to roll, her spine arches as she starts to climb, so I reposition my hand, using the heel to grind into her clit and slide a finger inside. And then she rides it, uses it to climb and climb until she falls off the edge and groans out her pleasure. When she tries to turn and return the



favor, I halt her hand with my fingers around the wrist, “That was for you, love.”

“But...” her eyes drop to the hard length poking into her body.

“I can deal with a little frustration for a while, it’ll make it all worth it later.”

She swallows, “Later?”

“Did you not hear me?” I chastely kiss her lips and roll out of bed, my bare feet hitting the floor with a dull thud, “I’m not leaving.”

“Ever!?” She gasps, horrified.

I throw her a devious grin and strut, naked to the bathroom to piss and use her toothbrush to brush my teeth. She follows, sputtering, incoherent words stuttering from her mouth. Her cheeks are still flushed from her orgasm, hair a wild mess on her head, and eyes clinging to that sleepy hold but, fuck, she is stunning and still very, very naked. She seems to have forgotten that fact.

“You’re not moving in!” She finally manages to get out.

Of course, I wasn’t moving in but playing with her was too hard to resist, “Do you think I just say things for the hell of it, Eleanor? Everything I do is for a reason.”

Her dark eyes widen, “but... *no*.”

I cock my head, suppressing my grin, “you believe you have a choice?”

“Kingston!” She growls, “You can come over, you can stay, but you. Are. Not. Moving. In.”

I spit into the sink and then wash my mouth out with water, plopping the bright pink toothbrush back into the holder. Her eyes widen, “is that my toothbrush!?”

“One might believe you don’t want me,” I tease, ignoring her question, “but we both know that isn’t true is it, love?”

I cup her bare pussy and she gasps.

“That’s right, love,” I whisper against her lips, “you want me, always. You’re ready for me, always. You think you hate me but your body...” I lick my lips, looking down, never getting enough of its perfection, “your body knows exactly what it needs, what it wants and unfortunately for you, regardless of logic, you will always succumb to your body’s needs. You will always succumb to me. *You will always be mine.*”

Her eyes roll back in her head as I add just a tiny bit of friction and then abruptly pull away, kissing her lips, “but thankfully for you, you’re right, I am not moving in, but you and I, we’ll be spending more time together.”

She shakes her head to clear it, “for this Tobias thing?”

“That,” I agree though I was starting to hate it, “but mainly for many other things that are far more fun and a lot dirtier.”

I leave her, and her flaming red cheeks, to freshen up as I head back to the room and dress, pulling on yesterday’s clothes. When I come back out, she’s covered in a robe and making coffee, her face fresher and eyes clear.

She looks me up and down and then turns quickly, trying to cover up her movements of putting away the second mug she had gotten out.

Something in my chest tightens, no not tightens, *strangles* and I continue forward, sitting in the chair at the table, “Do I not get a coffee?”

She peers at me from over her shoulder, cheeks red and gets the mug back out, filling both hers and mine with fresh coffee, and then places milk and sugar on the table before tentatively sitting across from me. She adds milk, no sugar, to her coffee and then curls her hands round it, pulling it towards her chest.

I add both sugar and milk to mine and take a sip, staring at her.

“I don’t do this,” she finally says.

“I know.”

“You and I...” she trails off, chewing on her lip, “We don’t work.”

“I know.”

“Don’t promise me anything,” she suddenly says, “I want you to stay, I want you to be here, even if it fucks me, but don’t promise me anything.”

“I won’t.”

She nods slowly, “Okay.”

“I want you to come to an address later,” I say after a few moments of silence, “meet with some of my people, they might be able to help you figure out how to get the information we need,” bile rises up my throat, “We can also arrange for those defense lessons.”

“After work?”

I nod.

She stares down into her coffee and nods her head, not saying a word, “I’ll text it to you.”

“Okay.”

I finish off my coffee and stand, heading to put it in the dishwasher and then back towards her. She still sits, her shoulders stiff, spine ramrod straight. I whisper my fingers across her neck, moving her mane of dark hair until I can lean down and press my lips there.

“I won’t promise you anything, Eleanor, except this,” she swallows audibly, “I will show you what your body can do, what I can make it do. What I can draw from it, how I can make it both pain and pleasure. I promise that I’ll be the one to free you to explore. To show you what you really want. That will be all I can promise.”

She nods.

“Till later,” I kiss her nape again and then turn, heading for the door.

As I’m leaving, the door almost closed behind me, I hear her reply,  
“Till later then.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

# *Eleanor*

I didn't find anything at all again during the time I spent in the office, in fact, I barely had any time at all. Tobias had me in meetings with him all day and when I wasn't, I was sorting his diary and making coffee for his clients. It was four by the time I sat down at my desk, my injured foot aching and a dried sweat making the skin on my brow tight.

It was unusually busy, but at five past four Tobias gets another meeting. Three men walk towards me, and I recognize them easily. I would recognize them from the sheer warning shrill that shoots down my spine.

I didn't like them.

The young one especially.

He was lethal grace embodied. I couldn't pin it exactly, what it was that made me go on high alert, but it was something. His glasses were in place, his suit impeccable, and to anyone else he probably looked like a normal businessman.

My mind whirls back to that first day I met them, when he shifted, just slightly, and I caught a glimpse of that gun tucked into his trousers.

Paranoia, I scoff inwardly. All this work with Kingston has me paranoid.

"Gentlemen," I stand, greeting them, holding all the steel in my spine I can muster, even if I feel exhausted and drained.

“Eleanor,” Clayton grins, “What a pleasure to see you again.”

I cringe.

“We’re here to see Tobias,” The young one says.

“Of course.” I press the button on the phone to dial through to his office. He answers on the first ring.

“What is it, Eleanor?”

“Clayton and Derek are here to see you.”

Silence.

“Tobias?”

“Now?” He questions.

“Yes, sir, they’re with me now.”

“I didn’t know we had a meeting scheduled.” He says quietly.

I say nothing, giving a polite smile to the men as I click open the calendar and realize the slot is empty. “We didn’t.”

He clears his throat, “Please see them to the meeting room, I’ll be there in a moment.”

“No problem.” I hang up.

“Is there an issue?” Clayton asks.

“Not at all,” I smile, sliding out from behind the desk, “Please follow me.”

They follow me down the hall, the busy sound of the office filling the silence, yet the thuds of their footfall sends a chill down my spine, like a prey backed into a corner and the predator closing in.

Kingston was a predator, he never hid that, but I knew what I was dealing with, with him, or at least I did to a certain extent, with them though, I had no idea. Was this something I needed to address with Kingston?

I chew my lip, knowing eyes are on me, not in places they should be, and that fact alone sends a jolt of fear to bloom in my stomach, making me feel sick.

I stop at the meeting room and open the door, showing them inside, “He’ll be through in just a moment.”

Derek and the young man enter but Clayton lingers. I freeze when his hand comes up to rest on the middle of my back. His hand slowly moves down my spine, “We are very thankful for your hospitality. Perhaps Tobias should invite you to more dinners of ours.”

NO! I scream in my head.

“Clayton,” Tobias’ voice is a surprising comfort.

Clayton snatches his hand back, whirling on Tobias with a grin, “Tobias.”

Tobias stares at me, telling me without words to leave. Now.

I don’t wait. I rush away as quickly as these heels will allow, power walking back down the hall to my desk. Heels were such a bad idea when I still had an injured foot!

It was only four thirty, but the message in my inbox had me packing my bags now.

**Tobias Franco:** You can leave early today, I’ll be wrapped up the rest of the day, and we can reconvene in the morning.

Have a good evening.

Tobias Franco

I don't question it, I don't think about how he orchestrated it, knowing what Clayton would do or how he would take an interest. The man I knew, and the man Kingston told me about were blurring. Letting me leave to keep me away wasn't the man Kingston had portrayed.

I bring up the address Kingston texted through earlier and head down to the lobby, calling an Uber. It wasn't within a walking distance, at least not in these shoes. It's still busy, far too busy for anything to happen, but I still feel goosebumps on my skin, and my stomach churning, fear a very palpable thing around me.

That was the truth. I was scared.

Always scared.

Weak.

I didn't know how to defend myself. How to escape.

If something were to happen to me, I'd have no way of ever hoping to get away.

The cold bites at me, but it isn't long before my phone buzzes with the information of the Uber and then the car pulls up.

I climb in the back, sighing with relief at the warm air as it chases away the chill. The driver says nothing as he makes his way to the address provided, and I just stare idly out the window, watching the city roll by and with it the miles that stretch between me and Tobias' building.

"Thank you," I say to the driver as I step out, feet screaming in protest after the twenty-minute rest, as I stand up right onto the pavement.

I stare up at the building, a huge half glass structure, modern, sleek, the very top jutting into the sky. There are no buzzers on the door but as I enter, I notice two security guards eying me and a doorman who steps towards me as I linger in the foyer.

"Can I help you, miss?"



“Uh, yes,” I bring up Kingston’s text, “I’m supposed to be seeing Kingston.”

I didn’t even know his last name.

The doorman frowns down at me, eyes traveling over the clothes, the body, “there isn’t a Kingston here.”

“This was the address he gave me,” I frown, had the Uber got it wrong?

“It’s okay.” A sudden feminine voice says, soft and when I turn, I realize the voice does not match the person at all, “she’s supposed to be here.” The woman walks towards me, her hips sway, long legs and brutal beauty. Straight black hair hangs around her face, a harsh contrast to the pale skin that suits her so well, she looks as if she’s just stepped out of a book. Painted red lips are upturned into a smile so concealed it may as well not be there, but it’s the eyes. Eyes of ice so hot it burns. Blue but not any blue I’ve ever seen other than in Kingston’s eyes. She wears a tight burgundy colored dress, a pair of high, pointed black stilettos on her feet and gold rings on her fingers.

She stops by my side, “Eleanor, did he not give you the code?”

It feels like a dig, but I shake my head anyway. Out of my league. Completely. She pouts as she guides me towards a single elevator separated from the wall of them across the foyer. Her manicured fingers punch in some digits that I don’t keep up with, and then she ushers me inside. The doors close. Soft, melodic music fills the space. I feel her eyes on me, burning into me, but I keep my head forward, straight, not once looking in her direction.

The woman was fucking terrifying.

When the doors slide open again, I can’t wait to get out. I rush towards the open space not really thinking about what lies on the other side.

Luxury and opulence, grace and sleek design. It was a palace built into the very top of a building.

“Welcome to King’s home.” The woman laughs before stalking away, leaving me alone.

It’s Micha who finds me.

“Eleanor?”

“Uh, hi?” I awkwardly wave a hand, before my face heats and my cheeks flame red, remembering the last time I saw him. He likely knows what happened. They probably all do. My voice shakes as I say, “Kingston told me to be here.”

“I’m sure he meant to meet him in the lobby,” Micha frowns.

“Uh, there was a woman, she let me up. Dark hair, blue eyes.”

His face pales, “Isobel.”

I shrug, “She didn’t give me her name.”

Micha pauses, “Do you often follow strangers?”

“Well,” I swallow, “No,” I pause, “I don’t know. Maybe?”

His eyes widen. “Jesus Christ.”

I liked Micha. He was nice, in all the ways he *could* be nice, I guess, considering who he worked for, but I don’t know, he was a comfort, safety, when there was none. He was loyal to Kingston, he would never have my back if I needed it, but it was good to know at least *he* didn’t terrify me like the others did. I wouldn’t start to question the why about it, I’ll just take the comfort.

“Firstly, Eleanor,” he raises a brow and looks at me sternly, “You’re going to need to learn to *not* trust everyone you meet. Secondly, just because someone says they can take you to the place you need to be does not mean they will, and thirdly, have some common sense, Isobel could have been anyone, and quite frankly, she’s unpredictable on the best of

days, and batshit on the worst. You're lucky you stepped out of that elevator in one piece."

"Well, she wasn't horrible or anything," I shiver, "she ignored me mostly."

He sighs loudly, "Come on, I'll take you to King."

I follow him through the large penthouse, eyes drawn to every luxurious item spread through the house, from the marble to the crystal, the paintings on the walls, and the fur rugs lining the floor.

It was warm, despite all the hard floors and large windows, and I couldn't get my head round a man like Kingston, with all his brutality and wickedness, living in a place like this. Remembering the conversation this morning, the flush on my cheek gets brighter. What an idiot I was, telling him he couldn't move in with me. Of course, that was not what he was saying, why would he when he had a place like this!?

I shake off the thoughts as Micha stops outside a door, raps his knuckle once, and doesn't wait for a response before he opens the door to a den like room. I spot Kingston immediately, like a beacon of light in the darkness. He sits on a leather chair next to a fire, a table before him with a tray holding a decanter of an amber liquid I assume is whiskey, and several crystal tumblers. He's relaxed, dressed in dark jeans and a white tee, the flames from the fire dancing across his inked skin. His piercings glint in the golden light, his hair slightly disheveled. Across from him is the man I remember as Ace. Dressed in a similar way except his jeans are ripped the entire way down, and he isn't nearly as relaxed, he leans forward with his elbows on his knees, chin resting in his linked hands.

The woman I now know as Isobel leans on the wall, a glass of champagne in her hand. She smiles at me, a complete contrast to the stoic and brutal woman she was in the elevator.

"Eleanor?" Kingston stands immediately, "you're early."

I look at Isobel, she clearly didn't tell them I had arrived. My eyes narrow, but I look away, back to King. Ace stares at me with his head cocked, and a subtle grin on his face.

Were they all just ridiculously attractive? Is that a thing to be when you're in this type of business?

I shake that off, I wouldn't fall for their harsh beauty no matter how nice they all were to look at.

"Tobias let me out early."

A few grumbles around me, but no one says anything outright.

"Did something happen?"

I shake my head, "no, he was busy and didn't need me."

He nods slowly, "How did you get up here?" he looks at Micha and I turn just in time to see him shake his head.

"Uh, Isobel let me up."

His head whips to the woman so quickly I'm surprised he doesn't give himself whiplash, "You didn't tell me." He growls.

Isobel sighs heavily and rolls her eyes, "Oh simmer down, King, I didn't do anything."

As if to check, King runs his eyes down my body and then turns back to the woman, "I can see why you like her," Isobel continues, "pretty, but she lacks some smarts if she is so willing to follow a stranger into an elevator."

Micha grunts his agreement, and that flush is now covering my neck and chest.

"Either way," Isobel shrugs, "she didn't run or back down, I guess that's a start."

My teeth grit, “I’m sorry, who are you exactly?” I snap, heart pounding.

The woman laughs and opens her mouth, but Kingston gets there first, “This is Isobel, my sister, and a huge pain in my arse.”

Sister.

I see the resemblance now, the eyes, the shape of the face. Where King was wicked though, she appeared a hell of a lot more savage.

A hidden and barely leashed violence.

“I’m sure we’ll be great friends,” Isobel chimes, walking towards me. She stops and stares, eyes doing a run over my body before she looks back up to my face, I swear that’s actual warmth in her eyes and a soft smile, “But I must be off now, I have things to do. See you later.”

“She fucking terrifies me,” Ace blows out a breath as the door clicks closed.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



“Are you sure everything is okay?” Kingston asks again after a few beats of silence. Ace watches me with an intensity I don’t like. He’s scruffier than the first time I saw him, his hair pulled away from his face and secured with a band, but dark blond tendrils frame his face. The beard remains, still groomed and neat and in the suit, I couldn’t get the full picture of how built he actually was. Broad shoulders, hard, big arms and thighs and his hands are fucking huge.

He was a mammoth of a man.

“Uh, yeah,” my eyes snap away from Ace back to Kingston, “yeah everything is fine. Why did you want me here?”

“Well, I wanted you to formally meet everyone, but also I thought Abel could show you some defense moves, just in case.”

“You won’t teach me?” I blurt.

“I have a few things to do, love.”

When I finally look at Ace again, all I see is a wicked grin and a mischievous glint in his eye.

“We’ll talk after,” Kingston says as he stands, walking towards me. His hand comes up, and his fingers whisper against my cheek, before he tucks some hair behind my ear in a move that doesn’t fit the relationship we have going.

He holds my stare for a long moment before he presses his thumb to my bottom lip and then snatches it away, leaving the room without a backward glance.

I swallow as Ace stands, this towering wall of muscle that could break me without much of an effort.

“I guess it’s just you and me, little one, should we get started?”

Micha steps up to my side, glaring at Ace, “Be nice.” Is all he says, but he too leaves, and then it’s just me and Ace.

“Follow me, Eleanor,” he says, heading to the door left open by Micha. When I don’t immediately follow, he stops in the threshold and looks over his shoulder, “Are you scared?”

My nostrils flare and I narrow my eyes, “No.”

“Good, then follow.”

My feet are heavier as I stomp after him, bristling. He walks through the penthouse before turning sharply and opening a door. I don’t think as I walk behind him only to be greeted by complete and utter darkness. No windows. No light.

I’m about to make a break back through the door, and the only source of light when it abruptly slams shut, and I’m plunged into that abyss. It’s so dark I don’t even see my own hand in front of my face, and I freeze, jutting out my arms to look for something, anything, I can use to steady and guide myself. The wall will lead to a door eventually, and if I can’t see it means Ace can’t either. But he knows this place better than I do, and is clearly a born fighter.

No.

Don’t think about that.

If I scream, will Kingston hear me or even Micha?

I open my mouth, ready to do just that when a hand clamps around it, and I'm sharply yanked before being pushed. I hit the wall hard. I feel Ace's body press up against mine from behind, unrelenting and like steel.

"Get free, Eleanor." He whispers into my ear, "shake me off and get free."

I try. I really do. Not because it's a lesson but because fear, real fear, urges me to flee.

A whole bunch of images flow through my mind. What he could do to me without anyone knowing. How he could brutalize me without a single murmur from me.

"Come on, little one," he breathes, "get free."

I push on him, trying to get all my weight behind me, using my hands to push off the wall, but I can't lift him or shake him off. His entire body weight is on me, his hand clamped so tight around my mouth my teeth cut into my gums.

"You can't?" He mocks.

A small, suffocated sound whimpers from me as I continue to try and push him off.

"Come on," he growls.

I can't get free. I can't move. He's suffocating me. His weight compresses my chest, his hand makes it hard to breathe. I suck in sharp breaths of air through my nose, but it isn't enough to fill my lungs. I feel the panic a moment before it hits.

A claw that sinks deep as it rips away basic instinct. I try to breathe, I try to suck in that precious oxygen, but nothing stops the burn in my lungs. He was going to smother me. Tears sting my eyes and I bring my hands up, clawing at his flesh but he does not relent.

"Get free!"



That panic makes everything hazy and in the dark, I can't tell what is up or down, left or right. Fear hits me hard, different to what Kingston draws, different to any other fear I've ever known.

My tears spill now, wet and hot and I thrash uselessly against him.

Abruptly, he snatches away and I crumple. I fall onto my knees with a hard thud, the pain ricocheting up my thighs, into my hips and then my spine.

I suck in air. Hungry. Panicked.

Lights suddenly brighten the room, they sting my eyes, forcing me to close them but I don't want to. If I close my eyes, I'm vulnerable once again.

"You're weak," Ace spits. "Fucking weak. You think you'll survive a life like this?" His voice rises, "You think you'll be a good woman standing next to Kingston!?"

His words hit an integral part of me I didn't realize was there.

"Fucking weak, little one."

"I hate you!" I spit.

"Yeah?" Ace laughs menacingly, "then do something about it!"

I get to my feet and spin on him, anger warring with the fear and the panic with the rage. He did this on purpose. To belittle me. To weaken me. He doesn't think I can do anything, let alone help Kingston or get my friend back. He doesn't think me strong or worthy.

Well fuck him!

I charge him. I have no hope of beating him, but I need him to feel at least a small ounce of the fear he just gave me.

He grins as I get closer, and opens his arms, welcoming me.

My shoulder hits his stomach and honestly, it feels like I've just voluntarily hit a brick wall, but he doesn't defend, he lets it happen, allowing my weight to topple him. We go down, me sprawled on top of him. My legs straddle his hips, and he just continues to grin, not even a little winded.

I raise a fist and slam it down into his face.

Instantly pain bursts in my hand.

I cry out, falling sideways, clutching my hand to my chest as the pain lances through me.

I'm still wheezing when I get to my knees, but Ace is now standing, though, when he got up, I couldn't tell you.

"That's the problem, you see," he cocks his head, watching me, "If you don't know how to properly punch someone, you'll likely do more damage to yourself. You have to keep the thumb on the outside," he holds out his fist, first showing me how I did it, with the thumb tucked in beneath my fingers and then how to properly do it, the thumb on the outside, resting across the index and the middle finger. He has a blooming mark on his jaw, but it won't bruise or swell.

"You need to throw all your weight into it, use your body to give momentum, give it your weight and strike, all you did was pull back your arm and strike, no push, no weight, you'll hardly be more effective than a bee sting."

"You're a fucking asshole," I hiccup, cradling that injured hand.

"But an asshole that's going to teach you to stay alive should the worse happen."

"I can hardly do anything now!" I cry.

"Oh, you can, and you will."

"No."

“Should we start the lesson over?” He cocks his head, “Learning at your weakest will only add to your strength.”

He doesn't give me an option to answer as he charges me. I'm on my knees, defenseless.

He gets close. The only thing I can do is let my instincts take over, and I duck just a moment before he hits. He sails over me, landing on the other side and I kick out a leg, landing a foot against his chest which sends him sprawling. He lands with a thud and loud whoosh of breath. He lifts only his head and grins, “Good.”

“Stop!” I beg, “Please.”

My hand is throbbing, the fear gripping. I wasn't prepared. I wasn't ready.

“You think you'll be ready when someone else wants to take a shot at you?” He answers. I hadn't realized I'd said it out loud. “Assume everyone is out to get you, Eleanor, because everyone is.”

“Even you?”

“There are exceptions, but do not trust easily, and do not let your guard down to anyone other than the ones you trust, you'll survive longer that way.”

“You talk like you expect to drop dead tomorrow.”

“Not drop dead,” he replies, “But die nonetheless.”

A silence as heavy as lead falls between us.

“Learn, Eleanor,” he says, “Learn how to protect yourself in the event one of us can't be here to save you.”

“I'm no damsel.” I whisper.

“Aren't you?”

“You’re a prick.”

“Maybe so, but I can keep you alive, you’d be wise to keep on my good side.”

“Or what?”

He doesn’t get to answer when the door opens and Kingston steps in, “What the fuck is going on?”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

# Kingston

Eleanor cradles her hand to her chest, her tears dried to her face, eyes red rimmed and still shining. She's pale, breathing heavy.

I made a mistake trusting Ace to handle her training. I knew he was brutal and unforgiving, but a part of me thought he would take it easy, at least to start with.

No such hope.

The bruising on her hand was already showing itself. It could be broken. A lot of her could be broken.

She stays close to my side, quiet and subdued as I walk her towards my bedroom. My penthouse was free rein to my closest, but my room was at least off limits. No one would bother us here.

I guide her in with a hand on the base of her spine and though she flinches at the contact she doesn't pull away. She doesn't appear to take anything in as she looks around and then promptly heads to the bed to sit, tucking her legs up to her chest and resting her chin on her knees.

"Eleanor," I start.

She sniffs loudly.

A part of me breaks at that sound.

“Let me see your hand,” I say.

“You let him do that,” she accuses.

“No,” I pause, “Well yes, but I didn’t think he’d be so hard.”

“I thought he was going to kill me.”

“Abel wouldn’t...”

“Wouldn’t he?”

“No, he wouldn’t, he’s teaching you the only way he knows.”

“How?”

“Kill or be killed, love. It’s all he knows.”

She tucks her hand in closer, scowling towards the corner of the room.

“Let me check that,” I say.

“No.”

“Eleanor,” I growl, “Let me check it.”

She doesn’t answer, just keeps her head turned, “If I knew this was what you had planned when you told me to come, I would never have booked that Uber.”

I knew she wasn’t lying, but I had nothing to say to that.

“Let me check that hand,” the words are nothing short of a command.

I watch the muscle twitch in her jaw before she releases the grip on her own hand and holds it out. It’s bruised, but it isn’t swollen which is a good sign. I force her fingers out, bending and moving them. She doesn’t cry out, only flinches and grits her teeth. They move without issue. As far as I can tell nothing is broken.

“You should have an x-ray,” I state, not wanting to push her, “I’ll have a hospital contact you tomorrow to book you in.”

“Why would he do that?” She asks quietly, “Knowing I can’t defend myself.”

“Abel is a different breed,” I sigh, “he doesn’t think about the consequences, only what is going to help him survive. It’s brutal and it’s ugly, but it works because if survival is the only goal, then you’ll do nothing but survive, no matter the cost.”

“That doesn’t make it okay. I thought I was suffocating.”

Guilt and pain grip my chest, “He’s trying to help.”

“I don’t want his help.

I swallow, “Okay, love.”

She nods slowly, watching me work her hand, her fingers, curling them and stretching them out. I’m sure nothing is broken, though it’s likely painful.

“Before we go on, Eleanor,” I let her go, “I am trying to help you. Ace has his ways, I didn’t think he’d be so harsh to begin with, but I knew he would at least get you to a position where you could defend yourself. You don’t need me, and I want to make sure that applies to *all* aspects of your life. I want you safe, and mark my words, Eleanor, I will do whatever it takes to get you there, even if I have to erase what you were to make you who you should be.

“I would like Abel – Ace to continue training you because he’s the best person for it. He can teach you to down not kill whereas me and Micha, all we know is to kill. I don’t want you to have that stain. I’d like you to stay safe while keeping your soul intact.”

She sighs and brings her hand back to her chest as I pull out a first aid kit, and get a bandage to secure it.

I drag it back to me, uncurling her fingers as I wrap it around tight. “I am doing this for you. I told you I wouldn’t leave, and I won’t, but I can’t be there all the time, I need you to protect yourself and at the moment, I am sorry to say, you can’t protect yourself.”

“Why?” She spits.

“Because it isn’t in your nature, in the way you were raised. Your life is sheltered and calm, this life is exposed and chaotic.”

“Your fault.”

“Yes, but regardless, if it wasn’t me then who, because eventually the two lines will meet, and unfortunately, Eleanor, you would lose and then what? You dead in a ditch? Broken beyond repair? I am trying to stop that!”

For a minute she stops breathing as her eyes meet mine, dark against light, good against evil and then something unexpected happens.

She kisses me.

*She kisses me.*

I don’t deny her. I let her take and take and taste and taste. I’ve been dying for it since the moment I saw her.

“Let me help you,” I whisper. “Please.”

We stare at each other for a long moment and then she nods, just once and I let out a breath. I finish bandaging her hand, securing the wrap with a knot.

“What actually happened today?” I ask her.

She sucks her bottom lip into her mouth, “It was just really busy, I didn’t have time to do anything other than be at Tobias’ beck and call, but there was something,” she pauses as if wondering whether or not to say it.



“Go on,” I press, guiding her out the room and towards the kitchen. She needs to eat.

“There were these men, I’ve met them before, just once, but I hadn’t seen or heard of them before that.”

“What are their names?”

“Clayton and Derek, they’re business partners and there’s another one with them, but I haven’t heard anyone say his name, and he stays quiet most of the time.”

“New clients?”

She sits at the table as I go about throwing some food together, shoving some noodles into water and stir-frying vegetables and chicken.

“Not according to the system, but they know Tobias well and have, I don’t know, a kind of sway over him.”

I think about that and all the information I have on Tobias and the Syndicate. I was hunting for the last two heads not at all mentioned in any reports. Eleanor had done exactly what I’d asked her to do, sniff out people that appear unusual. This Clayton and Derek could be who I was looking for, but who was the third man?

I needed those cameras up, the bugs working again, so I could see and hear what the fuck was going on inside that building.

When the food is done, I plate up Eleanor a serving and slide it before her. “Eat.”

“I’m not really hun—”

“Eat, love,” I order softly, plating myself a serving and leaving the rest in the wok for the guys. They’ll come sniffing soon enough.

I sit opposite her, shoveling the food into my mouth, she eats slower, tentatively, moving most of it around her plate more than actually putting

anything in her mouth.

It was my fault she was in this mood. Why she was subdued. What Ace had done was necessary, but he went too hard to start with. He forgets not everyone is built like we are.

And she was right, I had put her in this mess, made her a part of something beyond her capabilities, but there was no going back. I could let it go, let her go but I wasn't prepared to do that now.

Two sets of footsteps sound just a minute before Micha and Ace stroll into the kitchen, both of them sweating and in gym gear, clearly having just come from sparring. Eleanor doesn't look up at the two men, and instead of letting Ace get food and sit, I grab him and haul him from the kitchen.

"You were too hard on her," I growl quietly.

"It's necessary," he crosses his arms.

"She's not like you, Ace, she needs to be eased not shoved."

"We don't have time to ease her in, you want her here then this is what needs to happen, or would you prefer she go out completely defenseless and get herself killed, because that's what'll happen. She is led by emotion, and she has the ability to home in on it, but it needs to be like this if you want to keep her breathing."

"Scaring her half to death wasn't the plan."

"We both know what I did in there is nothing compared to what the Syndicate would do to her if they found out she was working for you. What do you think Tobias will do to her if she's found out?"

He was right. Damn it.

"Just...be careful. Don't break her."

Ace chuckles, "Don't worry, I won't break your little toy, King, though, when you get bored," he starts to walk away, giving me his back, "send her

my way would you.”

Fucking asshole.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

*Eleanor*

Micha shovels his food into his mouth, hunched over the bowl as if protecting it from someone trying to steal it.

“It’ll take time,” he continues to say, “you’re fit enough, but we just need to strengthen your defenses”

“So everyone keeps saying.” I mutter.

Ace strolls back into the kitchen, winks at me with a grin and pours the rest of the food in the wok into a bowl. King glares at him but retakes his seat across from me.

And that’s how the next week goes, back and forth between my apartment, work and Kingston’s penthouse. Whatever Kingston said to Ace must have worked because nothing like what happened that first day happens again. In fact, we’ve done barely any defense, it’s been more stances and positions, correcting my form and the way to hold my fist when hitting someone. Where to hit someone for maximum damage and how to cover yourself when you need to rebuild strength. It was a lot of information and a lot of work.

I was active, I went to the gym but this much was too much. My muscles scream and ache and I am exhausted. Between work and this I’m using all my energy and crashing before ten pm every night only to redo it all the next day.

Ace stands on the other side of the mat, feet bare, a pair of gray sweats hanging from his narrow hips, and today he's shirtless. Muscles, so many fucking muscles. Hard, defined, and he has his left nipple pierced.

"We're going to do something different today," he says, crossing his arms, "I'm going to come at you, and you're going to use what I've taught you to either evade me or, if I catch you, down me and escape."

"Ace," I hold my hands up, I'm too tired for this shit. "Can we do something else?"

My hand wasn't broken, just bruised and while it still hurts a little, it's much better.

"No."

He doesn't give me another chance to try and change the plan. He charges me, full speed and strength, and it takes all of me to jump out of the way with a little yelp. He catches me though, wrapping those beefy arms around my middle and hauling me off the ground before proceeding to pin me against the wall.

"Escape, Eleanor." He orders. He's holding me tight but not painfully, not at all like the first time. I try to remember all the things he's taught me, how to get out of various holds and bindings.

When I try to enact the training, my muscles scream in pain, overused and stressed. It's been a long week.

I push on him, but he doesn't move, and I give up, slumping onto the wall with a huff, "Just kidnap me at this point, I'm tired."

He chuckles and then let's go, catching me before I can fall from the sudden lack of support. I hadn't realized how much I was leaning on him, or just how tired I was.

"Go eat and rest," Ace says, "We'll pick it back up Monday."

I groan in pleasure. I have the whole weekend off from all of this shit. No Tobias. No training with Ace. I wouldn't say no Kingston because it didn't matter where we were, or what we were doing, he always turned up.

I was serious and I had had the locks changed, but he still got in and truthfully, I wasn't really trying to keep him out.

It was dangerous and it was stupid, and it was going to wreck me, but I kept doing it anyway, telling myself I'll stop it tomorrow, and yet tomorrow never comes, but Kingston does.

I tell myself it's just because the sex is amazing, it's because he knows how to work my body like it's an instrument but it's more than that. It's something else entirely, and I wasn't ready to even acknowledge it.

He's woken parts of me I didn't know existed, parts of me that feel sexy and needed and wanted. Parts of me that he has fed and fueled until they are the only things that I can think about.

We haven't gone back to the club, but I think about it. About that first time, what he did in front of that glass wall, and what the others were doing inside. What would that feel like? To be worshipped and pleased by not just one, but two men? How would that feel? How would you cope with the sensory overload I'm sure it would bring?

I don't mind the heat that runs through me at the thought. Would I do it? If you had asked me a few weeks ago I would have said no, I would have been embarrassed to even think about it but now, now I was sure I would do it. But it would be with Kingston. Only him. I'm stiff walking, but the desire warms me through and when I reach the kitchen, Kingston is cooking again, like he has done every night. Some pasta dish by the looks of it.

It seems so at odds with *who* he is. That this, cooking, hanging out with his friends, training with them is such normal behavior when he is the opposite of all of that.

He looks over his shoulder at me, gives me a crooked smile and goes about finishing up the food.

I take a bottle of water from the fridge and plop myself at the table, downing half of it.

“You look tired,” Micha comments as he strolls in. Kingston places a plate of food in front of me and then curls his finger under my chin, forcing me to look up at him. Something like concern swims in his eyes, but I had to ignore that, ignore the warm feeling running through me and the way my heart speeds up in my chest.

“I’m fine,” I mumble, forcing myself to remove my face from his hand just so I can put a stop to all this nonsense.

I didn’t have a death wish. I had only one goal. Get Tate. That wasn’t going to change, and I wasn’t to become another casualty to Kingston. I’m sure there’s a whole line of broken hearts, and broken bodies, spanning behind him. He doesn’t say anything, and thankfully lets me get on with eating. I eat quickly, not because I’m in any rush, but because I am starving. All this training and spying on Tobias leaves me so hungry at the end of the night that I’ve had to restock my fridge twice this week after devouring it all.

If tonight was like any other night this week, I’ll eat this, go home and eat some more before promptly passing out.

It wasn’t a bad way to spend one’s time, I guess.

It was usually later that Kingston showed up, finding me passed out on the couch or on top of the blankets in my bedroom. There’s been the odd day where he followed me home and spent the entire night with me, witnessing the state of me after I’ve binged on food and then felt guilty for doing so but still going back for ice-cream.

I finish before the guys, rinse my plate and put it in the dishwasher before heading through, leaving them behind to shove on my coat and shoes. I wouldn’t stay any longer than this. Maybe my prompt departure will be enough to deter Kingston from joining me later. If I could put some space between us, when all this is over, it’ll be easier to just resume a normal life.

The elevator doors open, and I quickly step inside, smashing the button to take me down. The doors start to close and are almost completely there, when a hand shoves through the gap, automatically stopping the doors and forcing them to reopen.

“Just where do you think you’re going, love?” Kingston cocks his head.

“Home,” I press against the wall.

He smiles, not a kind smile but one full of mischief and deviance, and then he steps into the elevator and the doors slide closed with a quiet hiss.

“Without a goodbye?”

“I’m sure you wouldn’t have missed me,” I swallow.

“Oh, you’re wrong love, I would have missed you a great deal.”

My brows pull low, “What?”

In three steps he’s directly in front of me, staring down, icy eyes on fire and that devilish smirk on his face, “You think I don’t know why you’re running?”

“I’m not running,” I lie, “I’m tired.”

“I believe that you’re tired,” his eyes soften, “but you’re running.”

I don’t say anything, don’t even dare to breathe as he leans in and buries his face in the crook of my neck, inhaling. I try, I really do try, to not tilt my head letting him in, but I do it, and he takes the invitation.

I try not to let my eyes close as the sensation of him overpowers my logic, but it happens anyway. Like the high of a drug, I’m caught in the web of euphoria, of warmth and pleasure and longing.

Longing for a man that will never be good for me.



His tongue licks up the column of my throat before he murmurs, “You’re still scared.”

“No,” lie. All these lies.

He chuckles, a rasp that shoots a bolt of pleasure straight down my spine, “You’re not scared of what I’ll do to you anymore, but you’re scared of me. You’re scared because you’re falling for me, and you’re sure I’ll damn you.”

“You will damn me.”

“You’re right,” he kisses my neck, “I will, but baby, damnation isn’t so bad, not when it comes with so much pleasure.”

To prove his point, he presses his cock into me, rubbing against my pussy. My hands suddenly grip his biceps.

“Are you sure you want to be good?” His hand slides down the front of my leggings, into the band of my underwear. He rubs small circles against my clit, a torturous build-up of pleasure that never truly strikes.

“Why fear damnation, love, when damnation can feel so good.”

He suddenly thrusts his fingers inside and I’m done. Gone.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

*Kingston*

I fuck her with my fingers, and she rides it beautifully, grinding her clit into the heel of my palm, her head tipped back, eyes squeezed closed as she continues that climb.

Why fear damnation, indeed, I think as her lips part and she moans loud enough for it to echo in the small space of the elevator, when damnation looks so good on her.

The elevator has descended and ascended twice, doors opening both times. If anyone saw I didn't notice, too caught up in the image before me. She was art in the purest form.

"Kingston," she breathes, her hips moving faster. I don't need more words, I give her what she's silently begging me for. My fingers thrust harder, faster, curling slightly to rub up against that spot and I push my heel hard into her clit, hard enough for it to hurt but give her that thin line between pleasure and pain that I know gets her off every damn time.

"Yes, fuck, yes," she chants and then shatters, her pussy convulsing around my fingers.

My fingers still buried inside, I lean and capture the lobe of her ear between my teeth, "You're fucking beautiful when you come for me."

She slumps against me, breathing hard. I pull from her pussy, fingers slick with her arousal and step back. She leans heavily on the wall,

watching me from beneath hooded eyes as I lift my hand to suck my fingers, “and you taste fucking divine.”

Her lips part, ready to say more, but the doors open to the foyer of the penthouse and I guide her out, taking her to my room. It was still relatively early, but she was tired and lagging. We don't stay here, always at hers and I was doing it to keep her in control, to give her that safety net but she's trying to pull away and I wasn't going to let her go.

She doesn't fight me as I carefully undress her, leaving her in only a pair of panties and then pull one of my t-shirts over her frame. She falls into my bed, drowning in the soft mattress, sheets and pillows and curls up, tucking the duvet around her. She groans, “This bed feels like a cloud.” She says sleepily.

I pull on a pair of sweats, “sleep, Eleanor, I'll be through in a bit.”

She nods, eyes closed. It won't be long before she's asleep, so I turn off the lights and join Ace and Micha in the den. Both are nursing glasses of bourbon.

“Any news on the bugs?” I ask.

“Not yet but they're getting close.”

I nod but it made me uneasy. It had been an unusually long time and I still hadn't figured out how Tobias knew they were there, let alone where they were.

I had some of the best hackers in the business, the fact that they couldn't get past the new encryption was ringing all sorts of warning bells in my head.

“Your girl good?” Micha asks, changing the subject.

I pour myself two fingers of the bourbon and take a seat in my armchair, nodding my head, “Resting.”

“Isobel likes her,” he says.

I hadn't seen Isobel since she brought Eleanor up and didn't tell me.

"And you know this how?"

"She told me, but then you know Isobel, she always has a woman's back, regardless."

I nod my agreement and take a sip, "What is she doing at the moment?"

"Keeping busy, she's spoken to those American's a lot this week, talking about the operation going on over there. They've busted thirty-seven sex rings so far."

I nod, "That's good, and the cops are staying off their back?"

Micha scoffs, "As if Silver would have it any other way."

At least one part of my plan was still running as planned. I couldn't be everywhere at once and while the alliance with the American's was tentative at best, they would do it right.

Now just to take out the heads and bring the whole thing tumbling down.

I down the rest of my drink and stand.

"Where are you going?"

"I have a woman in my bed whose company I much prefer to you arseholes, we'll catch up tomorrow."

I leave to their chuckles and find my way back to Eleanor.

As expected, she's asleep, curled up tight beneath the sheets but diagonal, with her face buried into my pillow.

I sigh, a problem. She was a problem.

I hadn't anticipated her, and I made plans for everything. She was just fun to start with, an innocent to corrupt but now? Now she was so much more.

I climb onto my side of the bed, gently moving her until her face is on the soft spot between my shoulder and neck and wrap my arm around her. She molds to the shape of my body, burying her face into me further and seems to completely relax, melting into me. We had shared a bed every night for a week, but it truly felt like a lifetime. I didn't want to sleep without her, and I had tried. The one night I decided it was enough, I would stop, I tossed, and I turned for hours before I grew so frustrated, I threw on a pair of sweats and drove to her apartment only to find her curled on the couch. I carried her to bed and didn't stay away again.

Sleep is easier when she is here. Sleep is peaceful.

And so, I hold her, running my hand down her spine.

She stirs and fidgets, moving her arm until her hand rests on my abdomen.

"Kingston," she mumbles.

"I'm here."

Her fingernails bite just a little before her hand starts to travel. I capture her wrist.

"Sleep, Eleanor," I tell her even if my cock immediately responds to her plans. There was never enough. I wanted it all. To be buried in her twenty-four seven, to have her taste on my tongue and scent on my skin. I wanted to show her it all. Give it all. But she needed to rest now.

We had time.

"But," she starts.

"Sleep, we'll revisit this in the morning," I kiss her forehead and hold her hand as she sighs and rests again.

I fall asleep with her tucked against me, in a place she's clearly always belonged.

I sleep so deeply I don't feel her stir and then get up. I don't hear it when she strips from my shirt and leaves it folded on my dresser, dressing in her own clothes or when she sneaks out, closing the door behind her.

I wake to the empty bed, now cold where she used to be. It's barely eight A.M and when I get up to search for her, she's nowhere in the penthouse.

I check my phone for a message, but nothing has come through, and then my eyes snag on the note next to a coffee mug placed by my coffee machine.

Her writing is neat, elegant and all it says is one word. *Sorry.*

Oh, she would be sorry.

She thinks she can just leave? I scoff, I've chased her before, I have no problem chasing her again, only this time, I'm going to get creative.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

# *Eleanor*

Guilt gnaws at my stomach, making it churn and tumble. I've showered and dressed, but I knew I couldn't stay home. Kingston would only find me there, so here I am, sat in a coffee shop in the center of London, head buried in a book I can barely focus on, and on my third cup of coffee in the last hour and a half.

It's a rare sunny day, but it's cold, the sun in the sky useless compared to the bitter claws winter firmly had in.

I wondered if he was at my apartment right now. I knew he would be awake but where he was, was anyone's guess. It made me nervous.

I was doing what was right, even if it made me sick.

It would end badly.

I was protecting myself.

I had made it a habit to lie over these last few weeks, what's a couple more even if they're to myself.

Surely, he would give up, and I could just move on. Surely, I was boring compared to what he could have, and eventually he'll get over it. It hurt, even thinking about it but better now than later on, when it'll hurt more.

I order another coffee and just as I'm sitting down, ready to reread the chapter in my book I had neglected to concentrate on, my phone buzzes, an

incoming call.

I check it, expecting Kingston's name, but it's Tobias.

Not much better.

I can't ignore his call, so after hesitating for another moment, I hit the green button, and put the phone to my ear. "Hello?"

It wasn't normal for him to call me on a weekend, but it had happened before.

"Eleanor, I'm sorry to interrupt your weekend, I need you in the office."

"Now?" I hiss.

"Yes, now," he's breathless, "I have a meeting coming in, in ten minutes, and I'm forty-five minutes away, I need you to keep him company until I can get there."

I sigh, "Fine."

"Thank you!" He gushes, "I'll be as quick as I can."

"Who is it anyway?" I ask but he's already hung up.

Rolling my eyes, I get up and head to the counter, getting my coffee transferred to a takeaway cup and shoving my book into my purse. I was only around the corner from the office, so I take a leisurely stroll down the street, weaving through the Saturday morning crowds.

The office wouldn't be empty, it never is. Far too many people worked overtime over the weekend, and it would be at least half full.

I slip in through the door, greet the weekend security guard who stands close to the doors and head up to my floor. I don't say anything to any of the staff that have their heads buried in the computers, tapping incessantly on the keyboards, or talking on the phone.



I crouch on the other side of my desk, going into the bottom drawer to fish out the keys for the meeting rooms when I hear footsteps, and then them stopping on the other side of the desk.

“Just a minute,” I shout over to them.

“Take your time,” they say, and my spine stiffens, “I quite like it when you’re on your knees.”

I jerk up, so suddenly I smack my head on the desk. I hiss out a breath, rubbing the tender spot as I see exactly who it is on the other side.

Kingston stands there, dressed impeccably in a suit, hands buried into the pockets of his trousers. He’s groomed and neat and even with the tattoos still showing he looks like a different man. He looks like Harrison, and I hate it. I want Kingston, in his rough denim jeans and t-shirt that seem to mold to his shape, I want all his tattoos on show to me, the cocky smile and skilled fingers.

“Kingston,” I breathe.

He cocks a brow, “Who?”

I correct myself, “Harrison.” The name is sour on the tongue.

“Very good, love.”

“What... why are you here?”

“Well, I have a meeting of course, of some urgency and Tobias was more than happy to oblige when a half a million pounds was on the line.”

“You went to my apartment.” I accuse.

“No. I knew you’d be smart enough to get out, after all I’d find you far too easily there and we both know how much I enjoy the chase. All it took was a couple of carefully constructed lies and your boss would bend over backwards for the money, and he’d drag you into it. Chasing isn’t always running after someone, Eleanor, you’d be wise to remember that.”

“And what if I didn’t want you to chase?” I snap. I was losing all of my control.

“You want me to chase, Eleanor, a part of you thrives in the fear, but mostly you want to be caught.”

I swallow.

“You’re thinking about it now, what being caught means. What happens to you now that I have you.”

“Nothing,” I clench my hands, he isn’t wrong, “Nothing can happen because we’re here.”

He just smiles, “So, will you take me through to that meeting room now?”

There were more than a few pairs of eyes on us, watching the exchange, though I doubted they heard anything, “Of course, sir,” I spit, “follow me.”

“Always,” he replies.

My hands shake as he follows me down the hall. I unlock the door with him close behind and when I open it, he doesn’t hesitate to follow.

“Tobias will be in soon.”

His eyes hold mine as he pushes the door closed.

“That’s a lie,” he says, “such a little liar.”

“Kingston,” I try.

“Eleanor.”

He moves quickly, too quickly for me to counter, and then I’m pressed to the wall, chest first, his own against my spine.

“Rude of you to leave without a word this morning.”

“I left a note, I didn’t want to wake you.”

“Is lying just so easy for you? And you thought it me who was to corrupt you, perhaps you were already there.” He grumbles and presses his lips to my neck.

“Stop,” I whisper even though my body responds, even though I press my arse back and arousal floods through me. “Someone could come in.”

“They won’t.”

“They can hear.”

“Then you best be quiet,” he rasps in my ear. “You left without a word, Eleanor, nothing, and here I thought we both knew what you wanted. You need a reminder.”

“King,” I warn with no conviction, not realizing what it is I’ve just said. Not until he growls with a possessive rasp.

“Say it again.”

I don’t hesitate, “King.”

I’m thankful I chose a dress to wear, thankful that it’s loose enough that he can shove it up over my hips, bunching it in his fist on the base of my spine. His hands grasp my arse, fingers leaving marks.

“Fuck, Eleanor,” he breathes, “I’ll never tire of this fucking arse.”

He swipes his fingers over my pussy above the material of my panties.

“You still deny yourself me when your body demands it.”

He wasn’t wrong.

My breath whooshes out of me as he pushes my thong out of the way and impales me on his fingers. No foreplay, no warming up, not that I need it with how wet he makes me.

“Always so ready,” he comments, pumping his hand.

I move with him. Always needy when it comes to what he has to offer.

“Yes,” I pant.

“I’m going to fuck you now, Eleanor,” he tells me, “Be a good girl and stay quiet.” I hear his zipper and the rustle of clothing and then the head of his cock is pressing into my pussy, pushing in, my body stretching and convulsing at the sensation of him filling me so slowly, I’m sure it’ll kill me.

He stifles his own groan once he’s buried all the way to the hilt. “You feel so fucking good, love.”

He starts to fuck me then, not at all like usual where everything he does is calculated, slow and torturous. He fucks me with a purpose. A reminder. A promise.

He pumps his hips and I meet his thrusts, climbing that peak. When he adjusts his position, bending his knees slightly to hit that spot inside, I cry out with a loud shrill, unable to stifle it.

He yanks me back so suddenly, I slam against his chest and his hand flies up to cover my mouth, his deep chuckle rasping in my ear, “I told you to be quiet, love. That wasn’t very quiet.”

He keeps moving, keeps fucking me. I whimper against his hand, his free one dipping down to pinch my clit.

The scream that wants to be ripped from me is blocked by that hand, and only a small cry, muffled and suppressed escapes me.

He hears it though, that small sound, a cry mostly.

“I know, Eleanor,” his voice is suddenly gentle, his breathing fast, “I know.”

His thrusts become harder, faster, his fingers moving quicker, and I come, earth-shatteringly hard. He follows me over that edge, spilling himself in me.

“Fuck,” he growls, taking a minute to let us both get our breathing under control before he pulls out.

I wince at the loss and then at the feel of him seeping onto my thighs.

I need to clean myself up, straighten myself back out, but my body still tremors with the aftershocks of the orgasm and my breathing is still out of control.

“Don’t run from me, Eleanor,” King says from behind me.

“I have to go clean up,” I say, “I need to just – go.”

He sighs loudly, “I’ll chase, always.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

*Eleanor*

“I’ll chase. Always.”

I didn’t doubt it. Kingston wasn’t a man willing to let something go. He wanted me, and he’d have me, no matter the cost.

I go to the bathroom, keeping my head down to hide the flush on my cheeks. I’m sure everyone knows exactly what just happened, what I just did with a client in the office – even if said client wasn’t that at all.

The bathroom is thankfully empty, so I quickly do my business, cleaning myself up the best I can considering where I am and then splash some cold water on my face, willing the blush on my cheeks to lessen, my breathing to even out. When I feel a little bit more in control I exit, heading back to my desk. Tobias can find King himself, I didn’t need to be in the same room as him.

“Eleanor!” Tobias rounds the corner, “Where is he?”

“Set up in room four,” I tell him, gathering my things, now he’s here I don’t need to be. “I’ll see you later.”

“Wait, where are you going?”

“Home, it’s Saturday.”

“I know, but I need you to take notes.”

I sag, defeated. Just a couple of hours, that's all I want, a couple of hours to sort my head out, to get myself together, but I wasn't going to get that, clearly.

I follow him reluctantly back to where King waits in the room. When I enter, behind Tobias, I spot him slouching in the chair at the head of the table, hands linked behind his head and his ankle resting on his knee.

He smirks, "Tobias," he greets.

His blue eyes meet mine, heating a fraction as he sweeps over my body, "Eleanor, you'll be joining us?"

"She will," Tobias answers for me. He acts as if he doesn't know every inch of my body, as if we haven't spent every night together for the past week and while I expected that, knew it had to happen to keep up whatever ruse he had going on, I hadn't expected the pang of pain it shot into my stomach at the indifference. I saw the heat in his gaze, the way he devoured me with his eyes and the slight curl of his lip, but only because I knew what I was looking for, Tobias wouldn't see that. He would see the man ahead of him treating me with little more than common courtesy.

I hated it.

I knew I had been fighting this, fighting whatever fucked up tie binds us together, stretching it and hoping it'll snap, but I hadn't realized just how hard I had been denying it.

There was no point being afraid of him damning me, it had already happened, and I guess I just had to go along for the ride and be prepared for the pain at the end of it.

I sit to the side, a notebook and a pen in front of me. Tobias continues the general menial talk as he gets settled in, and King is skilled at pretending, telling him about his family and the estates down in the Cotswold's. The lies roll off his tongue, the tales he weaves never wavering, never left open to allow questions.

I flick my eyes to him from behind the curtain of hair, but he's already looking at me and for just a minute, as our eyes meet his own soften, understanding where my mind is going.

He pulls his eyes away before Tobias can notice the prolonged stare and gets right to it. I zone out at this point as they talk numbers, important dates and future plans that'll never happen. I write the notes on autopilot, keeping my eyes trained on the page in front of me.

I jump in my chair when Tobias loudly claps his hands two hours later, bringing the meeting to an end.

"Thank you for seeing me at such late notice," King says.

"Of course," Tobias nods, "Before you go, I wanted to personally invite you to the Gala we're holding on Tuesday. It's to raise money for the Children's hospital."

I knew about the gala and had been invited to attend, my ticket already purchased through the company, but I hadn't planned on going.

"I'd be honored to attend," King replies, shocking me. "I'll have the tickets purchased this afternoon."

"Wonderful, I look forward to seeing you there. Eleanor, you're free to leave."

I nod and exit quickly, leaving them to their fake niceties. There was no point running, no point hiding from King, not when it would be futile. I'd end up snared by him again and again, so I take my time packing up my things, dawdling and prolonging it until I see the two of them heading towards me.

They shake hands again as I walk past, meeting King's eyes. He'll follow.

The air is a welcoming cold as I step out of the building and into the street, avoiding the heavy Saturday traffic as I begin the walk towards the



underground. It's been twenty minutes, but King hasn't caught up yet. Maybe he's going to give me space.

I knew a moment later that even the mere thought of King doing that was ridiculous, especially as a Mercedes pulls up to the curb and the passenger window rolls down, revealing King himself in the driver's seat. He's lost the suit jacket and rolled his sleeves up to show off all those intricate tattoos covering his skin.

"Get in," he orders.

I obey, pulling open the door and sliding in, the warmth from the fan enveloping me and chasing away the cold. I turn to face King and when I do, he reaches over and tucks a tendril of hair behind my ear, his fingers lingering on my cheek.

"I want you to hand in your resignation."

The words shock me stupid. I open my mouth and then close it again, trying and failing to find words to answer that.

His eyes bounce between mine, urging me to speak. He keeps his hand close, tracing the side of my face, my bottom lip until I finally find words again.

"Are you crazy?"

He smiles, "No, love, but I don't want you working for him anymore."

"You didn't seem to mind when it benefitted you." I cross my arms, quirking a brow, "And I might also add, I haven't even got you what you need. We had a deal."

"The deal still stands, I'll help with your friend, but I release you from your end of the bargain."

"Why!?"

He pulls away from me and slumps in his chair, the engine idling, the street outside still busy and yet a world away. Cars blast their horns at the obstruction he's causing to the flow of traffic, but he doesn't care.

"Can you just do it?" He presses.

"Tell me why."

He doesn't, instead he straightens and pulls out into the traffic, heading towards my apartment.

"King," I press.

I had planned to hand in my notice as soon as I could anyway but doing it now made everything I had been trying to do pointless. I hadn't succeeded in getting anything for Kingston, hadn't found anything useful and leaving now would make it impossible. I hated Tobias. And his son. I hated what they did, who they hurt, but I could stick it out a little longer.

He doesn't speak at all the entire drive to my apartment and parks out front. He climbs out, opens my door and begins towards the door.

"Kingston!" I growl behind him, following on his heels.

He's quick as he takes the steps and I stumble after him, trying to keep up. Of course, he doesn't need to wait for me to unlock the door as he has his own key. I'm not even mad about it.

"Kingston!" I shout.

I slam the door, and then he's on me, pressing me up against it.

"Because you're mine!" He growls in my face, "You weren't supposed to be, but you are and having you there, in the direct line of danger isn't something I'm willing to allow to continue. You'll quit and I'll protect you."

"You don't get to make that decision," I breathe, "if I quit, I'm useless."

He presses his forehead to mine, sighing deeply, "I'm sorry, Eleanor, I'm sorry for using you, dragging you into this. I'm sorry I can't let you go."

"King," I breathe.

"Please," he begs, "Tobias is dangerous, and I can't protect you when you're there."

"He doesn't know anything." I say.

"Eleanor," he holds my eyes, "Please."

"Can I think about it?"

He sighs, "You'll think about it?"

"Yes, King, I'll think about it, now can we do something else?"

He grins, "What did you have in mind?"

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

# Kingston

I could be normal. I could pretend to be normal even if *this* is something I haven't been able to do since I was a kid. The market is packed, barely any room to move, let alone walk side by side, but I'll be dead before I let go of Eleanor's hand.

My eyes never stop moving, taking in every face, every body, looking into every shadow and alley, waiting for something to happen. While I had remained anonymous for a long time, there were still some who knew who I was, and would recognize me.

"Relax," Eleanor squeezes my hand.

My teeth bite together hard enough for pain to bloom in my jaw. I didn't make it a habit to carry weapons, but I wished I had one now. I may be out of my element here, but Eleanor wasn't. She ignores the stares that follow us, people eying me, distrusting and then drop to her, wondering how it worked when clearly, we were complete opposites.

And while I was given the cold shoulder by most, Eleanor greeted everyone as if they were friends, speaking to vendors selling flowers and cheese and little trinkets from their brightly colored stalls set up in the market. Street food is cooked, the smells wafting under my nose, sweet doughnuts and hot dogs and burgers.

There was a time when I had done this. With Isobel, with my parents when they were still alive, but that was such a long time ago the memories

were blurry, though these smells, this noise, it was something you wouldn't forget.

"Are you hungry?" Eleanor asks, looking towards a vendor selling coffee and fresh pastries.

I had to remember this is her life, this is what she would do on her weekends, something she'd likely do with Tate if she were around.

I was honest when I said I was sorry about not letting her go, but I couldn't expect for her just to give everything up. I had to give her this.

"Sure," I say, following her towards the stall.

"I tried to come to this market at least once a month," she tells me joining the queue, "I'd come here and get coffee and a croissant, and then I'd go a little further down to the book stall and pick up a couple of new books to read."

"We can do that," I tell her.

She smiles softly and orders two coffees, her pastry, but I don't order any food. The coffee warms my hand as she passes it to me and pays, and then we re-join the crowd, walking towards the books.

She seems content, happy even, within the normal London lifestyle. I watched her during that meeting with Tobias, I watched her face as I spewed those lies, at how her brows pulled and mouth turned down, clearly questioning how easy it was for me to lie. Probably thought a lot of things I'd told her was the same and was questioning what was real and what was fake. But being in that room with Tobias I had to be someone else. I couldn't let on that Eleanor, and I were something more than mere acquaintances, for if they do find out *who* I am, they'll use her.

It was that thought alone that had me begging for her to quit working for the man. It was a panic I wasn't used to feeling when I had everything so under control. Everything but this. Her.

It was a lot to ask her, and I had to hope she'd truly think about it, think about everything I've told her, how dangerous Tobias and his son actually were, and what they would do to her if they ever found out she worked for me.

She eats her croissant as we walk, oblivious to my inner turmoil. Any uncertainty gone. She didn't run from me again though I had to admit, chasing her had become a new favorite thing.

I glance at her, I wonder how much she likes it? I wonder what she wants to try but is too afraid to ask. I'll give it all. I wanted her to experience it all.

We make it to the book vendor and a huge smile spreads across her face as she stares down at all the titles on sale. She starts to pick them up, stacking them in her arms.

"You haven't even read the blurbs?" I laugh.

"So?"

"So how do you know you'll like them?"

She frowns as if the concept is absurd, "Why wouldn't I like them?"

I shake my head and take the books from her, letting her use my arms to stack them. By the time she's finished, there are eight books in my arms, and three in hers. The vendor totals it up and bags her books and once it's paid for, we head back through the market.

My unease has lessened a little, but I can't help but be on alert regardless. I keep her close to me always. At the car, she places her books in the back seat and climbs into the front.

"Thank you." She mumbles when I have the engine started, "I'm sure that isn't something you'd like to do."

"If you enjoy it, Eleanor, then we'll do it." She blushes and I have to wonder what just went through her head.

“What do you enjoy?” She asks quietly.

I glance over to her, the blush on her cheeks telling me the question isn't so innocent.

“You'll have to be more specific, love,” I tease, “Do you mean in my spare time or sexually?”

“Uh,” she chokes, “The second one.”

I chuckle, reveling in that flush on her cheeks and neck, “You want to know what gets me off, Eleanor, other than your perfect pussy?”

“Oh God!” She covers her face in her hands, hiding that blush from me.

“Come on, Eleanor, is that what you want?”

“Yes!” She mumbles into her hands.

“Look at me,” I say to her, the car rolling through the traffic.

She peeks through her fingers and glares at me.

“There are a few things,” I reach across, my hand wrapping around her thigh, squeezing her flesh. She blows out a heavy breath, “Everything about you turns me on. Your innocence. Your fear. Your blush and arousal.”

She moves her hand now, dropping it to her lap, close to mine. I keep one eye on the road, but mostly I'm paying attention to her. I move my pinky finger, brushing it up against her hand, “but there are other things. I made Crimson as a release, to give and receive. A safe place to explore your desires with people with similar interests. When I came into this life, I had a lot of anger and no way to get it out without bloodshed, and I found sex to be the safest way to ease that pressure.”

I risk a glance at her face, expecting some judgement but finding her expression open, willing to listen and understand.

I turn back to the road and take a right off the main street, going the longer way home but with less traffic. We drive by office buildings and shops, cafés and restaurants, people milling about even with the temperature hovering around freezing.

“I’ve slept with a lot of people, Eleanor, I’ve done things that most people would have never even heard of, but most of all, I found I liked to watch.”

“Watch?”

I smirk, “I like to watch people fuck, love, I like to see their pleasure, their release while I get my own.”

“Like porn?”

I chuckle, “Porn isn’t real. It’s good for a quick orgasm but nothing lasting, I want real, lasting pleasure, a release to keep me satiated and seeing it in front of me gives me that.”

“Would you watch me?”

My head snaps towards her, forgetting I’m driving, forgetting I’m going fast enough to do damage to both of us and anyone in our paths.

“Watch you how?”

She looks out the window and then back at me, steeling her shoulders, “Get pleasure.”

“By another man?”

The thought was both intoxicating and enough fuel to have me seeing red. It would be an experience, to see her climb that peak, but seeing it happen because of another man would be a test, I’m sure.

She shrugs, “Maybe, or maybe by myself? Both? I don’t know.”

“I would watch you.” I decide. “However way it came.”



She nods and goes back to looking out the window.

“What about you?”

“I don’t know what I like, I’ve never done any of this. The sex with you is different to the sex I’ve had with anyone else.”

I grin.

She rolls her eyes.

“What about your desires? What do you want to try if given the chance?”

She thinks for a long minute as I take another corner, close to her apartment now.

“I’ve never...” she hesitates, “I’ve only done basic things, foreplay and sex, I found it more an inconvenience than anything else.”

“Is that right? Should we change that then?”

She laughs, “Not now, not anymore but because of that, I’ve never thought much on it. Crimson scared me.”

“Why?”

“Because I liked it.”

She chews her lip, brows pulled low.

“You won’t be judged by me, Eleanor.”

She looks over at me, searches my face and sighs, “I liked being touched in front of people, I liked watching. I liked it when you chased me and caught me. I liked the fear and how it made me feel.”

I nod. I knew this already, but she needed to figure it out herself. “What else?”

“That day, at Crimson, we were in front of a room, there were, uh, three people.”

I suck my tongue on my teeth, suppressing my smile, “You want to try it.”

It’s not a question but even so, it’s confirmed by her silence. I pull up to her apartment and kill the engine. Neither of us move to get out of the car.

“We have time,” I tell her, “We can try it when you’re ready.”

She blows out a breath, doesn’t say a word and gets out the car.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

*Eleanor*

“Pack a bag,” King says from behind me, closing the door with a soft click.

I glance over my shoulder; he just crosses his arms and waits.

I roll my eyes but go through to my room, packing up my things and placing them in a bag, just enough to see me through until Monday morning. It was a colossal mistake, giving up my fight but if I was honest, I didn't want to fight anymore.

Today was nice. It was almost normal, or as normal as it would get with a man like Kingston. He thinks I didn't notice how stiff he was, how he watched *everyone* in that market like they were a threat. I guess that's how he saw the world. Everyone in it posed some form of danger.

In his life I guess that's how he survived.

I meet him by the door where he takes my bag and then my hand, rubbing his thumb over my knuckles. His brows twitch, wanting to pull into a frown, but he stops it and pulls me towards the door, back to the car.

The drive across the city to his penthouse is quiet, both of us trapped in our heads, thinking about that latest conversation. He would let me, he would give me everything I wished for, but I would give him the same. He liked to watch. I expected to feel a little disorientated by that, I expected to judge him, it was human nature to do so, to judge what we do not know, but I didn't feel at all like that. All I wanted was to give him what he wanted.

I follow him to the elevator and inside it's much like the car, quiet but not uncomfortable. The penthouse, as far as I can tell, is empty, quiet and King goes about making coffees, his back to me while he works.

Something has changed. Something monumental. I open my phone ready to idly scroll through social media, but a text message freezes my hand.

**Tate:** Hey Eleanor. I'm just checking in to let you know I'm all good. Hope you're okay. I don't know when I'll be back. I'm enjoying this time away. I hope you understand.

A choked sob sounds as I drop the phone.

I didn't see Kingston move, but he's there in an instant, pulling me to his chest and holding a knife he pulled from the block on the side, prepared to fight off the invisible threat. I shake my head against his chest, "The phone," I hiccup.

He lays the knife down and lifts the phone, lighting the screen to show the text message.

"They started after I asked Garrett if he had seen her, I'd told him I was worried, he's using her phone."

"And you're sure these aren't from her?" He asks, scrolling through the others I've received.

"She calls me Ellie, always has and is the only one who does. And she doesn't speak like this, she's a lot more relaxed, and she always puts kisses on her texts."

"How long have you and Tate been friends?" King asks.

"Seven years."

He sighs, "she means a lot to you." He continues

“She was there when I moved to the city, the only person who was, we bonded, moved in together. She’s family.”

He smooths his hand down the back of my head, soothing me, “We’ll get her back.”

“Why her?”

He sighs heavily, “I’ve been looking into Tobias for a long time, and his son along with the organization he works for, I’ve told you already, they use women like nothing more than meat, but I will admit, this isn’t their usual MO.”

“What do you mean?”

“Tate has connections, people who will notice her missing, friends, co-workers, family, they usually go for girls with little to no family or women from shadier backgrounds.”

“So, Tate isn’t their usual victim? Surely that’s not a good sign.”

“I wouldn’t speculate, Eleanor, I can’t promise she’s alive, but the fact that they’ve done something that could get them caught doesn’t mean they’ve hurt her. They want people to think she’s still alive and free, she’ll have to eventually show her face in order for that image to stay believable. What of her family?”

“They’re convinced she’s fine,” I sniff, “But the way she speaks to them is different from me. Her family is strict, conservative, with me she wasn’t like that.”

He continues to smooth his tattooed hand down my hair, “We’ll end this, Eleanor, we’ll get her back.”

I don’t say anything, but I hoped he was right.

The rest of the afternoon is quiet until Ace and Micha show up. They bundle into the penthouse, huge bodies and loud voices shattering the peaceful quiet King and I had fallen into. I felt King didn’t get it very often,

a moment to himself, a moment of quiet, I couldn't help but resent them for disturbing it.

Ace is dirty, his brow split and blood trickling from a cut on his bottom lip, Micha is in a better state but still, he looks tired with a growing shadow beneath his eye.

King is up in an instant, "What the fuck happened?"

Ace waves a hand, bypasses the coffee machine and pulls a bottle of beer from the fridge. "We ran into a couple of guys sniffing around Crimson. "

"Who?"

Ace shakes his head, "They weren't willing to answer questions. We took care of it."

"Is that normal?" I ask.

Micha looks over to me and then King, who nods once. "Sometimes. We have everyone sign an NDA upon joining to stop them telling people about it, but that doesn't mean it doesn't happen, it's usually someone scorned, kicked out or rejected who tells the wrong person and they then come sniffing, wondering how they can use it or profit off it."

"But why?"

"A lot of people think what we do there is illegal, they try blackmail, but the more insidious plots have more to do with what *they* can get out of it. Who they can hurt when they're most vulnerable."

I shudder.

"It isn't Tobias?" I ask.

"I doubt it," King answers.

I look back to the guys, to Ace whose brow continues to bleed, “Let me help,” I say to him, “Where’s the first aid kit?”

“Under the sink,” King tells me. I pull it from its place and open it up, pulling out the supplies.

“I’m fine,” Ace grumbles as I step up to him, pursing my lips. Up close, I can see the bruises forming under the skin, dark shadows against light. The split in his lip is shallow, barely a graze but that one in his brow is a lot deeper.

“Shh,” I admonish. I start on the brow seeing as it’s the worse of the two, ripping open an alcohol wipe to clean it. He hisses through his teeth as I make contact but otherwise stays quiet.

I feel King watching me, I feel Ace watching me, both of them burning holes through me, but I try not to pay attention to that as I carefully clean away the new and old blood and then dry the area.

I find steri-strips in the kit and cut off three strips.

“I’m good, little one,” Ace mumbles.

I huff out a breath, “Shut up, Ace.”

Chuckles sound behind me as I get to work applying the steri-strips to his brow, pulling the skin together to seal the cut. When I’m done, I pat his cheek and put the supplies away.

This earns a whole round of laughs from the guys behind me.

“Did you just – did she just...” Ace stutters.

I shake my head, grab a wine glass from the cupboard and pour myself a big old glass of red, listening to them as they talk shit to each other.

It was normal. This.

This family that was not family at all.

This, I could get used to.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

# Kingston

It was a rare thing for any of us to let ourselves be consumed by alcohol. It left you weak, vulnerable but the state we were in... yeah, we were drunk.

Fucked actually.

Ace stumbles towards the bathroom, clutching a bottle of red wine in his hand, drinking straight from it while Micha lays passed out on the couch. Eleanor is in a better state, a little flushed and drowsy but coherent and me, I was buzzed but stable.

It was a little past midnight, early by any comparison, but I wanted Eleanor in my bed and naked. Now.

I don't bother waking Micha or waiting for Ace, they'll crash where they fall and quite frankly, I didn't care. I down the rest of the bourbon I had in my glass and stand, walking towards where she lays sprawled in a chair and pull her up, crashing my mouth to hers as soon as she's in distance.

She whimpers into my mouth, her tongue tasting the bourbon off mine. I don't break the kiss as I guide her towards my bedroom, kicking the door closed behind us, but it's here she decides to take control. The alcohol in her veins gives her more confidence, enough to tell her she could do this, but not too much for her not to be in control of her own thoughts.

“I brought something with me,” she says, backing me towards the chair in the room. The backs of my knees hit the edge and I fall into a sitting position, letting her dominate the situation, giving her the control I know she needs.

“What’s that?” I ask, popping the buttons on the shirt I still hadn’t changed out from since the meeting this morning. I untuck it and let it fall open.

“You can wait—” her words cut off as she turns towards me, lips parted, eyes devouring my naked torso, tracing over the tattoos and the ridges. I love how she looks at me. It’s the only thing she can’t hide from me. The amount of wanton need in that gaze, the heat, the desire, it’s a beacon for my depraved soul.

“Come on, Eleanor, show me what you have.”

She shakes her head, dragging her gaze away. “Give me a minute.”

“Take all the time you need.”

Her cheeks are reddened, but she doesn’t shy away, instead she heads to the bathroom, stealing a robe from the hook that hangs just outside the door. I stay where I am, waiting for her, wondering what exactly she has planned.

When she comes out a few minutes later, she has the robe tied around her frame tightly. She barely meets my eyes, a flush on her skin.

“Just give me a minute,” she says a little breathlessly, “can you, maybe, shut your eyes?”

I quirk a brow and smirk, slouching down further in the chair, closing my eyes like she asked. It helps that I’m picturing everything under that robe, the firm breasts, the taut stomach and shapely hips, the perfect pussy begging for my touch. My cock jerks at the thought of sinking deep into it, feeling the warmth envelope it, of me buried to the balls and feeling her convulse around me.

I hear her moving around, clothes shuffling, things being moved and then the slight squeak of the mattress as she climbs onto it. I can picture it too, her small frame kneeling first at the edge and then shuffling up it, getting herself comfortable on the pillows, pulling her hair out from beneath her before dragging the covers up to her chin.

“Okay,” She breathes, “You can open your eyes.”

Of all the things I had been expecting, this was not it.

I had expected some lingerie, lacy and translucent, ready to be ripped off by my teeth, but not the completely exposed skin on show, the naked breasts, nipples peaked, not the way her legs lay sprawled, bent at the knee but thighs apart, showing me *everything*.

I swallow.

The urge to go to her is as strong as the need to breathe. She lays at the top of the mattress, the pillows piled behind her, so she’s half sitting up and looking right at me.

In one hand she holds a single silver object.

“You like to watch,” she whispers, “I want to show you.”

“Love,” the word comes out broken, a rasp of pure primal need.

I grip the arms of the chair so tight I’m surprised I don’t rip them clean off.

“Watch,” she smiles slightly as her hand travels down her stomach and dips between her legs, manicured fingers parting her folds and gently, tentatively, stroking over her clit. She smears her wetness over her pussy, coating herself in her own arousal as she holds my gaze.

“Eleanor,” I choke.

“Watch.”

My cock grows so hard it becomes painful, straining against the zipper of my trousers.

I liked watching. I fucking loved watching. But watching her was *torture*. Beautiful and chaotic, divine, and painful.

She circles her fingers over her clit, her lips parting as the pleasure captures her, working herself up and then the vibrating starts.

She moves that silver object in her hand towards her clit, the thing vibrating so hard and incessantly the noise is an echo in my head, but when she puts the tip of it against her clit her head falls back, and she gasps.

“Fuck,” I growl.

She uses both hands now, one holding the vibrator to her clit, the other slipping down to tease at her hole, and she works herself, forgetting me, blind to her pleasure.

Her hips twitch, wanting to grind, but she keeps mostly still, fucking herself with her fingers and working her clit and I can't take it anymore. I rip open my trousers and grab my cock, squeezing it hard as my breath hisses through my teeth.

“Say my name,” I demand, pumping myself hard.

“King,” she obeys, the sound a breath from her lips as she continues to pleasure herself.

“Yes, like that,” I fuck my own hand to the view of her fucking herself, of her showing me how she likes it.

Her moans get louder as she finds her rhythm, her body twitching as she hits nerves but me, watching isn't enough.

She's so lost in what she's doing to herself that she doesn't see me come towards her, doesn't feel me situate myself between her legs until I'm pushing her hand away and spearing my own fingers inside of her. She cries

out as I hit deeper than she could. My hand continues to pump my cock but at the same speed I fuck her with my other hand.

“Fuck, yes,” she moans, lifting her hips higher and pressing that vibrator harder to her clit.

Seeing her like this, watching her lost in her euphoria, it wasn't what I had expected it to be.

“Fuck,” I growl, unable to hold it back. The need for her, the need to own her, claim her, have her in every single way that was physically possible.

I pull my fingers from her and line the head of my cock to her pussy, sinking in.

We moan in unison, her stretching around my size. “Keep doing what you're doing,” I tell her when she goes to pull away. She holds her hand steady, keeping the vibration on her clit, rubbing it up and down, side to side, milking every ounce of pleasure it can give her all the while I pump my hips, sinking in further with each thrust.

It's like her body was built for me. The way I fit inside, her enveloping me in a tight sheath, our breathing mingling, syncing. I can't get enough. Never enough.

I grip her hips as I fuck her, pushing in and out, reveling in the way she responds, the way her eyes roll back and her face tightens.

I thrust hard, hitting some part of her that makes her scream and I do it again, and again.

“King!” She pleads, one hand coming up to lay against the bottom of my abdomen, both pulling and pushing me away.

“What do you want?” I growl, pounding in so hard our skin thuds together.

“Oh god,” She cries out right before she shatters. Her mouth parts on a silent scream as her head tips back, exposing her throat to me as her cunt pulses around my cock.

“Haven’t I told you before, love,” I finish my sentence with a harsh, rough pound of my hips, “God can’t help you now.”

The silent scream turns loud. Her pussy convulses so violently it becomes almost vice like as I pump in and out of her and a warm wetness coats my cock as she comes so violently, she goes silent again, her body spasming around me.

“Fuck, your pussy feels so fucking good, the feel of you coming on my cock! I think we can have another, I *want* another,” I tell her, leaning down once she settles slightly, kissing her mouth,

“I don’t think I can,” she moans.

“Oh, I think you can, love, you can take it,” I whisper against her mouth as I slip out, grab her hips and turn her over.

“King,” she warns as the head of my cock presses against that virgin flesh of her arse.

I chuckle, “I’ll have you here,” I promise, “and you’ll scream louder than you ever have before.”

She groans as she wiggles, letting me slip right back into her cunt. I’ll have another orgasm out of her even if it kills me, and so I go again, and again, fucking her until the only thing she can remember is my name.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



Monday comes too quickly.

Being wrapped up in Kingston has made the world around me almost non-existent, if not for Ace and Micha showing up, I would truly believe only him and I existed in this city.

We spent most of the weekend lost in each other, learning what the other loved, what pushed us to the edge, what kept us there, never quite tipping us over that ledge. It was glorious and torturous, but the world still existed even if we didn't want it to.

I'm pouring a coffee into a travel mug borrowed from deep within one of King's cupboards when the call comes in.

"Yeah?" King says from behind me.

I add milk to the coffee as silence falls behind me. A couple of seconds later the call goes to speakerphone.

When I turn Micha and Ace are leaning over the phone listening.

"We have a way back in," the voice on the other end of the line says.

"How?" King demands.

“The encryptions are tough but not foolproof, it requires getting close,” They say. King’s eyes meet mine but just as quickly as they do, he looks away, not willing to think about what is needed here.

Me.

“What needs to happen?” It’s Ace that asks.

“The servers are split into two on opposites sides of the building, they didn’t remove the bugs, as far as I could tell, they couldn’t find them, but they sent out a virus to disable them while keeping their own documents safe.”

“Is that possible?” I ask.

“Coding,” Micha says.

I wasn’t going to pretend I knew how that worked.

“I’ve created a host,” the voice says, “A Trojan that acts like their own virus, but once it’s in, it’ll release the virus and give us access, as far as I can tell, it doesn’t notify the host.”

“How sure are you?” King asks.

“I can never be one hundred percent, their cybersecurity is extensive, a lot of veins, but I’m almost certain we can conceal it enough to pass as one of their own.”

“So, how do we get it in?”

The voice sighs, “that’s the hard part, they have a huge network and what I have created isn’t strong enough to take it all. If we can get two hard drives plugged, we’ll be in. One will give us a town, two will give us the kingdom.”

“Tell me how to do it,” I pipe up.

It would only be me who could.



Silence greets me, but it doesn't deter me, I look to King, to Ace and Micha, "Tell me how to do it."

"The Trojans have to be inputted into both servers. Once inserted it'll take five minutes to unload the data to overtake the system and to bypass their encryption unnoticed."

"What are the servers?" I ask

I try to think about what I know about the IT in the building. There was a large team and there are two rooms holding machines that flash and beep and hum that I've never paid attention to.

"Server one is T and the second G."

"Do I have to get into the server directly?" I ask.

No one else is speaking. They stare at me like I've grown a second head.

"No," the guy says, "Just a drive linked to the server, the Trojan will do the rest."

"Okay, I can do that. Can you send me the drives to insert?"

"On the way to you now."

The guy hangs up and three pairs of eyes turn on me.

"No." King immediately says.

"It's dangerous," Micha says, "You could be caught."

"You remember what I taught you?" Ace follows up.

At least he has my back.

"You're not doing it." King growls.

“You have another idea?” I ask, “Do you have unlimited access to the building to be able to plant the Trojan, Kingston?”

“We talked about this,” King’s voice softens.

“But this could get you back in without them ever knowing,” I counter, “We could get what we need.”

“Eleanor, if you get caught, they won’t just sell you and use you, they will kill you.”

“I won’t get caught, Tobias trusts me.”

“No.” King says again but Micha is silent, and Ace is watching me with admiration.

“We need the in,” Ace says, “Being blind has delayed us.”

“And you think risking Eleanor is the way to stop that?”

“Eleanor is a big girl, let her make her own decisions. She has something to lose too.”

“I agree.” The second feminine voice is a shock.

I whip my head around to find Isobel leaning on the door, dressed in a pair of tight leather trousers and a white knitted jumper, her black hair dead straight.

“Every one of us has had to earn their place, let this be hers.”

“Shut up, Isobel,” King growls.

“She’s right,” Micha chimes in, “We have all had to do something, you want her here, she wants to be here, let her prove it.”

“And if she gets caught?” King bellows.

“Then we get her back!” Ace yells back.

I wasn't fond of being spoken about like I wasn't here, but I stayed quiet. I felt more than saw Isobel slide up to me. Her hand lands on my shoulder, not hard at all, a comfort. She gives me a squeeze before she leans down and whispers, "Men will always believe women need to be cared for, show them that that is not the case."

"The drives are being delivered," I say, only to King, "I'm the only one with access, I'll do it and when I'm done," I stare right at Kingston, "I'll hand in my resignation. I'll quit, just like you asked."

"Eleanor."

"Let me do it."

"What if you get caught?" He asks, pain masking his voice.

"I won't," I couldn't be sure, but I don't show that. I don't show my hesitation or lack of faith. It would work.

"If she gets caught, I've taught her how to defend herself," Ace pipes up, straightening his shoulders, "She knows what to do."

I didn't, but I let him have it.

Micha and King stare at me. Micha is softer, a lot more likely to agree, but it isn't him I need to convince, "Kingston, I promise I'll leave the company but only if you let me do this one last thing."

It was the least I could do. I had failed at getting the information King needed, failed at learning anything new and so this, this was my redemption.

I would be part of taking Tobias down.

Of saving Tate.

"I don't want you to do this," King says quietly, vulnerably.

"I know," I reply, "But I want to."

“You know what you need to do?”

I nod, “My own computer is linked to server T, I just need to find one linked to G and insert the drive.”

“Tell me what you’ll do if you’re caught,” He asks.

“Fight. Call you. Run.”

“No.”

“What?” My brows pull down.

“You just run, Eleanor.”

Ace opens his mouth to defend me, but I put a hand on his forearm. I understood where King was coming from. This wasn’t coming from a place of logic or rational thinking, it was coming from a place where a man lov – no – cared, *deeply*, for a woman.

I would tell King all he needed to hear.

“I’ll run.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

*Kingston*

The drives will arrive later today, and Eleanor can get them in tomorrow. I hated it.

The idea that she was putting herself in danger. If she gets caught, if they catch wind of the Trojans, I doubted they'd give her a chance to escape. There would be no selling her into the ring with a chance of me getting her out. They'll just kill her.

Ace and Micha disappear to the gym, Isobel with them, leaving just the two of us in the kitchen.

She sips at her coffee, dressed already for the office. Everything had changed this weekend. Nothing would be the same again. The thought terrified and exhilarated me all the same.

"There are others who can do this," I tell her, sitting opposite her, "It doesn't have to be you."

"And how do you suppose you'll get them in?" She counters, "It'll look a bit odd if you or anyone else on your team starts sniffing around laptops. I'm trusted. It'll be easy for me."

"I'd find a way," I shrug, I always found a way.

"I promised, King, as soon as I've done this, I'll do what you want and quit. Just let me do it."

My teeth grind together.

“I want your phone on you at all times, you call me if you even get a sniff of something going wrong.”

She smiles and then laughs, “And what, you’ll storm the building and kill them all?” It’s a joke but I’m not laughing.

“Yes.”

The smile falls from her face.

“You’re mine now, Eleanor. If anyone even thinks about touching you, about hurting you, I’ll destroy them.”

“Kingston,” she whispers. “I’ll be fine. Promise.”

She climbs up from her seat and walks around to me, positioning herself in my lap. I give her the space to do so, my hand falling onto her thigh. Her pencil skirt is tight, formed to her shape like a second skin.

“I have to go to work now, I’ll use today to figure out who’s on the second server, so I know what to do tomorrow.”

“Be careful, love,” I whisper against her lips.

“Always,” she kisses me and gets up, gathering her things, “I’ll come back later for my bags.”

“Or you’ll grab some new clothes and stay here again,” I counter.

She quirks a brow, “fine.”

She starts for the door, before I stop her again, “Do you have a dress?”

Eleanor pauses at the door, Micha popping out from the gym to drive her to work. I would do it but if someone spots me, it’s questions we don’t need to answer right now.

“For what?”

“The gala.”

“You’re actually going?” She frowns.

“Got to keep up appearances, for now, so, do you?”

“I wasn’t going to go.”

“You are now, answer the question.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Okay, see you later.”

I don’t let her question me, I get up and head to the gym, finding Ace in front of the boxing bag, his fists thumping into the leather in steady, rhythmic thuds. When he spots me, he captures the bag to stop the swing and waits for me to talk.

“You alright?”

“Will she actually be able to protect herself?”

“She’ll be able to get away, that’s enough.”

“I don’t fucking like this, Ace.”

Ace stares at me, but I don’t give a fuck if it makes me fucking weak. I slump down onto a bench and cradle my head in my hands, fingers tugging at my hair. Ace slaps me on the back but says nothing. There isn’t anything he can say, he knows as well as I do how much trouble this could bring. What could happen to her if they found out the connection to me.

It made me even more selfish that I was not willing to let her go.

# Eleanor

The office is busy, final preparation going on for the Gala tomorrow night. Tobias is in his office with Garrett and thankfully, his calendar is clear today so I'll have plenty of time to figure out who is on the G server.

I complete my usual tasks in record time, giving me plenty of time during the afternoon to scope out other computers and figure out a way to do it that didn't look weird. I double-check my own server and confirm to myself I am the T before I print out a schedule for tomorrow night and get up from my computer.

This had to work. Even if I didn't speak to anyone in the office other than Tate, I knew everyone, and they knew me. I go about checking through the preparations, acting as if I am checking things off my list before going over to HR to confirm numbers for the gala.

"Josie," I greet with a smile. She's flushed and panicked, but she gives me a smile anyway and goes right back to her work. I walk around her desk and place the piece of paper I printed on the top, right next to the still full coffee.

"Everything okay?" I ask with genuine concern.

"It's just so busy," she rushes out, her fingers buzzing over the keyboard, "all these preparations, I'm worried I've missed something."

"Why don't I help," I throw my hand out dramatically, gesturing to the schedule and to do list only to purposely knock that coffee over, all over the paper and her desk.

We both jump back, Josie yelling as the coffee spills, dripping off the side and onto the carpet.



“Oh, I’m sorry!”

She grumbles and goes about grabbing some cloths to clean it up.

“You get that,” I tell her, “I’ll print a new schedule and help you!”

She pauses and then her face softens, “Thank you, Eleanor.”

“No problem,” I smile, going on to her laptop as she mops up the coffee. It’s easy to see the server name as I open up the files and it lists it down the left side.

T Server.

Damn it.

I do what I said I would and print out the schedule, hoping it will actually help her and leave. I couldn’t do that to every person in the office until I found the right one. I slowly walk through, pretending to check my to do as I walk past those involved in tomorrow’s gala while looking over their shoulders, hoping they’ll have the files open so I can see. Only a few do and no luck. Everyone is on T. Come to think of it, I knew there were two servers, but everything for the company was on T, I had no idea what was on G.

I pause outside Tobias’ office. Garrett is gone, so I take a deep breath and slip in. This was normal. Checking in on the boss.

“Hi Tobias,” I smile, the expression forced and painful.

He offers me a warm smile.

I go around his desk, glancing at his computer out of the corner of my eye and see exactly what I need to see. The G Server. I pluck up his coffee cup, “I’ll fetch you another coffee.”

“Are you okay, Eleanor?” He asks, stopping me fleeing.

My fingers tighten on the mug, “Just fine.”

His eyes narrow, “is there something you want to tell me?”

My heart leaps into my throat, what did he know? “I don’t think so.”

He continues to scrutinize me but then looks away, “I know it’s been busy lately, thank you for what you did for me on Saturday, you know I wouldn’t ask you to work a weekend if it can be helped. I hope you’ll come to the gala tomorrow, relax and let your hair down a little.”

“I’ll be there,” I tell him and use the pause to escape.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



I collapse against my couch. It's dark out, the sky covered in thick suffocating clouds that promise rain is not far off. I was tired, but I had a plan for tomorrow. It would work, and then I would get out, handing in my notice on Wednesday after the gala.

I need King to agree of course, but I'm certain he'll be happy to when it involves him now.

With an exhausted groan I haul my sorry butt off the couch and head to my room to pack some things. I turn on the lights only to be greeted by a very large black box on the bed. I huff out a laugh, already knowing where it's come from and what's likely inside.

I pluck the note card from the top and rip it open.

*I think my new favorite thing is going to be you in this dress. K.*

I roll my eyes but eagerly rip off the lid. The dress is covered in a thick sparkling black paper that I gently open to find a dress the color of blood inside. It's vibrant but not overly and there is a subtle sparkle in the fabric. It's soft to touch and nerves come over me as I grasp it between my fingers and draw it from the box with a whoosh of material.

It's floor length with a high, halter-neck style top half that looks like it'll be tight and while it looks simple, I know it won't be. I chew my lip, debating on trying it on before I head to Kingston's and then decide not to. I have no doubt it'll fit.

I pack it back into the box and then shove all my other things in a bag and call an Uber.

A half hour later I'm dropped off outside the building housing his penthouse and head through, hitting the call button on the elevator. It rings a minute later, the doors opening.

Kingston is cooking when I reach the kitchen, so casual in his gray sweats and tight white tee, all those intricate tattoos on show to me. For a minute I just admire the view.

"It's quite rude to stare, love," I hear the amusement in his tone though he doesn't turn around, just continues cooking at the stove.

I don't see them, but I know the other two are here somewhere.

"The drives?" I ask.

"Safe."

"I know where to insert the second drive," I tell him. He pauses his cooking, just for a second, spine stiffening, "and I have a plan."

"Whose computer?" He asks before asking the plan.

"King, it'll work, I just need your help."

"Whose?"

"Tobias'."

"You couldn't find any other?" He spins, eyes narrowed.

"No, I couldn't, and we need to do it sooner rather than later, so this is it."

"What's your plan then?" He crosses his arms, jaw tight.

“I need you to distract Tobias while I get into his office and insert the drive.”

“A very simple plan,” he runs his thumb across his bottom lip.

“These things don’t need to be difficult, King.”

His mouth quirks at the side, “A lot could go wrong, how do you suppose I distract him?”

He turns back to the stove, finishing off the dinner and plating it up. He lays a plate in front of me and sits opposite, spooning the pasta into his mouth.

“You can’t schedule a meeting,” I say, “with the gala he’ll be too busy to accept, so you need to turn up and demand to see him. Don’t give the option. I’ll get you and call for him, with you already there he won’t refuse. Half an hour, that’s all I need.”

“The drive takes five minutes to upload to the server, why do you need that long?”

“I don’t, it’s just in case.”

He nods slowly, moving the food around on his plate.

“Okay.” He agrees eventually.

We fall into silence as we finish off the food and when I’m done, I look up at him, “Thank you.”

His brows pull low, “For?”

I smile, “I’m sure there is plenty I could thank you for but this, giving me this. Trusting me to do it.”

“I trust you, Eleanor, not just in this.”

My brows rise, “why?”

“Why?”

“Why me?”

King smiles and reaches across the table, plucking up my hand before he leans forwards and presses his mouth to my knuckles, “For the same reason any man would pursue a woman like you.”

He turns my hand over and presses a kiss to my wrist, right over my jumping pulse. His breath is hot on the thin skin of my wrist, my pulse reacting to his closeness, “because your innocence is a fine wine, the sweetest dessert. Like a taste of the forbidden you’re all too willing to take. You are all the things I crave and all the things I would ruin, and yet I wasn’t able to stop myself.”

He pulls away, but I’m not able to speak. Not when he keeps a hold on my hand and traces the blue lines of my veins snaking up the inside of my arm. The touch feather light, barely a whisper on the skin, and yet I feel it as if he’s scorching me, branding me.

“I wanted to taste it, all the things I wasn’t, the innocence, the kindness. I thought that was it, all I wanted and once that was done it would be over, but then once I’d had it, I knew immediately it was never going to be enough. More than once was still never going to be enough.” His eyes jump to mine, “I want to show you everything, make you *feel* everything. What your body can do, what I can make it do. I want you to know what it feels like to be worshipped and protected.”

He drops his head on a sigh and lets go of my hand, “I’m not a good man, Eleanor. I’ve done bad things, I’ll continue to do bad things to protect the ones that mean the most to me. My sister was hurt a long time ago, I’m doing what I’m doing now to make that right.”

“Kingston,” I start, he just shakes his head, stopping me.

“It’s all kinds of fucked up, Eleanor, and it won’t stop being that way.”

“I understand.”

He lifts his eyes to search mine, “I’ve killed people.”

“I know.”

“And what?” He cocks his head.

“And you’ve made it clear leaving isn’t an option so what else am I supposed to do? Do I agree with it? I don’t understand it enough to disagree with it, but you think I’m blind to how bad this world can get, I’m not. It doesn’t mean I’m going to do it but I’m not going to pretend that I don’t feel this too. I tried to and it didn’t work out well. I’ll learn to live each day as it comes.”

He nods, “Okay.”

I sigh, “Okay.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE



The drives feel like lead in the pocket of my coat and my palms sweat, nerves eating away at my stomach as I make my way down the hall towards my desk. This is the easy part. The hardest part will come next.

I place all my things where I usually do and open my laptop, glancing around to see if anyone might catch what I'm about to do, but with it being the day of the gala, no one is paying attention to me.

My hands shake as I withdraw one of the drives, curling my fingers around it as I wait for the computer to load.

Kingston waits outside for my signal and knowing he's there, it eases the nerves slightly. I'm not completely on my own.

Blowing out a breath I slot the drive into the port. Immediately a black screen pops up, the text on it neon green as a bunch of numbers and letters start to fill the page.

Shit.

I scramble to open my email box to cover the evidence and thankfully that pops open within seconds.

They said five minutes, so I glance at the clock. Four minutes to go.

Three.



I work through my emails, barely reading them, replying automatically and robotically as the minutes tick down.

One minute remaining.

I look up, Tobias is in, walking towards his office. He smiles and waves at me which only adds to the nerves. My pulse jumps wildly, so fast and hard I'm sure people can see it fluttering away in my neck.

My palms are slick with sweat and when my phone vibrates against the desk at exactly the five-minute mark, I just about jump out of my skin.

**Kingston:** Drive 1 is done, get it out and hide it.

I yank the stick from the port and shove it into my bag and then look around, waiting for the shoe to drop.

Kingston was right, this was a simple plan, easy actually and that makes me nervous. I'm waiting to get caught, for someone to see and immediately know what I'm doing but when I look around, not a single person is looking in my direction.

I had to move on, I had to get the second drive in.

I text Kingston back, telling him to come in and go directly to my desk. We had already gone over this. It would work.

I try to act as normal as I can as I wait for him to show up, my fingers stiff as I type on my keyboard, and I sense him before I see him. My eyes immediately go up, staring down the hall in front of me and then there he is, striding towards me with swagger and purpose, hands buried in the pockets of his suit trousers, white shirt tucked in, but the two top buttons undone showing off the tips of the tattoos adorning his chest. His eyes sparkle with utter mischief and despite the nerves, despite the terror of getting caught, heat floods my veins.

He stops in front of my desk and cocks a brow, "I need to see Tobias." He says.

For a minute I'm silent, staring. Not an act, as I try to get myself back under control. I'm sure this isn't normal. That just the view of a man could leave me this damn stupid.

"Right! Uh," I stutter, again, not an act, as I purposely pull up the calendar knowing it'll be blank, "You're not scheduled."

"Tell him it's an emergency."

I've worked for Tobias for a long enough time that I knew he would never want me to turn away a client paying as well as Kingston is, which is why I'm sure this'll work. On the phone, maybe, but in person, never.

"Of course," I swallow, "I'll just take you down to the room."

He walks at my side, close, close enough that his fingers brush against me and the scent of his aftershave invades my nose. I get him into the room, and he gives me one long look before whispering, "Be careful."

I rush to Tobias' office, taking deep breaths along the way to quell the rising tide of panic, "Tobias, Harrison is here to see you!" My words rush from me as the door to his office swings open. His head snaps up, "What!?"

"Harrison, he says it's an emergency."

"We don't have a meeting scheduled." Tobias snaps.

"I know, but I know you don't like me turning people away."

"I'm too busy for this, Eleanor, get rid of him."

Shit, "I tried," I lie, "He wouldn't take no for an answer."

He looks at me then, properly looks at me and I had to be grateful that he's mistaking the panic and nerves in my face as something else as he softens, "I'll deal with him."

My eyes track him as he walks down the hall and disappears around the corner. King will keep him occupied. I gently close the door, beelining for

his laptop left open and unlocked on the desk and pull the drive from my pocket.

I try not to look at anything as I insert the drive into the port, but a single folder on the desktop catches my eye. It's simply titled 'X'.

The same black box pops open and the letters and numbers start to fill the page. Five minutes.

My eyes dart between the door, the box and that damn folder.

It's likely nothing.

Nothing, I tell myself and yet my finger goes to the mouse pad and moves the cursor until it's hovering over that folder.

Two minutes left.

I click it.

Bile instantly rises in my throat, acid coating my tongue as image after image loads in the folder. Explicit images, violent, graphic. Women, bound, gagged, tortured, bleeding on mattresses and on the floor.

Up until now I hadn't seen anything linking Tobias to what Kingston had told me. I scan the images, tears pricking my eyes as I look at their faces, their brutalized bodies.

I more than hated him. I keep scanning. I know what I'm looking for, *who* I am looking for but with each pass of my eyes, the nausea increases, and I know it's only a matter of time before I vomit.

I suppress a sob, forcing myself to keep going, keep looking for Tate. It just gets worse. All these poor women. Used, kidnapped, tortured and for what? Sport for these sick motherfuckers? Games?

One minute.

I don't see Tate in any of the pictures, but this will haunt me. My stomach rolls as I close down the folder, but even with the images gone, I see them in my head with vivid clarity.

I watch the seconds ticking down on the clock, my arm banded around my stomach as if I can stop the rising sickness.

My eyes burn, my throat closing and then the door swings open and Tobias steps in.

I move quickly, grabbing the drive and yanking it from the port, stuffing it straight into my pocket. I have no idea if the five minutes were up, it doesn't matter now anyway.

Tobias stands frozen, "What are you doing, Eleanor?"

A cold sweat dampens my skin and my heart pounds too quickly, I feel dizzy, sick, "There was a phone call. I didn't have time to get back to my desk to answer it."

"You look a little pale," he comments, stepping further into the room. He doesn't shut the door which I take as a good sign, "Are you well?"

My stomach churns, "I skipped breakfast," I wave a shaky hand, "I'll be fine."

His eyes bounce between my face and the open laptop.

"Is everything settled with K – Harrison?" I choke.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

This was going from bad to worse.

I was going to be sick. I could feel it.

Behind him I see a familiar face. Ace stands there, hand concealed under his jacket.

Oh fuck.

They were prepared to rage war right now thinking I've been caught. I needed to get out now, let them know everything is fine.

"It will be soon, I just needed to get the tablet." Tobias walks towards me and plucks up the tablet on the edge of the desk. I should've seen it, should've clocked that he would be back for that. He uses it for every meeting.

"Right," I stand, legs shaking, but I steel myself to stop my knees giving out, "Well, I'll get back to my desk."

"You do that, Eleanor." He doesn't look at me, only at the open laptop as if all the evidence is still on the screen.

I don't look back as I rush towards Ace, grab him by the elbow and shove him into the ladies bathroom, locking the door behind us.

It's then that my stomach gives out, and I vomit straight into the sink.

## CHAPTER FORTY

# *Eleanor*

“Where’s Kingston?” I rasp, heaving and spitting into the sink, my stomach cramping painfully.

“About to rip off heads if I don’t tell him within the next five seconds that I have you.”

“Get him to stop,” I rush, gagging some more but nothing comes up, “He’ll ruin everything.”

“I’m trying!”

I manage a watery glance at him, seeing him with the phone pressed to his ear, a rare sort of panic in his eyes. I sag with relief as he says into the phone, “I’ve got her. She’s safe.”

I heave into the sink, the images replaying like a sick movie inside my head, but I have nothing left in my stomach to purge. A hand comes down onto my spine, soothing, “What happened, little one?” Ace asks softly.

“I don’t know if it worked,” I mumble, “He came in, I didn’t get to check it.”

“Did you get the drive out?”

I nod weakly and pat my pocket, just in case.

“Okay, we’ll find out if it worked, right now, it doesn’t matter.”

I nod again.

“What else happened?”

A sob cracks through me, all I could see was the violence, the depravity, “I found images.”

“Alright,” Ace hauls me up, straightening, “shh, it’s okay.” He drags me into his chest, tightening his arms around me as if to contain all the pieces of me he knows are falling apart. He smooths his hand down my hair and pats my back until the sobs quieten, but the tears still fall if only silently now.

“You’re safe,” he reminds me.

But I wasn’t, no woman was when Tobias, his son and that damn organization still existed. Still kept taking innocent women.

I have no concept of time, I just stand there and let Ace soothe me until I feel him shift slightly and the lock on the door clicks open.

It’s only when that familiar scent hits me that I realize who it is he just let in.

Kingston doesn’t hesitate taking me from Ace and I go willingly, falling into him as Ace leaves. King relocks the doors, secures me harder into his arms and then sinks us both to the tiled floor of the ladies bathroom, cradling me in his lap.

A numbness has seeped over me, stopping the tears, the uncontrollable shaking and I stay there, ear pressed to King’s chest, letting his steady heartbeat bring me back, chase away the chill in my blood.

It’s okay, I tell myself, we’re going to stop them. We’ll save them. Tate.

“Did he suspect anything?” I ask after a few minutes.

“I don’t think so, he came back, finished the meeting,” King answers softly, smoothing a hand down my hair, “What happened?”

I tell him the same thing as I told Ace, but then more words spew out as I detail what was in the pictures, what I saw, “It was easy to pretend it wasn’t real, that it was a mistake. I knew he wasn’t good but now I know. I’ve seen it.”

“I know,” King whispers.

—

The bath is heavenly. The soapy bubbles pop incessantly at my ears, the water gently rippling as I take steady, even breaths.

It was okay. I was okay.

The images, they’re burned in my brain, but I had to keep moving. Keep the plan going. Tonight was a necessity, showing my face after what happened today was needed to ensure Tobias knew nothing, suspected nothing. If he did though, this could be suicide.

Fingers suddenly brush against my cheek and I startle, eyes shooting open to find Kingston sat at the edge of the bath, head cocked to the side.

“You looked deep in thought,” He muses.

“Just thinking about tonight.”

“We don’t have to go.” He says sternly. “My guys confirmed the drives did what they needed, they’re getting through the encryption as we speak, and we’ll be online within the hour.”

“We do have to go, we need to make sure *he* doesn’t know. Not going will look like I’m hiding, I was hardly conspicuous getting out of that office and then tomorrow it’ll be over.”

He grits his teeth, but doesn’t say anything, doesn’t argue any further.

I climb from the bath and wrap a towel around myself, heading towards the bedroom with King following.



“After, you and I,” King runs his hand across my shoulders, leaning to whisper the words in my ear, “We’re going to go and have some fun.”

A shiver runs down my spine. “Yeah?”

“Mm,” his husky baritone vibrates through me, “We’re going to make all those dirty fantasies of yours real.”

My intake of breath has him chuckling and then his footsteps sound away from me, “Get ready, Eleanor. We leave in a few hours and then after, you’re all mine.”

I swallow, anticipation making me hum. I take my time dressing, applying my make-up which is done shakily with my lack of experience, but it goes on and then move onto my hair, drying and curling it before pinning it up in an elaborate style at the back of my head.

When that’s done, I move over to the dress, running my fingers over the material and smile.

Everything would be fine.

## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

# Kingston

“She good?” Ace asks as I come down after dressing for the gala. A simple black tux.

I nod once, “Where are we with the drives?”

Isobel saunters into the room, sipping a champagne, “Finally getting somewhere,” she clicks her tongue, “Not just a pretty face then.”

“Belle,” I warn.

She rolls her eyes, “She’s fine, King, she did good.”

“Tech is on the line now,” Ace eyes my sister and then me, “we’re back in.”

I open my laptop and send my screen to the large flatscreen on the wall.

At first, it’s just a bunch of code and then one by one, screens begin to pop up, security cameras each with an audio that can be tapped. With it being late the office is quiet, only the security guys still in the building, but that wasn’t what I wanted.

“Go back a few days,” I say remembering what Eleanor had told me about the guys that had arrived to see Tobias. The feed begins to rewind, hours then days until it pauses and plays. I scan each screen, waiting, watching.

“You’re in?” Eleanor gasps behind me.

I spin on her and lose a few brain cells in that moment.

She’s dressed for the gala and holy fuck, she is stunning.

The dress is perfect for her, tight on the torso, high neck that flows and follows her curves as if it’s been painted on, the subtle sparkle in the material catching in the light as her chest moves with each soft breath she takes. The skirt follows the shape of her hips before flowing down, but then she steps forward, and it opens, revealing twin splits for each leg.

I may as well have swallowed my tongue for what seeing her in that dress does to me. I was right, it was my new favorite thing.

“Eleanor,” I breathe.

“Holy shit,” Ace chokes.

“You look beautiful,” I tell her honestly, my heart suddenly pounding harder, unable to get enough of her in this dress.

A blush steals her cheeks, and she smiles softly, running conscious hands over the dress, straightening the splits to cover her legs again.

It’s a sharp, pained gasp behind me that has me spinning back to the screens.

Isobel is doubled over, clutching her stomach. The glass of champagne slips from her fingers, the glass smashing onto the ground.

“It’s him,” she gasps out, eyes pinned to the screen. “It’s Hunter.”

My eyes ping to the screens.

“That’s Clayton and Derek,” Eleanor confirms.

I watch as the two men in question saunter into the office. I’ve never seen them before, but that was hardly surprising, but that third face, the

young one following like a shadow, he was the one I *was* surprised to see.

I've seen him only once, three years ago on the same night I was reunited with my sister, the *reason* I was reunited with my sister.

His eyes flick to the camera as if he knows I'm watching, as if he knows Isobel is watching. This was days ago. A smirk pulls on his mouth.

I follow him with the cameras as they move through the building, heading to Tobias.

There was no question about who they were now that I'd seen Hunter with them.

The final two heads of the Syndicate.

"Get me everything on those two," I tell Tech, "All of it. Addresses, bank accounts, I want it all."

"On it," a voice crackles over the speaker.

"Isobel," I turn to my sister, "He's in the city."

Her nostrils flare as she straightens, unshed tears glittering in her eyes, turning the blue more vibrant. She hadn't cried in years, she wouldn't start now. She squeezes her eyes shut and spins, her feet crunching the glass.

"Don't come," she says to me, "This is mine."

I nod. It would take days, weeks maybe for her to pin him down and tech will tell me if he leaves the city now that we have him, but I didn't think he would be leaving. Not without the two of them seeing this through.

Unfinished business had a funny way of rearing its ugly head even after years have passed. And the two of them had a mountain of unfinished business.

"Isobel," I call to her before she disappears, "be careful please. You know where we are."

She stops and turns, looking at me, and then she does something I never would have expected. She doubles back and hugs me. “You be careful too, brother. I’ll see you when this is over.”

And then she’s gone.

“What’s happening?” Eleanor asks nervously.

“Our plans are finally coming to an end,” I tell her, marking the three of them now convened in the office. Ace pulls out a deck of cards and begins to shuffle them.

“That’s them? Are you sure?” she asks.

“Yes,” I answer, “but tech will confirm.”

She swallows, paling.

I cross the room to her, “It’ll be fine.”

She laughs without humor, “That’s what I keep telling myself, but I don’t think I believe it.”

“Let’s just go to the gala and then after...” I leave the promise hanging there, risking a glance to Ace who smirks and then heads out.

It would be fine, I’d planned for this and would accept no other alternative.

## CHAPTER FORTY-TWO



We arrive separately, King driving himself while Micha takes me.

It's already started however guests are still arriving, and we filter into the traffic. When Micha pulls up to the steps I steel my spine, say goodbye and get out, adjusting the skirts of my dress to cover the skin on show. The dress was beautiful, I hadn't realized the splits were there until I put it on and while they left me feeling a tad vulnerable, the dress made me feel sexy too.

I weave into the crowd walking through the large doors and sweep into the foyer. Servers walk with trays of food and drink, offering them to the guests mingling in the foyer, and more drift through to the ballroom where music plays softly allowing conversation to thrive. There are several tables set up around the room, and I was thankful that there would be no three course sit down meal but rather a buffet style set up for later, and constant food being offered by the servers.

My palms sweat as I walk the crowd, smiling and greeting those who notice me. I pluck up a flute of champagne from one of the trays and take a grateful sip, the cold bubbles cooling some of the heat.

My eyes run through the crowds. I didn't know if King was here yet, and we couldn't spend too much time together but having him here, close, it was good enough.

I see Tobias and his son, Garrett at the bar, and then next to them is Derek and Clayton but there is no sign of the man I now know to be Hunter.

I continue through the crowd, heading towards one of the tables in the corner to take a seat. I'm almost there when Tobias catches me.

"Eleanor," he greets, but the usual warmth isn't in his face, "You made it."

I fake a smile, "I told you I would."

I stifle the images that try to cripple me, I couldn't let them affect me now, not here with him.

"Hmm," he muses, sipping his whiskey, "Well enjoy."

"Thank you," I swallow, sipping my champagne to help with the lump in my throat. He checks me over, eyes following the curves the dress clearly show and then turns back to his son. I watch him go, tension loosening with each step he takes away from me, and then I spot Kingston. He owns the room as he walks in, his tux tailored to fit his body perfectly, his black hair swept back and those tattoos seeming to pop from his skin. His blue eyes land on mine in an instant and then move on.

Just a few hours, that's all this was. A few hours and then the promise of Kingston for the rest of the night.

I pluck another champagne from a tray and lean back in my chair watching as the crowd relaxes further with each hour that passes and more alcohol is consumed. The volume of the music increases the later it gets, and people begin to dance, mainly couples and I just watch. Kingston is at the bar talking with some men I haven't seen before, and Tobias is still at the bar.

I check the time, not long now.

It was a shame that the dress was being wasted here when no one can really see it, but I didn't dare get up or move around. If Tate were here, she would have been working the room and I would be with her, her slowly bringing me out of my shell, her infectious laughter easing the tension.

But she wasn't here, and King had to pretend we were nothing and so I sit here alone.

The thought of another champagne made my stomach churn and I eye the bar, the distance and likelihood of having to speak with someone.

Was gin worth it?

I eye the bubbles popping in the glass in my hand.

Yes. Yes, it was.

I get up, leaving my safe little bubble to head to a part of the bar the furthest away from Tobias. I order my gin, thankful when the barman fetches it quickly and slides it towards me. I spin back to my table, ready to flee back to that little haven I'd created when my wrist is caught.

It wasn't King.

"Dance with me," Tobias says, it's neither command nor request, but it wasn't something I could refuse, not when his fingers grip me so tightly, the skin indenting where he holds, and his eyes capturing mine in a deadly snare.

"I don't dance," I try.

"Dance with me," he says again, tugging me towards where others swirl in circles.

He tugs me to the middle of the dance floor and holds me close, one hand at the base of my spine, the other holding my hand, and begins to move us to the music.

"That's a beautiful dress," he comments suspiciously. My whole body is stiff, hand clammy in his. Sickness rolls through my stomach, making me really regret the champagne.

"Thank you," I force myself to say.



“Quite expensive, where did you get it?”

My brows tug down, “Excuse me?”

He cocks his head as he continues to move us to the music, “Forgive me.”

“It was a gift,” I tell him, feeling like I need to cover my tracks.

“Generous gift,” he replies.

I nod my agreement and try to pull away at the end of the song, but he holds me fast and moves us into the next song. I swallow hard.

“I really was fond of you, Eleanor.” He says it so quietly, I wonder if he meant for me to hear it, though I don’t get a chance to question it when a body steps close to us, forcing us to stop.

“I couldn’t resist,” King says cockily, “A dress like that calls to me, may I cut in?”

To anyone else it’s polite, but to me I hear the undercurrent of violence that turns the edges of his voice to a husky rasp.

Something settles in Tobias’ face, “Be my guest.” He lets go abruptly, harsh enough that I stumble in the heels I’m wearing, but Kingston steadies me quickly, watching as Tobias disappears and then King takes control, pulling me in far too close to be professional even if we were away from the office. His hands on me are possessive, his face close to mine as he sweeps me around to the music.

His presence brushes away the tension left there by Tobias.

His fingers dig into my waist, his other hand clutching my hand tightly as his breath brushes the shell of my ear.

“Seeing him touching you made me want to rip this entire room apart,” he whispers into my ear, “it was either take over and have you myself or start ripping off heads, I thought this would be what you’d prefer.”

Despite it all, I laugh, “how magnanimous of you.”

He chuckles, “That’s me, love.”

I roll my eyes though he doesn’t see it, “When can we leave?”

“So eager, are we?” He whispers.

I squirm against him.

He laughs again, “Find Micha, I’ll join in five minutes.”

I nod, but he doesn’t immediately let go, instead he sweeps me into an elaborate spin and then bows dramatically, kissing my knuckles before letting me go.

I stand for a second, dumbfounded, I feel eyes on me, and a blush heats my face.

Finding Micha was easy, and the cold air of the evening was refreshing on my overheated skin. He opens the backdoor for me, and I climb in, letting out a sigh of relief.

I’d shown my face, I’d pretended everything was normal. It had to be enough. I settle against the backseat, pressing a hand to my chest and feeling my rapid heartbeat pump against my palm.

Turning my head, I stare out the back window, watching the party, watching the doors, waiting for him.

Waiting for Kingston.

## CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

# Kingston

I don't keep her waiting. I slip from the gala without a word, finding her waiting with Micha, "Get one of the guys to collect the car," I tell him, "And take us to Crimson."

He smirks, sends off the message and starts the car.

"We're going to Crimson?" She asks.

"I told you we were going to play, love," I pull her towards me and land a kiss on her mouth, tasting the sweetness of the champagne on her tongue. "So, play is what we're going to do."

"Are there, uh," she breathes against my lips, "are there other people there tonight?"

"It's not open night, but there are a few, no one will bother us."

She nods slowly, nervously, "We don't have to, love," I brush a strand of hair from her face.

"No, I want to."

"Good girl."

It's not the usual scene at Crimson, tonight is more intimate, not as crowded or loud. We look out of place in the formal wear we still have on, but no one really turns our way, too caught up in whatever it is they are discussing or doing with their partners for the evening.

Micha disappears into the crowd to find himself his own entertainment while I take Eleanor towards the stairs. Her dress flows behind her, the splits open to show me all that creamy skin on her thighs and my mouth waters with the anticipation of sinking my teeth into that soft flesh.

Her cheeks are flushed, her eyes bright and her fingers hold my hand tightly.

I stop us outside a door knowing what was waiting inside, it's there I press her up against the wall and claim her mouth once more, sweeping my tongue through to work her up. She grips the lapels of my jacket, pulling me closer, curving her spine until her breasts press on my chest.

"You told me this was something that you wanted to try," I whisper, "but at any point, we can stop, okay?"

"What is it?" She murmurs.

"Come on."

I guide her into the room. It's dimly lit by the lanterns on the walls and warm, but it isn't the bed or the lights or the silk sheets, it's the man that sits at the end of the bed that has her eyes widening.

This isn't something new. We've done this before once or twice, and if there were anyone I'd trust to do this, it would be him.

"Ace?" She squeaks.

He grins and quirks a brow but doesn't say anything or move. This is her call, not mine, not his. It's all well and good fantasizing or desiring, it's a whole different story to actually do it. I'm giving her the option for it, and she can leave it should she wish to.

And if she chooses to do it, it's at her pace.

"Is this?" She stutters, "are you?"

"Yes, love," I whisper to her, "but it's up to you."

I run my hand down her face, over her throat, stopping at the hammering pulse point that beats against my fingers. Her breathing is chaotic, but she doesn't appear afraid. Curious.

"I don't know how," she breathes.

"We'll show you," I confirm, "do you want this?" My hand continues down her body, fingers trailing over the mounds of her breasts, her nipples straining at the material. No bra. Good.

Ace watches her with barely restrained lust.

It makes me want to kill him, and yet I understand. And I know it's all it is. Lust.

He stands slowly, cautiously and comes towards Eleanor as I back behind her, pressing her to my chest, and then he stops, staring down at Eleanor.

"You want this?" I whisper again.

"Yes," she breathes.

## CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

*Eleanor*

My heart batters at my chest. King holds me from behind while Ace continues to peruse me from the front, watching me from beneath hooded eyes, so close I smell his aftershave. The muscles in his jaw twitch and fire brightens his gaze. He moves slowly, his finger hooking under the hem of his shirt to drag it off. I'd seen him shirtless before, but this was different. This was *something*.

I didn't know how to feel. How to act.

It felt wrong and right.

The anticipation made my blood hum, my heart sing and my legs shake. I was scared and aroused. It was an overload.

But I wanted it.

I wanted it so fucking bad.

The low lighting of the room casts harsh shadows over the hard muscles of his abdomen, the ridges and the dips like a ladder waiting to be climbed and that nipple piercing glints in the light.

King pinches my chin and tips my head back and to the side, taking my mouth to sweep his tongue through it while his other hand trails away from my breasts, over my stomach and to the slit in my dress. His fingers burn as they brush on my thigh, but then he steps away, and I practically whimper as his absence wraps around me like a cold embrace.

I don't feel it for long as Ace takes me, his hands where Kingston's just was, tipping my face up and bringing his mouth down. It's a shock, a different feeling to the one King gives, it's rougher but no less thorough. Explorative. I taste the bourbon on his tongue, a slight smoky flavor, and then his fingers bury into my hair, and he kisses me harder, throwing out all thought except this. He kisses me like he's wanted to do it for months.

He pulls away abruptly and breathes into my mouth, "I won't lie," he licks my bottom lip, "I've thought about this."

Kingston growls. Likely the only warning he'll give. Ace laughs as his hands move down, over the curve of my neck and then further around the back, fingers easily finding the zipper holding my dress up.

He raises a brow in question, and I nod.

The sound of the zip opening is obscenely loud and then the noise is replaced by the swish of material as it slides from my body and pools at my feet. I stand in just a pair of panties and my heels and while the room is warm my nipples still peak as the air whispers against my skin.

Ace whistles through his teeth with his rough exhale as his eyes sweep down my flesh and then back up to meet mine. His hand comes up, a single finger to trace the curve of the underside of my breast, up and round, following the contour until he gently rubs it across my nipple.

I gasp, arousal flooding me, my thighs pressing heavily together.

His eyes burn.

Gently, Ace guides me towards the huge bed in the center of the room, holding my stare, fingers still touching, exploring and behind me, I hear Kingston move, the squeak of a chair I hadn't noticed when I first got here. My knees hit the mattress and my eyes land on Kingston who slouches in that chair, shirt unbuttoned along with his trousers, he watches me, devours me, his eyes dark.

He liked to watch.

The thought of him watching now only serves to heat me further.

“Don’t look at him,” Ace hooks his fingers under the straps of my underwear, tugging, “Look at me.”

I lift my hips to allow him to slide my panties off and then both sets of eyes sear me to the soul as they hungrily take in everything I’m showing.

It makes me feel alive. Powerful.

My spine arches as Ace clamps his mouth around a nipple, teeth scraping the sensitive flesh and a whimper escapes my lips, the pleasure blinding.

Vaguely I’m aware of a pained sort of noise coming from Kingston’s direction, but I can’t think clearly with the way Ace’s tongue and teeth tease and bite at my breasts, my pussy clenching as the arousal floods through me. Needing more.

His hand slips over my stomach and then dips between my legs, sweeping though the wetness before he circles my clit slowly.

“Oh!” I cry out, earning a grin from Ace against my flesh.

King’s breathing is heavy, frantic. I manage to crack my eyes open, looking over to him. His cock is out, in his fist, pumping with his mouth parted slightly. The erotic view only making me more needy, the wanton, shameless desire to be *filled* turning me absolutely feral. He meets my eyes, and a wicked smile curls his lips.

“Ace,” he rasps, “put her out of her damn misery.”

Ace chuckles as his hand moves a little faster, applying pressure to my clit, and he doesn’t stop as he unbuttons his jeans and tugs them down one handed. “Open your legs wider for me, little one,” he commands.

I do, and he immediately steps between them, his cock hard and right there, nudging at me while his fingers continue to work me over. My hips



grind and my head tips back at the same time he thrusts forward, filling me in one, quick move.

I cry out, unable to stop myself. It was different and new and hot, and I couldn't think.

He pumps his hips, pulling out and then back in with hard thrusts that serve only to burst stars behind my eyes. His hand grips my chin to hold me steady as he kisses me roughly, tongue punching into my mouth at the same speed as his dick. Over and over.

"Fuck," he rasps against my lips, ripping himself away to grip my hips and fuck me harder.

My fingers curl into the sheets as my head tips towards Kingston whose hand is gripping his cock so tightly, I wonder how it doesn't hurt. He pins me with his stare, no anger or jealousy at what his friend is doing, just pure lust.

It sends me higher, has me lifting my legs which Ace uses to his advantage to shift and hit a different, deeper spot.

Thinking is gone. The only thing right now is the pleasure. The intensity.

"Fuck," King growls, eyes watching his friend screw me.

"Your cunt is fucking perfect," Ace praises before dropping down to claim my mouth in a quick heated kiss and then flips us until he's on his back, and I'm straddling his hips. I continue to move, unable to stop chasing that peak, my hips grinding so my clit rubs up against his pelvic bone.

He palms my breasts and then there's a body behind mine, a naked chest on my spine and a hand banded around my throat.

"You're stunning when you chase your pleasure, love," Kingston whispers in my ear, tongue tracing the shell. My head falls back onto his

shoulder and my hips continue that torturous, euphoric grind.

“I’m going to fuck your perfect arse,” he tells me, “I’ll be the only man who takes you there. Do you want that?”

The thought is terrifying, but I *need* him. “Yes!”

He moves away but only for a second, and then he’s back though I don’t stop my hips, Ace’s grunts and hard exhales filling the room. Kingston swipes a hand through the crack, smearing lube against that virgin flesh and then gently, so gently he teases with a finger, going slow into the virgin flesh of my backside. Working me up until I can take two of his fingers which he still moves too slowly. My hips have paused, Ace’s cock jerking, fingers digging into my thighs, but he makes no move to rush. He kneads my flesh as King works me up enough to take him there.

“Deep breath,” King whispers before the head of his cock is nudging at the hole. He stretches me, the stinging bite of that plus Ace still buried deep inside has me whimpering, body tensing.

“You can take it,” King urges, pushing in a little, “All of it, from both of us.”

My fingers curl and bite into Ace’s skin, leaving angry red welts.

He takes it slow, filling in an inch at a time, giving me time to adjust. He moves his hips, the sensation different but not unpleasant, painful but in a delicious sort of way. Ace barely moves, only his chest rises and falls with his heavy pants, clearly tugging on his restraint. When King is fully inside, his hips pulsing enough to send pleasure through me, my pussy clenches around Ace’s cock.

“Fuck!” He grunts, squeezing his eyes closed, fingers bruising. “Hands on my chest,” Ace tells me, letting my thighs go to loop his fingers around my wrists to drag me forward. When my hands are flat against his pecs, he puts his own over them and grins, “time to play.”

In this position, I'm bent enough that Kingston is able to move more freely. His hips pump steadily at first and then quickens. It's painful, shocking but not so much I want him to stop.

"Relax, love," King coaxes, "just feel me."

I blow out a breath just as Ace lifts one hand from mine and pinches my clit, the pleasure making me buck. I cry out as King really starts to move.

It's not long before the shock of it turns to blinding pleasure and my own hips roll.

"Yes, oh, fuck," I cry, fingers curling against Ace's chest.

Ace starts to move again then, forcing me to hover on my knees as he fucks me from below and King from behind. It's a sensory overload. I'm full, and I'm wet, and I'm so desperate.

My head tips back as King leans forward, one arm banding around my middle as he continues to fuck me. Ace becomes more frantic, fucking me harder, his grunts louder and then he rips his cock from me abruptly and comes up my stomach, the hot spurts of liquid landing and sliding over and off my skin.

But King doesn't stop, his breaths hit the nape of my neck as he continues to stretch and fill me in a place a man has never been.

Ace doesn't stay still for long, his fingers thrust inside me, and his thumb circles my clit and I detonate, crying out as my climax has my body convulsing and tensing.

Ace pumps his fingers hard, prolonging the orgasm and King leans back to grip my hips, yanking me back and into his deep thrusts. I feel them both everywhere, Ace's fingers curling and sweeping over that sweet spot inside, and King pounding into me from behind like a man possessed.

"Yes, oh God," I cry, another orgasm washing through me off the back of the previous one. Ace breathes heavily, eyes dark and focused while

King continues to fuck me. My pussy convulses on Ace's fingers, my climax sending euphoric tremors throughout my body.

"Fuck!" King roars and pulls out, his come hitting my spine.

I fall to the side, landing in a heap on the sheets, my breathing rasps from my chest and my body quivers from the intensity and aftershocks of what just happened. At some point Ace managed to untangle himself and walks back towards me with a wet cloth to clean me up with. His mouth is pulled into a half, satisfied grin, and then he leans down and gently presses his mouth against mine before leaving. He just leaves.

I watch him go, frowning, but King hauls me to him, holding me against his chest as his fingers soothe over the sensitive, still burning skin.

"That was some of the most painful, and yet best sex I've ever had," King muses, breath teasing my hair,

"Painful?" I whisper, unable to manage more.

He draws small circles on my skin, "Seeing another man fuck you made me want to rip out his throat, trusted friend or not, but watching you ride him, watching you lose yourself to the pleasure of it...it was mesmerizing."

"But you like to watch?" I say, confused.

"Mm, and I did like it," he kisses my brow, "Doesn't mean I didn't want to kill him."

I laugh softly.

"Was it what you expected?"

"I didn't know what to expect," I reply honestly, "But *that*," my breath rushes from my lips. It was amazing and fulfilling and made me feel so damn sexy, so alive. He doesn't push me for those answers though, instead we just lay there in the quiet and revel in the intimacy.

## CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE



We don't stay at Crimson for long and King had the sense of packing a spare set of clothes for both of us right at the start of the night. Just in case, he told me as he handed me the sweats and hoodie which I gratefully put on. As stunning as the dress was, I was tired, and I ached in places I've never ached before.

It was a delicious kind of pain, one that reminded me of what just happened over and over, but I was ready to fall into a sleep so deep I didn't want to wake up for hours.

Kingston drives us back to the penthouse, it's late enough that the streets are dead, the odd cab whizzing down the road, but we're alone for the most part. The car is comfortably quiet, and I doze in the passenger seat, startled awake twenty or so minutes later by Kingston opening my door.

"Come on, love, let's go to bed."

I don't change when we get to the bedroom, I fall face first onto the mattress and then crawl up and under the blankets, snuggling down much to Kingston's amusement as he watches me get comfortable.

He joins me, sliding behind and curling his arm around my waist, "Good night."

I grunt back and promptly fall asleep.

It's raining when I wake in the morning, the gloomy dim light barely illuminating the room, but it's enough to see the bed empty next to me, the sheets cold. I scan the room for signs of him, but everything is quiet, the penthouse further even more so.

With a stretch, my muscles twinging with the movement, I roll out of bed and pad for the bathroom joined onto the bedroom. After showering, I pick out the last clean outfit I have here and get ready for work before I go in search of King, or anyone else. But the penthouse is empty.

I find my phone and find a message from King, sent at seven this morning.

**Kingston:** I've some urgent business at the compound, I will be back by the time you finish work this evening. Don't think about last night too much, I'm sure I'll be doing it enough for the two of us. Have a good day. K.

I grin and pocket my phone, grabbing a to-go cup and filling it with coffee before I head out and call an Uber to take me to the office. I was handing my notice in today but going back into that office, seeing Tobias after what I found yesterday, it made my stomach churn with a new wave of nausea.

It wouldn't just be over either, not that easily, I had to serve my one month before I could actually get out. Another month of being in that office with that man.

I don't suppress the shiver that runs down my spine.

The Uber arrives, and I climb in, typing out the resignation letter on my phone in preparation of arriving at the office. I wouldn't waste time avoiding the issue.

The office is busy as standard and lively, with those who attended the gala last night discussing the event, some looking a little worse for wear. Everything is normal and yet as my feet carry me through the office, a sense of dread begins to settle into my stomach. I pause at the elevator.

“Are you getting in?” Someone asks me.

I look over to them, “No, no, you go ahead.”

He smiles politely and climbs into the elevator, the doors closing.

It’s nerves, I tell myself, just nerves and a little bit of fear which are totally normal.

But even as I repeat that over and over inside my head, I can’t help but feel like I’m about to walk into something I’m not sure I’ll walk back out of.

“Just get it over with,” I hiss under my breath, earning me a few awkward stares. I march into the elevator, hit the button and clench my fists, hiding the shake.

On my floor all is normal, desks full, office chatter loud. I see Tobias walking into his office, Garrett off to the side and blow out a breath. Normal.

Once I’ve printed the resignation letter, I head towards Tobias’ office.

“Eleanor,” he says by way of greeting, no smile.

I swallow, “This may come as a shock,” I tell him, keeping my voice steady as I step up to the desk and drop the envelope on top of the keyboard on his laptop, “I’m handing in my notice.”

His face remains blank, “No shock.”

“What?”

“It’s no shock,” he leans back in his chair, “Why would you continue working for me when you work for him?”

I don’t have to say anything to give myself away, whatever is on my face is enough as his mouth turns into a cruel smile.

“I was a little surprised,” He nods slowly, “I didn’t suspect you at all at first, not until that little stunt in my office yesterday.”

I visibly jump when the door behind me closes with a dull thud, shutting the rest of the office out. I knew for a fact that this particular office was soundproof and while there is one window looking out onto the floor beyond, it’s a one-way kind of thing, I can see out, but they can’t see in. I never questioned it before, but I should have.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Kingston Heart,” he tsks, “The legend, hm?”

“I don’t know who that is.” I lie.

“Oh, I think you do considering you’ve been sleeping with him for weeks.”

I start to back towards the door, not thinking about how it shut in the first place.

“Going somewhere, Eleanor?” Garrett says.

They’d trapped me in here. It was a set up.

“It was a matter of hours before *my* tech realized they’d been hacked, *again*. I knew you were up to something in here yesterday, I wasn’t sure what, but then they told me we had yet another bug and I put it together. You helped them into my servers.”

“You’re a monster!” I spit, turning so I’m sideways between the father and son, able to see them both. There was no point lying.

“Maybe so, but I’m rich, and I’m powerful, and you’re going to do exactly as I say because well, you don’t have much other choice do you, Eleanor?”

“What do you want!?”



“Plenty,” he muses, “I really was fond of you, you know. A kind, sweet girl like you. You could have had a happy and long life, working here, keeping your nose out of business that didn’t belong to you, but I’ve realized after seeing all the dark parts this city, this world, has to offer that nothing is ever good enough. People always want what they can’t have, seek out things they have no right exploring but we humans are a curious bunch. And so, I provide. I give what most can’t.”

“You don’t give, Tobias, you take,” I correct.

“I have to admit there is some beauty in what we do.”

Sickness curls my stomach, fear gripping my spine like a claw. I can’t speak.

“Females are so easy to bend, to break, it’s marvelous to watch.”

“You are disgusting.”

He laughs though it holds no amusement, nor does he smile, it’s just a flat, harsh noise.

“Let’s get back to it shall we, Eleanor?” He links his fingers, resting them on his stomach as he leans back in his chair, “It’s not uncommon for people to try and hack these servers you know? Not for any other reason than to steal from me mainly though, I doubt that’s the reason Mr Heart wanted in, is it? Either way, we have weekly scans for bugs, and that first set we found, I shrugged it off. Nothing new and I would have forgotten all about it if you hadn’t been caught in my office.”

He scratches his chin, “He’s good, I’ll admit, he’s evaded the Syndicate for a long time, powerful enough to keep us out and at bay because we had nothing on him. You don’t go blindly into war, do you?”

“He’ll kill you.”

“I had no idea that it was him this entire time, not until I put two and two together, had you followed, had him tagged, it was a matter of waiting

it out, and then it all landed in my lap. Kingston Heart, the notorious anonymous and self-proclaimed king of London. He's been a thorn in my side for such a long time that this is going to be delightful, and guess where you come in."

"You think you can use me against him?" Tears prick my eyes, "he doesn't care enough about me to worry about you doing something to me, so go ahead, Tobias. Kill me."

For a fraction of a second, he looks pained, "I think you're lying, Miss Locke, but no bother, it's not your life I'm bargaining with, though I'm sure if it really came down to it, you'd break in a second. Imagine that gun to your temple and all you needed to do was give me Mr Heart, you think you wouldn't do it?"

"No." I was certain. I didn't want to die. I was terrified of dying but I wouldn't. Not for my life.

"So brave, Eleanor, but what about for another life, you think you'll be brave then?"

That dread comes back tenfold, a sickening doom that makes me want to double over and vomit.

"You can save her," He says, his voice barely audible over the roar of blood in my ears, "Tate. You can save her and all you need to do is take me to him."

## CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

# Kingston

The rain continues to hammer down on the city, the sky dark and grim, wind whipping up leaves still on the ground. I pace in the foyer of the compound, waiting on tech to give me something, anything to tell me their suspicions aren't true.

This game of push and pull with the damn Syndicate was getting tedious, and I couldn't figure out how they were doing it. That was the most frustrating part. Not knowing.

Tobias was a smart man. If I could give him anything, it was that, so what was he doing, and what did he know?

Ace jogs down the stairs towards me, face pale, "They were right. They looped it."

"Fuck!" I bellow. "They know."

He nods solemnly.

Did he know who I really was?

I stop dead, my whole body seizing. Did they know about Eleanor?

"Does anyone have eyes on her?" There's an edge to my voice, a calm rage, "Does anyone have eyes on Eleanor?"

“Micha confirmed she headed into the office this morning, hasn’t seen her since.”

That was normal. It was normal. She was at work. She was fine.

But everything in me told me that wasn’t the case at all.

“I need to get back to the penthouse.” I say, resuming my pace, “Be there when she gets back.” She would come back. I pull out my phone and open our message thread, seeing she had read the message I sent this morning but not responded.

*Are you okay?* I type out. I didn’t need to worry her. If she didn’t respond, then I’d know something was up.

Her message comes through a minute later, *Fine, I’ll see you later.*

I pocket my phone even if it wasn’t sitting right. Nothing was.

Tobias found we hacked him again, he looped the cameras.

“Pull out the Trojans,” I tell Ace, “Remove every trace of us in that system. Now.”

“On it.”

I head to the door, “And Ace,” I stop, hearing his own footfall come to an abrupt halt as he waits for my next words, “Get men ready, at the penthouse in one hour. No later. I want at least ten inside, fifty on the streets.”

“Why?”

I shake my head, “I don’t know but do it, okay?”

“Yes.”

The door to the compound slams shut with a deafening thud and the rain lashes against my body as I head to the Mercedes parked out front.

I speed as much as I can through the busy streets of London, made worse by the rain.

“Come on!” I yell at everyone and no one, “move!”

Horns bellow as traffic crawls, angry shouts from people hanging out of windows, and the traffic stays at that torturous crawl. I was still ten minutes out from the penthouse but the urgency to get there now had me pulling into a parking garage and hitting the streets on foot, thankfully more empty because of the rain.

I run.

The muscles in my legs pump, feet hitting the concrete hard as I push myself as hard as I can down the pavements. Rain stings where it hits, water drenching the backs of my trousers, wetting my t-shirt enough that it clings to my skin. I don't feel the cold though I know the air is around freezing.

My feet slip as I round a corner, slamming into a crowd of walkers holding umbrellas. They screech and holler, but I keep going. The towering building housing my penthouse comes into view.

“Mr Heart?” A security guy startles as I shove through the doors. I don't take in his face enough to remember his name. My fingers are numb as I punch in the code for the elevator and fall inside, pressing the button continuously until the doors close and the cart climbs the building.

The warmth of the place burns as it fights away the chill and I stumble into the foyer, shoes squeaking on the marble. Only silence greets me.

No lights are on, no sign of anyone here. “Eleanor!” I call out.

I knew she wasn't here, and yet I check. I rampage through the penthouse, throwing doors open hard enough that they slam against the walls, some leaving dents in the plaster. This *panic*, this utter terror, it was going to kill me.

This was why we didn't allow weaknesses.

This was why I had to remain alone.

I fucked up, and now I have no idea if my fucking woman was even still alive.

After I've swept through the bedroom, almost losing it as her scent still lingers there I head back to the foyer, dialing her on my phone.

The call goes through and the phone rings directly in front of me.

She stands in front of the elevator, soaked through to the bone. Her dark hair sticks to her skin and her eyes are red and puffy from tears. She appears to be in one piece physically, but there's something broken in her eyes.

"Eleanor," her name comes out on a breath.

Seeing her should settle me.

It doesn't.

Instead, fire runs through my veins.

Her eyes run over my face, welling with fresh tears that roll over her already wet skin.

She looks at every part of me, those tears continuing to fall. I step forward, "Eleanor."

Her lips part and the small, pained whimper cracks my chest, and then she whispers, so quietly I almost miss it, "I'm sorry."

"Hello, Mr Heart, I'd say it was a pleasure to meet you, but we've met already, haven't we?"

Tobias steps forward, followed by four security guards and his son.

It was over.

## CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN



Every part of me shatters as the betrayal sinks beneath his skin.

His eyes bounce between me and Tobias at my side, standing far too close to be comfortable. He wasn't carrying a gun but the men around him were, I knew only because he made me watch.

"I am incredibly impressed, Kingston," Tobias says with a smirk, "Can I call you Kingston?"

But King doesn't look at him, he stares at me, searching my face, for what, I didn't know.

My heart hurts. Tears run freely down my cheeks, but I can't move. Can hardly breathe.

They'd shown me Tate. Let me talk to her. She was okay, unharmed which of course Tobias promptly reminded me that would only remain so if I brought him here.

They had managed to get a lot of information on Kingston using those Trojan's, which tech had claimed were untraceable. It seemed they were wrong. The only thing they needed was his home address. From me.

In return, Tate could go.

What they did to me after this, I could only guess.

I swallow, throat dry. He had made me walk here while he and his small army drove. The rain had bit at my skin, the wind chilling me through to the bone, but it was nothing against the pain of what I'd done to King. To everything he stood for.

I would have tried to get something in the message I sent earlier if it had been me who had the phone.

“Such an interesting turn of events, wouldn't you say?” Tobias continues, “I should have seen it sooner but better late than never, right?”

“My, my,” King finally looks to Tobias, rolling his eyes as he takes on that cocky, arrogant mask he adorns so well, “don't you enjoy hearing yourself speak.” The pain of my betrayal is no longer evident on his face, in fact he barely looks at me at all, “Well get on with it then, we all know what it is you're here to do.”

Despite the fact that he doesn't look at me I never take my eyes off of him. I can't. Terror keeps me watching him, even if I have to watch him die.

Everything happens in a second, one minute it's just us, then there are more. Coming up through doors I didn't even realize the penthouse had, the elevator opening to let in more. I see Ace. Micha.

I'm grabbed around the waist so quickly I don't see who it is, but I'm hauled away and then shoved roughly.

“Stay there,” King growls, the anger in his voice is clear.

“King,” I grab his arm, “I'm sorry.”

He pauses, just for a second, long enough for me to rush out, “They threatened Tate. They told me this was the only way I could keep her alive.”

His nostrils flare.

“Please,” I beg, “I'm sorry.”

He stares at me for the longest time, “Don't die.”



And then he heads back to Tobias and his men, backed into the corner by Ace, Micha and now King, at their backs an army of men I've never seen which I'm sure is deliberate.

"You had me at quite the disadvantage, Tobias," King clicks his tongue, "Shame on you for taking the cowards route."

Tobias just smiles.

Something was wrong.

"I had hoped this would be easy," Tobias replies.

Warning bells begin to ring inside the penthouse, so loud I can barely hear myself think. There's too much going on and not enough space to track it and in the chaos, I lose sight of Kingston. One minute, there was space, the next it was being filled with men with guns, knives, shoulders squared in preparation of a fight.

I step forward, I need to find Kingston or Ace or even Micha, but I see none of them. None of Kingston's men, only Tobias'. It would be a bloodbath.

There was no way King would walk out against this lot.

A shoulder slams into my spine and I fall forward, stumbling over as loud shouts suddenly fill the penthouse, grunts and deafening bangs, so loud they make my ears ring and continue to do so even when it's stopped.

My fingers are stomped on, my body kicked, but I continue to crawl, unable to find enough space to get up.

Where is he!?

I don't look at the bodies dropping to the floor, I hear the thuds and look the other way, I smell the blood and hear the shouts of pain, but I don't look. If I look it's over. I wasn't built for this. I couldn't do this.

Oh, what have I done!?

*What have I done!?*

“King,” my voice cracks and is barely above a whisper, no use. He won’t hear me, I doubt he’ll even see me, that’s if he isn’t already dead.

I cry out when hands suddenly band around my waist from behind, tugging me up violently. I slam against a chest and spin.

“What are you doing, Eleanor?” King growls in my ear, “run!”

I frantically turn in his arms, eyes catching the carnage behind, but I see his face a second later, blood running down his temple from a cut in his hairline, a bruise blooming across his jaw, bottom lip split and swollen. Blood coats his hands, his clothes.

“I’m sorry, they had Tate, and I didn’t know what to do. I wanted to warn you, I’m sorry King!” I’m rambling, and I know I’m repeating myself, but he had to understand. I didn’t want to hurt him, I didn’t have a choice!

“You listen to me, Eleanor,” he grips my face in his hands, stopping my rambling speech, I feel the blood from his palms smearing on my cheeks, “You run, do you understand me?”

“No,” I shake my head.

“Love,” he softens, “I understand, okay? I understand why, but I’m not winning this and there’s no point us both dying. What will happen to Tate then?”

“King!” Ace hollers from somewhere in the chaos.

Kingston stiffens, “Run, Eleanor, please. Run!”

His mouth slams down against mine, the taste of his blood hitting my tongue. I open my eyes when he pulls away only to see Tobias beelining towards Kingston’s exposed back.

“Kingston!” I warn.

King spins, dodging the thrust of the blade and pushes me to the side hard enough I slam against the wall, “Run, Eleanor!”

So, I do, not because I want to, not because I can stand it but because I am fucking scared. I am so terrified that my body is not my own.

I make it to the door to the left of the elevator and slam it open, finding it clear and I risk one last glance back. I was hopeful. Hopeful that he would somehow survive, somehow win but at the same moment my eyes meet his, the noise of the battle drowned out by the roaring in my ears, is the same moment Tobias thrusts his knife into Kingston’s chest.

Everything stops in that moment.

I don’t see the bodies or the blood, don’t hear the sirens wailing outside as the police finally arrive, don’t see Ace or Micha screaming towards King, I only see him.

I only see Tobias jerk his arm, thrusting that knife in deeper before he yanks it out, the steel coated in blood.

To the side, I see shapes moving, Ace, Micha, battling through the numbers to get to King, to save him, to do something, but they won’t make it, they’re outnumbered. King was dead.

But he never takes his eyes off me, even when the pain crumples his features, even when blood gushes from the stab wound, he watches me always.

Tobias wipes the blood from the blade on his trousers.

Kingston falls to his knees.

My head is underwater, I’m drowning in an agony so deep, so dark I can’t see the surface.

Kingston finds my eyes again, his steadily dimming, and he says one word, “Run.”

So, I do.

## CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

*Kingston*

Death wasn't chaos.

It wasn't screaming and brimstone, there was no fire or life flashing before my eyes.

It just *was*.

It was quiet, but not peaceful, painful but numb.

I expected more.

But I knew this was it.

The knife had punctured a lung, I couldn't breathe, my chest cavity was filling with blood, stealing my oxygen, but I wasn't sure which would kill me first. I didn't know how the body worked. Would it be from suffocation? Choking on my own blood? Or would I bleed out first?

There was a lot of blood.

Tobias still stood close. Watching me. Not moving, just watching and behind him, frozen, was Eleanor.

She needed to run.

She had to live at least.

I may have failed, but Isobel wouldn't, and she would get what she needed and Eleanor, my sweet Eleanor would live. She had to.

I've made mistakes. But she wasn't one of them. A weakness but never a mistake.

And I understood. I know why she did it. And that's okay.

I hold her eyes, the pain in them evident even though there are no tears, no words or sounds. It's chaos around us but there's only her.

I try to suck in a breath, but I can't. I can't breathe.

My knees buckle and I go down, hitting the floor with a thud though the pain doesn't register.

I'd be dead soon.

She should know by now Tobias has no intention of letting Tate go. No intention of letting Eleanor go either. She had no choice but to run.

I look at her face one last time, committing it to my memory, so it can be the last thing I see. And once that's done, once I've seen it, I try to give her a smile that fails and simply say, "Run."

My eyes close in relief when she does.

And then I let my body go. A darkness sweeps in, warm and inviting and that's all I see as I plunge into it.

## CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

*Eleanor*

It's been a day.

A day since I watched Kingston get stabbed, since I ran. A day since I've heard *nothing*. There's nothing on the news, nothing online, as far as everyone is concerned nothing happened.

I didn't know if Kingston was alive. If Ace or Micha were. I didn't know where Tobias was or his son.

I've stopped crying. Truthfully, I have nothing left to give.

I could only hide for so long, Tobias would find me eventually. I had nothing, no phone, no clothes, only the small amount of money in my bank account and that wouldn't last long.

I should have known it was a trick. Of course, he wouldn't let Tate go. Why would he? He's not a man of his word, he can't be trusted and me and my stupid need to help Tate made me blind to it.

I know now.

But it's too late now.

I betrayed Kingston.

I ran.

And it was over.

I pull my knees to my chest, hugging my arms around them. The hotel was cheap, the sheets scratching and smelling like dust. At night, I hear shouting and screams both from inside the building and on the streets. I was no safer here than I was out there.

“Fucking stupid,” I growl at myself, “I’m so fucking stupid!”

I’ve barely slept, I’ve not eaten, I didn’t know what to do from here.

I lay in the bed, staring blankly at the wall across from me, the curtains open and letting in a dim glow cast by the streetlights outside. It’s rained non-stop since yesterday, the roads were flooded, the clouds seeming to be never ending with no break in the weather at all.

It was fitting.

My body was exhausted, my emotions shot, yet I still couldn’t sleep. All I could see was Kingston, bleeding, falling to his knees.

I had to hope he wasn’t dead. Not when the idea of it was opening this great yawning pit of emptiness inside me.

When did it happen? I wonder. When did I fall in love with him?

It’s a little past midnight when I hear footsteps outside my hotel room. I dismiss it as one of the other guests, but then they pause, and I glance, sleepy eyed towards the door to see their shadow blocking the light from beneath the door.

My heart leaps into my throat and I stop breathing for a minute as if they can hear me.

Their knuckles tap on the door.

I don’t move.

“Eleanor?” It’s Ace’s voice that sounds through the wood, muffled and rough, tired.



I scramble off the bed, tangling my legs and tripping, but I manage to get there, ripping it open to find him leaning on the door frame. His eyes are red rimmed and dark shadows sit underneath. There are bruises all over his face, cuts and as he stumbles towards me, I see the limp, the way he favors his left side to his right and wraps one hand around his ribs. He was hurt. Badly.

“Ace!” I rush.

He gives me the smallest of smiles.

I wrap my arms around his neck, hugging him tight. He only manages one arm, but it’s tight and warm and meaningful.

I guide him into the hotel room, check left and right down the hall and then close the door.

He slumps on the bed and sighs heavily, leaning forward until his elbows rest on his knees and his face is cupped in his hands.

He looks exhausted. Defeated.

I ignore the panic rising in my gut, the dread.

“Ace?”

“Why are you still here, Eleanor?”

“What else am I supposed to do?” I snap, “How did you find me?”

“You should know by now we have our ways,” he says.

“Does that mean – is he alive!?” The words rush from me, jumbling together almost to the point they become incoherent.

Ace slowly rises his head, those eyes suddenly no longer tired.

Pain.

That's what that was.

No. No.

"Ace?" My voice cracks. I was shattering. I could feel this chasm building inside my chest, it fractured like a crack in the earth and now, now it was opening. Wider and wider the longer the silence goes on.

"Ace, *please.*"

He sighs heavily but then he shakes his head. "I'm sorry, Eleanor."

"No," I whisper, "No, Ace, please."

"Kingston died, Eleanor." He sighs, standing and limping over to me, "He's dead. I'm sorry."

I shake my head frantically, "No."

"I'm sorry." He grabs me, hauling me to his chest, "I'm sorry."

It was my fault. Kingston was dead, because of me. I'd lead Tobias to him. I let him in. He'd killed him.

*Because of me.*

That chasm, it bursts wide open and darkness seeps in. It burns. It all burns. But I let Ace hold me. I don't move, and I don't cry.

Kingston was dead.

Tears wouldn't fix it.

They wouldn't change it.

Nothing would, but there was something I could do.

"Eleanor," Ace smooths his hand down the back of my hair, "you have to leave."

“With what money, Ace? I have no job, I can’t go home.”

He swallows, “Kingston had money, he’d made a point of leaving you a hefty amount should something happen to him. It’s in a different account.”

“He did what?” I push away from him, he keeps me close as if uncertain what I’ll do, “I don’t want his money.”

“Eleanor, he’d want you to be safe.”

“Yeah, well, King’s dead, so it doesn’t matter *what* he wants.”

“Eleanor,” he pleads.

“I’ll leave,” I lie, “But I don’t want his money.”

“How will you survive?”

“I’m a big girl, Ace,” I sigh, “I’ll handle myself.”

“Eleanor...”

“He’s *dead*,” I snatch out of his arms, standing abruptly, my stomach churning violently, “and it’s *my* fault. I may as well have plunged that knife into his chest.”

“No,” he holds out his hands, “No, Eleanor.”

He wouldn’t let it go, I realize, he would push until I agreed with him, until I promised to leave *and* take the money. I’d have to give him what he wanted.

I allow him to guide me back to the bed, I let him tuck me in, telling me to sleep. I tell him I’ll leave in the morning, I’ll take the money, and I’ll leave. He nods but doesn’t leave, opting to stay in the chair for the rest of the night, watching me, napping there and when morning comes, I pack the meager things I have, and we stand face to face.

I doubted this was the last time I’d see Ace, but I pretend like it is.

“Bye, Ace.”

He smiles gently and cups my face, “you were good for him. Go live, Eleanor.” Tears burn my eyes as he kisses my cheek, “If only it could have ended differently.”

It was going to end differently. It was going to end the right way.

## CHAPTER FIFTY



This was it.

It had been a week since I let Ace believe I'd left for good. A week of buying plane tickets and booking hotel rooms across the sea to make sure he believed it. If he did, I wasn't sure but the fact that he hasn't come looking for me was enough to convince me that he'd bought it, after all, why wouldn't he?

I was nothing. No one. Sweet little Eleanor. Innocent little Eleanor.

I wasn't powerful. I wasn't anyone.

And that worked in my favor.

I kept out of view. I hadn't a sniff of Tobias either.

I planned to do what I had set out to do in the first place. Before Kingston. Before I truly knew what Tobias was capable of. If I did that, not everything would be a failure. King's death would still be my fault, but Tate might still live.

What happened to me, I didn't really care.

The hole inside my chest hadn't closed in the week that had passed. It didn't get bigger either. It just was. I was numb. I didn't cry. I didn't get

scared.

It was like I was broken.

Irrevocably broken.

I was thankful for the cold weather and the mass of Christmas shoppers. It helped keep me concealed on the bench across from Tobias' building. The weather meant I could keep the hood of my coat up, concealing my face and the crowds made me blend.

I hadn't an ounce of knowledge of how exactly to do this, but I'd go in. And I'd go in as if I knew *everything*.

I had nothing else to lose after all.

No one in that office would have a single clue what went down. They might know I handed in my notice, but my presence wouldn't necessarily be unusual. I still had a notice.

I didn't have a gun, only a kitchen knife. Nothing to protect me but the clothes on my back.

I was sure I wouldn't walk out of that building and I knew the kitchen knife in my pocket would do nothing against a gun.

I head through the doors and push back my hood, "Eleanor?"

I ignore it. No one stops me as I press the button and then enter the elevator, no one stops me when I step onto the floor I'd been working on for years, and no one stops me when I head right for Tobias' office.

I open his door with an abruptness that has the door swinging and slamming against the wall, making the glass in that one-way window vibrate.

His head snaps up.

“Hello, Tobias,” I say with a smile, stepping in and slamming the door behind me.

He sighs impatiently, “Eleanor.”

“You lied.”

“I thought you were smarter than this, Eleanor,” he pinches the bridge of his nose, “I was even willing to let you go. What are you doing here?”

“You said you’d let Tate go, you haven’t, but you never planned to, did you?” I accuse, “You made me give up Kingston for nothing, and then you *killed* him.”

“I understand you’re fairly new to this game, but death and murder are really quite a common occurrence.”

“You killed him!” For the first time in a week, I feel my emotions rising.

“Poor, sweet Eleanor,” he sighs, “I am sorry you’re grieving.”

“Don’t lie to me!”

He grins, “What fire you have. If only you’d shown it sooner.”

“Let Tate go!”

“I can’t do that,” he tsks, “I am actually quite glad you turned up, I had been willing to let you go, but now I realize that would have been a mistake. You know far too much.”

“So, you’ll sell me to one of your sex rings?”

“Oh no, I wasn’t lying, I do *like* you, so I’ll save you the torture of that and kill you instead. It’ll be less painful.”

“You’re despicable.”

He shrugs, “Perhaps.”

“I loved him, Tobias,” my voice cracks, “and you killed him.”

For just a second, he pauses, if I wasn’t paying attention, I would have missed it, but I was paying attention and I use that moment, I take my chance to catch him off guard.

I lunge across the room, dragging the stupid kitchen knife from my pocket and aim it for his chest.

I should have known it wouldn’t be that easy.

He dodges the blade and slams his fist against my face. I hit the floor, ears ringing.

“I didn’t peg you to be stupid, Eleanor,” he spits, “And really, choosing the office for this?”

I spit blood onto the carpet, “You’ll have to be careful what you do,” I say, “These walls may contain conversation, but will they stop a gun shot, a scream?”

His foot hits my stomach so hard I don’t make a sound as I topple over, gasping for breath.

I’m still fighting to get air into my lungs after being winded when he forces me onto my back and straddles me.

“You should have left, Eleanor.”

“Fuck you!”

His fist slams into my face and my head snaps to the side, but he grabs my chin and makes me look at him, “I don’t need a gun to kill you. I don’t need a knife to kill you either. You’re weak, all you women are weak.” His hands go around my throat with enough pressure to let me know he’s there but not enough to cut off air. Yet.



“This is how it should be.” He presses his palms harder against my windpipe, “women beneath and men on top. We will always dominate.”

“Fuck. You!”

He doesn't restrain himself as he tightens his hands. I don't fight him either.

My lungs cry out at the sudden lack of air flow and my throat burns with the pressure, but I don't stop staring at him, right into his eyes.

Murdered in an office full of people.

Dark fog starts to crawl in at the edges of my vision. My throat aches, burns, my lungs trying and failing to breathe while my heart pounds like a rampaging bull.

This was it.

I don't fight it.

“Here's what's going to happen,” Tobias suddenly releases my throat and I gasp, sucking in air, eyes streaming. “We're going to get up, and you're going to follow me.”

“Where!?” I rasp.

Tobias leans forward and wipes away a tear, “Well I can't be mixing business with pleasure, can I?”

“I'll scream.”

“I thought you might say that,” he grabs me by the arms and hauls me to my feet, dragging me towards his desk where his laptop lay open. I have no strength to fight him. He presses a couple of keys, and a video pops up. It's dark and grungy, but I can just about make out the people in there. Two.

One tied to a chair, a man behind.

Tate.

“All I need to do is call him, and he’ll slice her throat from ear to ear, so you’re going to come with me, and it’ll all be over.”

I stare at my best friend. She was in good shape, some aged marks on her face but nothing too extreme and while she was dirty, she was alive. The man I realize is Garrett. He says something and she spits at him.

She was alive.

“Fine.”

We walk through the office, his hand tight and bruising around the top of my arm but to everyone else it looks casual. My face is red, my throat burning, but if it’s noticeable no one seems to care. They look away, leaving me to my fate. They ignore the blood on my mouth, the bruising on my face.

Even in the elevator, he doesn’t let go and keeps that vice like grip on my arm the entire way through the foyer and out into the street, towards an idling car at the pavement.

“Get in, Eleanor,” Tobias orders.

But I don’t. Not because I don’t want to but because I can’t. I’m frozen. This can’t be right. Directly across the street I see Ace, he looks furious, but next to him...

No, this can’t be right.

His eyes pin me in place, he was livid, the icy blue of his eyes burning me. He breaks my stare to look at his watch and then back up at me. His lips curl, but then he mouths, “see you soon.”

Kingston was alive.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

# Kingston

I was furious.

She wasn't supposed to be here, she was supposed to be far, far away already. I'd lied to keep her safe, had Ace tell her I was gone, so she might have a chance at living a normal life. A life she deserved and yet here she is, having walked herself right into the hands of the man I wanted to save her from.

Seeing her walk into that building, seeing her hand herself over like that, it broke me. She was broken. And I had done that.

I was getting her back.

Everyone apart from Ace, Micha and Isobel thought I was dead. It made this a shit ton easier.

I follow behind the town car carrying Eleanor. He wasn't stupid enough to kill her in an office full of people, he may be powerful, but witnesses were tricky and that many would send him down.

After what went down at the penthouse, I've had to keep it quiet, but my plans were still moving. Tobias had to die.

It was just coming sooner rather than later.

My chest burns and every intake of breath hurts, the wound pulling and twinging with each movement I make. I was lucky to be alive. Lucky Ace

got me to the hospital as quickly as he did. I would have died otherwise.

The doctors and nurses had tried to stop me from leaving, but there was no way I was staying in a hospital. Not when everything I had worked for was going up in smoke, and Eleanor was still out there alone.

They take the roads out of the city and travel for a few miles before pulling into an industrial park off the motorway. Huge warehouses create a maze and I soon realize it's abandoned, save for a few expensive cars and men in suits. I couldn't follow any further. I park the car in a lay by and climb out, Ace following. We don't wait for the others to show, they will and they'll know what to do.

We keep to the gaps between the buildings, weapons drawn, ready for anything. Ace stays close, guarding my back as we round corner after corner until the town car comes back into view.

I ignore the pain in my chest, ignore how my breath rattles and wheezes. The only thing that mattered to me in this moment was her.

Tobias is yanking Eleanor out of the back seats. She snatches her arm back and hits him. I hear the slap from a hundred yards away, the echo of skin hitting skin bouncing off the walls of the warehouses.

His punch comes too quickly for her to dodge. Her head snaps back, and she falls, hitting the side of the car.

A rage so violent floods through me. *I will tear him apart.*

I'm suddenly tugged back, "Don't be a fool, Kingston!" Ace growls.

My teeth grind painfully together, and all I can do is watch as he manhandles her to standing again, blood dripping from her nose and lips as he forces her towards the door of the warehouse. The door closes with a resounding thud, locking her inside.

There are three men outside patrolling and I use a gap in the cross-over to sprint across the courtyard towards the door, Ace behind me.

“Kill them all,” I hiss to him, “Get Eleanor out.”

He nods and we slip inside.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

# *Eleanor*

Blood runs from my nose and mouth, tickling as it rolls over my skin. My face is on fire. Tobias did not hold back on that hit. He drags me, my legs scuffing in the dirt of the warehouse floor and then he throws me down. I land hard on my hip, hissing through my teeth to stop myself from crying out. I roll, trying to get up right, but my back hits something solid behind me.

“Ellie!?” Tate’s voice is a shrill of panic.

I spin as quick as I can and come face to face with her. She’s tied to a chair, hair matted and limp, and her face is gaunt, the skin pale, but she’s here. She’s right here.

“Tate!” I cry, ignoring the pain as I get to my knees and throw my arms around her.

“What are you doing here!?” She cries, “Why are you here!?”

Somewhere behind us a door opens and closes with a thud that echoes through the open space. It’s dark and damp in here, barely any light shining through the moss and grime covered windows in the ceiling and a little lamp set up close to where Tate is being held barely emits a glow.

I don’t get to answer when Tobias laughs.

My head whips around to see him looking back towards the way we came, “My, my, isn’t he persistent.”

On the ride over I'd convinced myself seeing Kingston was an illusion, a hallucination brought on by fear. Him telling me he'll see me soon wasn't because he would in this lifetime, but because I'd be dead.

I open my mouth to speak, but Tobias is gone, leaving just Tate and me in the warehouse.

I see it as an opportunity. My whole body hurts, even my fingers, but it doesn't stop me from going behind the chair to start tugging at the ropes binding her.

"Ellie, why are you here?"

"I came looking for you," I whisper, too afraid to talk louder.

"You fucking idiot!" She hisses but there's no anger.

"I wasn't just going to let you go!"

"Garrett said he text you, that you believed it."

I scoff, "Please, that guy's a fucking idiot if he thinks I'd ever believe those messages."

She laughs without humor, "You're going to get yourself killed."

"No," I say, getting the rope loose, "I'm going to get us out."

I don't let on how much I don't believe those words.

I move onto her ankles and free her, helping her stand. "Where's Garrett?" I ask.

She shakes her head.

"Hey!" A boom of a voice stops us, "What are you doing!?"

With Tate weak and me not in a much better state, we don't stand a chance against the two men that rush us. Tate is ripped away and held

roughly and me, I'm shoved so hard my head hits the chair as I fall. Stars burst behind my eyes, fog creeping in.

His boot hits me in the stomach, "They said we couldn't touch the blonde," the man sneers, "No one said anything about you."

The boot hits me again, in the ribs and I feel something crack as the wind rushes out, and I struggle to draw air into my lungs. Tate screams and fights against the other man's hold, but she can't get free to stop him.

I'm still trying to suck in air when he reaches down and grabs my jacket, hauling me up closer to him. I'm too weak to hold myself. I can't breathe.

"You're wearing far too many clothes," he sneers.

Horror makes my heart gallop faster than it already was. "No!" I scream. "No!"

An awful laugh erupts from him as he revels in my fear, but then that laugh turns to a gurgle and a warm spray hits me in the face.

My eyes widen when I finally see what's happened. The tip of a knife is protruding from his throat, blood trickling out of it and his mouth. Behind him, his face a mask of cold, quiet fury is Kingston, a hand ripping at his hair to hold his head back, the other wrapped around the hilt of the knife.

"Hello, love," he growls.

"Kingston!?"

He tugs the knife back and shoves the guy away, letting him fall in a heap of limbs and drowning gurgles.

"You're alive!?" I gasp and then I'm angry. "You lied!"

But before he can respond a slow, loud clap begins to echo through the warehouse.



“I never thought I’d see a dead man walking again,” Tobias tsks, “a valiant effort. Was it worth it?”

There’s no pause as Tobias withdraws a gun, aims it at Kingston and fires.

“No!” I scream, trying to get to him, but it isn’t me who blocks the shot. And it doesn’t hit Kingston.

Everything happens so fast and yet it’s like the world has slowed down. My scream echoes again when I realize who has stepped in front of that bullet. Where it has hit.

Ace lands hard into the dirt, the hole in the back of his head turning his blond hair red. It gushes from the wound and onto the ground, creating a puddle beneath his face.

“No!” Kingston’s cry is nothing but pure agony as he turns to drop down by his friend. But then he stops and his body stills, and when he looks over to Tobias, everything about him is angry. He pulls out his gun quicker than Tobias can react and then pulls the trigger three times. The shots make my ears ring, but they hit their mark, two in the chest, one in the head.

And that’s it.

Tobias drops to the floor, dead, Ace lies there unmoving. I can’t talk, I can’t move.

The gun clatters from King’s hand. He doesn’t come to me, and I don’t expect him to.

It kills me when a sob escapes his lips as he drops down to his knees besides his friend.

I feel Tate come up next to me, feel her arm go around my shoulders. Kingston gently rolls Ace’s body over until he’s on his back, eyes open and staring at the ceiling.

There's no life. His once vibrant blue eyes are dull, blood caked to his pale skin and blond hair.

Silent tears roll down Kingston's face as he leans forward and gently shuts his friend's eyes.

"We should leave," Tate whispers, "There will be others."

I nod, the hot tears on my own face running through the blood on my skin. I don't feel like I can walk, so instead I crawl towards Kingston. He flinches hard when I touch him but then his eyes meet mine, almost neon with the tears, and he grabs me, hauling me to his chest where he then buries his face into my hair and begins to shake, his silent sobs vibrating through me.

My throat burns with emotion, my eyes sting, and I know we can't stay here long but I give him this moment. This minute to mourn his friend.

The friend that saved his life and I doubted it was the first time either.

"King, we have to go."

He sucks in a sharp breath and nods, and though he pulls away from me, he doesn't let me go. His eyes, still watery and red hold mine as he cups my face in his bloody hands.

And then he kisses me. It's not rough or frantic, it's a claiming, a promise. The taste of his tears hits my tongue, and I could have stayed there forever. He pulls away too soon and stands, gently pulling me to my feet.

Pain makes it hard, my ribs hurt, my face, my whole damn body but he doesn't let go.

He steers me towards the door just as it bangs open and several men file in, trapping us inside.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

# Kingston

I shove Eleanor behind me hard, hard enough for it to cause her pain that she conceals with a hiss of breath and squeezing her eyes closed. But it isn't Tobias' men that enter to finish what he couldn't. It's mine.

Micha charges forward, splattered with blood, some likely his own, most not. His eyes scan the three of us standing, and then they land on Ace.

I'd felt this pain before.

When Isobel went missing all those years ago, and I thought her dead, that felt like this too.

Ace was my brother in everything but blood.

And he was dead.

There would be no saving him, no turning back the time. He had sacrificed his life to save mine. The grief was heavy. It weighed more than anything else I've ever had to bear.

Micha sighs heavily and closes his eyes, dropping his head in sorrow.

When he looks back up the pain is there in his glistening eyes, but he swallows and nods, "It's clear. Garrett got away."

Eleanor's friend, Tate, mutters a curse but doesn't say anything more. I'd have questions for her later. Like how the fuck is she here and not

buried somewhere or sold into one of the seedy skin markets.

Now was not the time.

“Tobias is dead,” I confirm, “No sign of Clayton or Derek.”

The Syndicate would still stand for now, but their days were borrowed.

“Have him—” I choke on my words and Eleanor grips my hand, “have him transported, I’ll begin the preparations for the funeral.”

Micha nods and rounds up a couple of guys to cover Ace and carry him out to one of the waiting SUVs. I walk Eleanor out, holding her weight as she limps with me. She’d taken a beaten and needed a doctor.

“I’m sorry, King,” she whispers when I help her into the back of a waiting SUV, opening the front door for Tate to climb up front. She does without a word and once she is shut in, I climb in the back with Eleanor, bringing her to me.

A week away with no contact was hard, though I had expected that. I was only able to keep away because I thought she was safe. She was out of the city.

But she’d been here this entire time, hidden but in arm’s reach.

I wouldn’t let her go again.

She cuddles into my side as one of my guys climbs in the driver’s seat and pulls away from the warehouse silently. We’re just leaving the industrial estate when the warehouse explodes.

Eleanor jumps next to me, swinging her head around to watch the huge black cloud rising from the destroyed building.

Gas leak, the papers will claim. A tragic accident.

The world will know who Tobias was, but that time would come. There were other things I had to do first.

The driver doesn't take us back to the compound. Nor the penthouse, though that was still unlivable after the incident a week ago. He takes us to the hospital for Tate and Eleanor to get checked out.

Five hours later, a bag of painkillers and some stitches for her lip, we were heading back to the compound.

She's drowsy, Tate is passed out and in the silence, with the sound of the tires on the road, I can't help but picture Ace. The sound of the bullet hitting his skull.

My fingers curl where they rest against my thigh.

Killing Tobias wasn't enough.

Sleepily, Eleanor reaches across and tucks her hand into mine, her grip weak but there, nonetheless.

"I'm sorry," she whispers again.

I kiss her head and hold her hand, but say nothing as we turn the corner and head through the gates of the compound.

There are several black SUVs already parked in the driveway waiting for us.

Despite the mass of people here, everyone is silent. They watch as I walk in, heads bowed and only Micha steps forward, "He's at the morgue, but the men wanted to pay their respects."

I nod and head through to the office, grabbing three bottles of the bourbon Ace loved the most. Eleanor watches me, her friend, eyes heavy with sleep leaning on the wall. I'd have to deal with her a little later.

I head back out to the guys and stop, facing them all. Eleanor sidles up next to me, quiet as a mouse.

"This crew is a family," I say to them, looking at each of their faces. I was no good at this, Ace was the people person of the two of us, the one

who dealt with this shit for me. He probably knew everyone's full name, what their sisters were called, where they went to college. I couldn't give them the same, but I could give Ace the send-off he deserved, "Ace was family. A brother. He died for what he loved, this family, this crew and what we stand for."

The men mumble their agreements.

"We are not good. We are not kind, but we are just. We are the law. One head has fallen today, let's make sure the last two are done for Ace."

I take a swig of the bourbon and hand it to the guy next to me, "For Ace!" I bellow.

They all bellow back.

*For Ace.*

## CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

# Kingston

The ground is wet, the wind cold, but it had stopped raining, giving me a small reprieve from where I stand next to the mound of dirt. It had long gone quiet since Ace's burial a few hours ago, and yet I hadn't been able to move from this spot.

It was a goodbye I was finding too hard to give.

Gravel moves behind me and I turn to see Eleanor walking towards me, a soft, gentle smile on her mouth.

Her hand slips into mine when she reaches my side, but she says nothing as she looks down at where Ace was buried.

Isobel hadn't turned up for the funeral. I was pissed at her for it, but I suppose I got it too.

She was too close to getting what she wanted to risk losing it again, though it still fucked me off. Ace was family.

"We should head back," I tell her.

She nods but doesn't move to walk away, instead she reaches into the large bag I hadn't realized she was carrying with her and pulls out a bottle of bourbon, twisting off the cap. She screws up her nose as she takes a swig from the bottle.

“That’s disgusting,” she rasps, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand.

I chuckle, taking the bottle from her and following suit. It burns all the way down.

I hand it back, expecting her to put it in her bag, so it surprises me when she lets go of my hand and steps forward, tipping the bottle and pouring the bourbon directly onto the fresh mound of dirt.

“Goodbye Ace,” she lifts the bottle, puts the cap back on and leaves the bottle in the dirt.

“Goodbye, brother.”



King does not let me go. Not when we get into the car and head back to the compound, not when we walk through the house, greeting people and accepting respects. He holds me tight, his thumb stroking across my knuckles, his lips brushing my hair. It’s only when I spot Tate, sat in the kitchen with a bottle of vodka dangling between her fingers and her eyes staring at a blank wall that he hesitates.

We hadn’t spoken much these past few days. I had tried, but she slept a lot and when she was awake it was much like this, her blankly staring at a wall or off into the distance.

I squeeze King’s hand, “I’ll be back in a minute.”

He follows my eyeline and nods once, kissing me before letting me go.

“Tate?” She doesn’t immediately respond, so I gently touch her arm and her head snaps towards me. “Are you okay?”



“Uh, yeah,” she nods, “Yeah I’m fine, tired.”

I nod, “Understandable.”

She nods awkwardly and puts that bottle down, frowning at it. She always held the bottles, but she never drank from them. She just held them and stared at them and then put them away.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“I should,” She smiles sadly, reaching to grab my hand. “I’m okay, you know, you don’t have to worry about me.”

“I do, though,” I admit.

She laughs, “I think it should be the other way round, I’d really like the story about how *you* found *him*.”

I roll my eyes, looking over to where she is. King leans casually against the wall speaking with Micha, but he looks over every now and then as if to check I’m still here.

“I didn’t find him,” I say truthfully, “he found me.”

“Be careful, Eleanor,” Tate whispers.

I nod, “I am.”

“I figured it out, what Garrett and his dad were doing. He was always shady and I’m nosey. It’s why he took me.”

“But he didn’t hurt you?”

She shakes her head. “Garrett was – is, I suppose, obsessed. During the time he had me, he kept telling me how we belonged together, that we would be together forever, and all that shit. He was a creep and I always thought there was something not quite right.”

“Kingston will find him.”

“He doesn’t scare me.”

“He should, Tate.”

She shrugs, “I’m okay, Eleanor,” she changes the subject. I stare at her face, she had more color now, her tan complexion glowing and her green eyes brighter than what they were, but there were shadows. I knew she was lying about being scared, she forgot how well I knew her, but I would let her have it. She wore a black dress today, her long blonde hair cut and shaped to how she liked it, so it framed her face.

She looked like my best friend, but not.

“I know but you know where to find me.”

She nods and then shoos me away, “Go back to your man. If he keeps looking over here like a lost puppy I might vomit.”

I tut and scoff my laughter, but I do as she says and head back to Kingston.

“Is she okay?”

“I’ll tell you later.”

He nods slowly, “Are you ready to go home?”

I smile at that. Home. With Kingston.

“Yes, let’s go home.”

## CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

# Kingston

Word spread about Tobias' death and his son missing. News outlets talked about it everyday for weeks, about how much of a tragedy it was losing such a valuable member of society. If only they knew. Garrett was suspected dead, and hopefully he would be soon. I just had to get a lead on his whereabouts.

But for now, I was sitting back.

I needed to.

I lead Eleanor into Crimson, her palm clammy inside my own.

There was still so much I wanted to show her, and if I'd learned anything, it was that time was not kind. It did not wait, and it did not discriminate.

Her black dress is modest, tight but long with an off the shoulder neckline. Her dark hair is pulled away, exposing that delicate throat.

It was late enough that when we walk inside most had already sauntered off, disappearing into one of the many rooms in the building, and I don't waste our time.

I was insatiable when it came to Eleanor. I had to have her whenever and wherever I could, and these little moments, these hours when the world around us slept I could cave into those darker desires and let her explore her own.

I grab drinks from the bar before I guide her down to the glass rooms below.

“Kingston,” she rasps, hesitating.

I pause, waiting for her to make her own decision, and when she squares her shoulders and takes that step, I grin at her and kiss her mouth.

I don't stop to see the other rooms or the people watching, the sounds around me are enough to tell me how *well* the night is going for them. Eleanor's fingers grip mine tightly and only when she pauses do I stop to see why.

She's turned slightly towards a room, her lip caught between her teeth.

“Does it turn you on, love?” I whisper against her ear.

“Yes.”

“Let me make you feel good.”

Her eyes sparkle when she looks at me and her lips tip up into a sensual smile. I guide her into one of the glass rooms, shutting the door before coaxing her towards the large, black silk lined bed. I place the drinks on the bedside table and step up to the woman I'd fallen in love with.

My hands trace down her bare arms while I kiss the exposed skin at her nape.

“Do you trust me?” I whisper.

“Yes.”

I pull the blindfold from my pocket and gently wrap it around her eyes, tying it securely at the back of her head. “King?”

“Shh, love,” I grumble, deft fingers finding the zipper on the back of the dress. I pull it down and guide the dress from her body, letting it fall to the floor, leaving her in just her black panties and no bra.

I groan at the sight of all her naked flesh. Never enough.

“Are you okay?” I check.

She nods, breathless, while I let my fingers trail down her spine, all the way down until I hook them into her underwear and tug them down her legs, leaving her bare, save for the heels on her feet.

“You are beautiful, love,” I tell her honestly.

“Kingston,” she sighs heavily, blissfully.

“Just feel,” I tell her, urging her to sit and then lay on the bed, the blindfold secured around her eyes. “No touching.”

“What?”

“No. Touching.”

She swallows.

I climb onto the mattress between her legs, coaxing her knees apart.

My fingers swipe through the hot flesh, her arousal coating my hand. “So wet, love. Always so responsive.”

“Yes,” she hisses, her fingers curling into the sheets.

“So needy too,” I muse. “What a greedy girl you are.”

I slowly insert a finger, pumping it slowly before I let my mouth fall between her legs, tongue finding her clit and flicking it. She arches, hands darting to grip my hair.

“No touching,” I pull away, taking away both my mouth and hand.

She cries out.

“Are you going to obey?” I tease.

“Yes!”

Instead of gripping the sheets, she raises her arms and holds onto the headboard, tightening her fingers to keep them there.

“Good girl.”

I taste her from hole to clit, letting the flat edge of my tongue push hard into her flesh and then grab her thighs, opening her up further for me. I suck, and I bite, I work her up, keeping her at that edge but never quite letting her go over.

“Does it feel good, baby?”

She whimpers, nodding and then says, “Are people watching?”

I grin on her flesh, “Oh they’re watching love.”

As if the mere idea is enough her spine arches, and she cries out, nearly at that peak.

“Well, well,” I muse, kissing her clit before I impale her on my fingers, curling them slightly as I fuck her with my hand, “Do you like that?”

She detonates. Her orgasm is loud, her pussy convulsing around my fingers and all I can do is chuckle against her skin.

No, nothing was perfect, and nothing was okay. But this.

If the world ended now, I’d go happily, buried between the thighs of my beautiful woman.

“Oh love, we are just getting started,” I place my fingers in my mouth, tasting her there, “I told you once I’d give you it all,” crawling up her body I kiss the side of her mouth, “and I’m a man of my word,” I kiss the other side and then slam my lips against hers hard and possessive.

“You’re mine now love,” I remind her, “and I’m going to give you *everything*.”

THE END

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Happy reading everyone!

Ria, x

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# About the Author

Bringing you stories that are dirty, dangerous & deliciously sinful. Ria Wilde is an indie author who writes dark & sinful romance. A lover of all things gritty & dark, the anti-heroes we all hate to love and of course, the possessive alpha men. When she isn't writing, you'll likely find her with her nose in a book or doing her second love, graphic design!

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