



EAST
COAST
DEVILS
BOOK ONE

THE

Devils

KEEPSAKE

SOMME SKETCHER

Somme Sketcher

The Devil's Keepsake

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First edition

Cover art by Cover Couture

Editing by Amy Briggs

This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy

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Prologue

NINE YEARS OLD

I was nine when I realized my father was a bad man, and it was all because I needed to pee.

My bladder woke me up somewhere between bedtime and morning, the time when darkness seems to stretch on forever. When the monsters come out to play.

But that night, they weren't hiding under my bed or lurking in my closet.

They were at the end of the hall.

I called out for my father to take me to the bathroom. Once, twice. No response.

So, I crept out onto the landing, following the only source of light, the yellow glow from under the door at the end of the hall. The door I was forbidden from opening. I wasn't a rebellious child, but if I was feeling bold, I'd wrap my tiny hand around the rusting knob, letting the adrenaline turn me dizzy. If I was feeling reckless, I'd twist it.

It was never, ever, unlocked.

But like time, a nine-year-old's bladder waits for no man. Even if said man is busy slitting another man's throat.

The door wasn't locked like it usually was. As I crept closer, I realized the yellow glow wasn't just coming from under the door, it stretched up the side of the frame too. It was ajar.

I followed the light and the gruff voices, and I watched silently from the safety of the crack of light from the door.

Even at nine, I knew I could have screamed and shouted and cried; my father would have still plunged the knife into the man's neck.

Even at that young age, I knew it was wrong. I knew my father was a bad man.

But the figure in the shadows, the one with the glowing amber eyes, so bright they sliced through the darkness, and the cigar tucked into the corner of his mouth?

I knew instantly.

He was the Devil.

Poppy

FIFTEEN YEARS OLD

I saw the Devil when I was nine.

He claimed me when I was fifteen.

The six years that stretched between those two events were anything but peaceful.

The man with the amber eyes went from having a supporting role in the worst memory of my life, to taking a leading role in the soap opera that was my imagination. Like any character in a long-running show, he evolved with every season. He grew stronger, darker, scarier with every sleepless night I spent staring at my ceiling. His yellow eyes became more and more piercing with every sweat-drenched nightmare. His looming figure expanded, filling up more than the darkened corner of my father's study. No. It filled the entire room, then poured out into every inch of my brain.

I was nine when I realized my dad, Marcus Murphy, was a bad man. But I'm fifteen when I realize he is a cowardly one.

His hurried footsteps grow louder and louder, that's what wakes me up. His frantic voice accompanies them.

"Poppy." My bedroom door bursts open so hard that for a moment, I think he's ripped it off its rusting hinges. "You need to get up. *Now.*"

Most teenage girls woken up at the crack of dawn by their frantic father would expect the worst. That something had happened to a loved one. Except, I don't have anyone to love outside of the four Barbie-pink walls of my box-sized bedroom. My mom was found swinging from the garage rafters when I was still in diapers, and both sides of the family severed ties with my father, and consequently me, after the funeral.

I tuck the bed sheet under my chin, recoiling at the sudden shock of light coming from the naked light bulb swinging above my head. "What have you done now, Dad?" I grumble, swallowing the annoyance that follows the initial shock.

Now. What have you done now.

It's a valid question because my father has always done *something*. These *somethings* are the reason we have a baseball bat by the front door and the reason I have to tell the scary men who appear in our doorway unannounced that he isn't home, even though he's hiding in the linen closet.

At fifteen, I'm old enough to know my father is a criminal and old enough to know he isn't a very good one. His employers wear expensive watches and smoke cigars and are chauffeured around in the back of luxury cars. They pay my father cash-in-hand, and if the cell phone in the trunk of his car rings, he knows better than to ignore it.

He works a constant graveyard shift, and when we cross paths in the mornings, me hurrying to catch the school bus, him on his way to bed, he often has a black eye and a bloodied lip.

Yes. At fifteen, I'm old enough not to believe his "I-work-nighttime-security-at-the-mall" bullshit.

Slitting throats is above a mall cop's pay grade.

“I haven’t done nothin’, Pop. Okay? Nothin’.” The wobble in his voice says otherwise. “But you gotta get up, and you gotta get dressed.” He twists toward my closet, and like a mad man, pulls out every black garment I own. Dresses, shirts, pants, strewn across the carpet.

“Dad!” I shout as loudly as my dry throat allows. “*What is going on?*” My room is so small that I’m almost on top of him the second I leap out of bed. I wrap my fingers around his arm and squeeze.

Human contact seemed to work. He spins around, and his dark eyes are wild. I can’t remember my mother, but even without having the tatty photograph of her tucked into the frame of my vanity mirror, I know just by looking at my father, that I stole all of her physical features. My copper hair is a stark contrast to his jet-black tufts, and my ice-white skin isn’t even on the same Pantone color chart as his olive complexion. I must have taken my mom’s build too. My father is short and stout and even only halfway through puberty, I towered over him.

“Get dressed, Poppy,” he repeats, dragging a bruised knuckle over the scruff on his jaw. “We’re going to a funeral.”

The scowl on my forehead deepens. “Whose funeral?” My brain automatically flicks through the very small list of people I know. It’s less than half a page with just a fistful of names. Family... well, there are none unless you count my Auntie Esme, the faceless woman who sends the same Christmas card every year. Outside of my bloodline, there are a few girls in school I’m friendly with. And by friendly, I mean they let me sit at the end of their lunch table if I keep my head down. I rattle through the list in my head, thinking of all the nameless neighbors...

“The Quinns,” my father says, the name sticking in his throat. “Donal Quinn. And Eamon Quinn. And Fergus Quinn. They are...*dead*, Pop. The

Quinns are fuckin' dead.”

The names aren't in my Rolodex, but they are somewhere, floating around the perimeters of my brain. The Quinn family.

My body reacts before my brain, sending a shiver down the length of my spine.

My father takes in the expression settling in on my face and nods, taking it as a sign I understood the gravity of the situation.

“So, get dressed,” he mutters, nudging the pool of black clothes towards me. “Gotta leave in an hour.”

* * *

An hour and two minutes later, I'm sitting in the back of my father's beat-up Civic, in the only seat that had a working safety belt. I watch as he scurries out of the brown apartment building and down the broken path towards the car. A cocktail of guilt and embarrassment rattles in my chest. His only suit has seen better days, and the replacement button I'd hastily sewn onto his jacket a few moments earlier was a different color than the rest of them. His once white shirt is yellowed with age, and years of nervous sweat are entwined deep within the cheap fabric.

I look down at my own outfit. A simple black dress that makes an appearance anytime I have to look dressy. With its short sleeves and thigh-skimming length, it's barely appropriate for a funeral, but even less fitting for a freezing January morning in Boston. We drive to the sound of my teeth chattering, making our way out of the slums of the Roxbury neighborhood. The Civic's bald tires skate along the icy roads.

It's the nervous tension brewing in my stomach that forces the question up my throat.

"Who are the Quinns?" I ask quietly.

My father glances at me in the cracked rearview mirror, surprise flashing across his face. "They are my..." he grimaces, searching the road ahead for the end of his sentence. "The family I work for, Pop. The Quinn's are—were—very important in Boston."

I don't know why there is a lump in my throat because that was the answer I was expecting.

So, the big, bad mafia family was dead. Some of them, at least.

I'd never been a curious child, not since the night I saw my father kill a man. Because curiosity didn't just kill the cat, it killed my relationship with my father too. I learned hard and fast that being nosy and asking questions get you into trouble.

What you don't know can't hurt you.

I've never asked my father what job he has or who he works for. What qualifications he needs to slit throats for a living. I keep my mouth shut and remain stubbornly incurious.

But two other questions were burning in my throat desperate to get past my tongue. There is only one I allow myself to ask.

"Why do I have to go to the funeral? I didn't know the Quinns." In fact, I'm not sure if I'd ever seen them. My father's employers were nothing but black, faceless shadows that put food scraps on our table and work him to the bone.

Even from the back seat, I see his knuckles whiten around the steering wheel. "You were invited."

I turn my attention back to the scenery, watching the boarded-up windows and graffiti that littered my neighborhood morph into tree-lined, cobbled streets and four-story townhouses that screamed wealth.

I swallow the other question. The one I *really* don't want to know the answer to.

Is the Devil with the wolf-like eyes going to be there?

Poppy

Park Street Church, Boston.

It's a big, blocky building with a towering spire that disappears deep into the fog. In front, the sprawling Boston Common is a carpet of snow, and behind it, the Charles River brings in an icy chill that snakes through the narrow streets.

My father parks a few blocks away, and by the time we reach the front of the church, there's frost gathering on my eyelashes. I pull my worn jacket tight under my chin. It doesn't feel like the right time to tell him I need a new one.

There's a fistful of people on the stone steps, hands stuffed into pockets and eyes following early-morning runners on their way to the park.

Asking less questions means I see more. And as we approach the church, I notice two things.

One: For such an "important family," there really aren't many people celebrating the Quinns' lives.

Two: The people that are here don't look solemn. They look confused. Scared, even.

I glance up at my father but his eyes are trained straight ahead, a hardened expression smeared across his face. It's one I can't read. I don't know him well enough.

With everyone avoiding eye contact, I take the chance to look at the crowd in better detail. From body language alone, I can tell where the divides lie. A woman with dark roots and heavy bags lining the underside of her eyes clutches the hands of two boys, neither older than seven. The younger-looking one grips the hem of her peacoat, his big blue eyes as bewildered as I feel. To the left of us, a man around my father's age, and a teenager I assumed to be his son in his shadow. As I run a cautious look over the pair, the boy locks eyes with me. Steel gray and deep-set, and there's not a trace of fear in them.

I look away first. Like the coward I am.

The church bells above our heads chime, their echo reverberating against my rib cage.

Eight times for eight a.m., sharp.

Among the deafening noise, my father does something he's never done before.

Grabs my hand.

"Poppy," he says, spinning me around to face him. This time, his expression is as clear as day. Fear. It taints his emerald-green eyes, the only physical feature we share. "You keep your head down and your mouth shut, okay?" I swallow my own fear as it rises up my throat. Looking around, I can see the mom having the same hushed conversation with her children, the father hovering over his son, body language displaying a similar sentiment. Another tug on my hand. "Poppy?" my father hisses, the lines deepening on his face. "You listening to me?"

I manage a nod, and it's enough for him to straighten up, reset his jaw, and pull me toward the opening church doors.

Inside, the silence rings louder than the bells, but there's no relief from the biting chill. I blink, once, twice, to adjust my eyes to the room. It's cavernous with sloped ceilings and intricate stained glass that transform the white winter sun into a kaleidoscope of colors. They wash over the simple interior, bringing the well-worn pews and beige tiles to life. The small crowd hovers in the aisle, no one wanting to be the first to take a seat. After a few electrified seconds, the teenage boy pushes past my shoulder and stomps toward the front row, both the sound and sight of his Doc Martens standing out like a sore thumb. His father mutters something under his breath beside me and then follows him. I glance at my own father for reassurance. As always, it doesn't come. I decide to take matters into my own hands, and with my legs like jelly, I make my way to the pew third from the front—not directly in the line of fire, yet not too obviously trying to hide at the back—and slide onto the smooth bench.

The set-up at the front of the church only adds fire to my confusion. Only one simple coffin sits on the raised sanctuary. There's a new question forcing its way up my throat. *I thought three of the Quinns were dead?* But before I can lean toward my father's ear and ask, the church doors fly open behind us, slamming against the hinges with a crashing echo.

There's a collective wince, the tide of everyone rising to their feet forces me to stand too, and it's instinctive to squeeze my eyes shut.

What you can't see can't hurt you. What you can't see can't hurt you. What you can't see can't hurt you.

The chant swarming around my head is so familiar it's almost melodic. Etched in my brain from years of forcing myself not to be curious.

But closing my eyes only sharpens my other senses.

I can hear the heavy footsteps growing louder.

I can smell the fresh wave of crisp, winter air they've brought in from the street.

I can feel the tension brewing among the small crowd, reaching almost unbearable heights.

When the footsteps come to an abrupt stop, my father nudges his elbow against mine.

And when I look up, there's no spark of recognition or creeping unease that trickles over me.

No. It hits me like a ten-ton truck.

I'm locking eyes with the Devil.

The man with the wolfish eyes that have haunted every dark crevice in my brain since I was nine.

His amber stare pins me to the pew, his mere presence gripping at my windpipe, threatening to cut off my air supply.

What you can't see can't hurt you.

But I can't look away.

After what feels like hours, but is probably only seconds, he releases me from his vice-like stare, dragging his yellow eyes across the rest of the crowd instead.

"Dearly beloved," he spits, his deep voice echoing off the high ceilings and the thick walls. "We gather here today to honor the life of my family. My father, Donal Quinn, and my two brothers, Eamon Quinn and Fergus Quinn."

Ice runs through my veins. *He's a Quinn. My father's boss.*

The Devil lets the deafening silence hang in the air for a few seconds, just enough time for me to try to grapple at my senses and take him in.

Hard lines define him. Sharp nose, square jaw, and a mouth contorted into a permanent straight line. His eyes—those goddamn eyes—are set in his angular face like two rare gems on display in a museum. His beard is the type only achieved by rich men with time on their hands. Thick and black, the first signs of salt and pepper flecked around his chin. The hair on his head matches in thickness and in color, falling into waves just above his ears, and bizarrely, I can't help but think, if he grew it a centimeter longer, it'd form into curls.

His suit costs more than my soul. The wool fabric probably has an exotic history, and it's clad to his imposing frame like a second skin. The only relief to his never-ending darkness is the large emerald ring on his pinky and the vibrant pop of silk elaborately folded into his chest pocket.

Blood red.

When he starts speaking again, something about his demeanor shifts. His hard mouth curls upwards into something resembling a smile, and there's a glint in his eye.

“But make no mistake,” he snarls, “we will not be honoring their life with nostalgic anecdotes and fake tears. We are the Quinn family,” his voice wraps around his last name with a cocktail of pride and authority. “We are gods among mortals. And there is only one way gods should be honored.” Those yellow eyes search the room, taking their time to land back on me. “Sacrifice.”

The blood rushes from my head, and my father's hand tucks under the crook of my elbow as I stumble, stopping me from sinking into the pew.

A sacrifice.

This *is* a funeral.

Just not one for the Quinn family.

With the flair of a circus ringmaster, he takes the three steps up to the sanctuary and stands behind the simple pulpit. While his eyes aren't boring into my soul, I take the chance to glance around the room. The fear is universal, etched into foreheads, balled up into fists and quivering on bottom lips. I catch the eye of one of the children, the same one with the big blue eyes. I force a smile, but it doesn't feel convincing. Looking over my shoulder to the back of the church, I notice three large men in suits guarding the doors.

The only exit, and it's guarded by the hounds of Hell.

A rustle from the front of the church forces me back around. The Devil produces a crisp sheet of paper from his jacket pocket and places it on the pulpit.

"You may be wondering why you're here," he addresses the petrified crowd, his nostrils flaring. "Or, if you were smart, perhaps you've already made the connection. Eleana Cummings," he says swiftly, twisting to face the woman and her kids. She pulls them closer to her body. "On January 11th, you delivered a parcel to one-oh-four Pillsbury Street. My family's warehouse—"

"Please," the shell of a woman lets out a desperate sob, her body collapsing in on itself. "I'm only a mail carrier. I work for UPS. I had no idea—"

It's not a word or even a hand that cuts Eleana Cummings off. Just one, simple look. A look that makes acid rise up my throat.

"And in that parcel," the Devil continues, "was a mix of gasoline, propane, and fertilizer. A lethal, homemade bomb that took the lives of Donal, Eamon, and Fergus Quinn." The tension hanging over the tiny congregation is suffocating. Every pair of lungs in the church is full of stale

oxygen as everyone waits to hear what fate the Devil has decided for Eleana Cummings. “I’m a cruel man,” he says, almost softly. “It’s in my DNA. But I’m not an unreasonable man, even in the midst of grief. I won’t kill you, or your children.” Out of the corner of my eye, I see Eleana form a vice-like grip around the shoulders of her kids. “But rest assured, I’ll make you suffer. Your job is to be terminated immediately, and there isn’t a business, legal or illegal, that will hire you within a one-hundred-mile radius of Quinn territory. Within the same territory, no supermarket or restaurant will serve you. No landlord will rent to you. No church or charity will take pity on you. No, Eleana Cummings,” he says, a chilling smile creeping over his hard face, as if his special strain of punishment is amusing to him. “I won’t kill you. But I’ll make it impossible for you to live.” He glances up toward the back of the church, and the tiniest twitch triggers a stampede of heavy boots. I watch, helplessly, as the men guarding the church doors drag her and her screaming children down the aisle, back out into the harsh Boston weather.

The doors slam behind her, and in the sudden silence, numbness creeps over me. *I’m not an unreasonable man.* If barring a single mother from every resource in the city because she was simply doing her job isn’t unreasonable, then this man is more psychopathic than I first thought.

The unease creeps up my neck. With Eleana out of the way, there are two more punishments to be dealt.

“Marcus Murphy.” My father’s name echoes around the church, a horrifying ring to it.

I’m not a religious girl. God never saved my mother and no matter how many carpet burns I got on my knees from praying at the foot of my bed, he never brought her back to save me.

But in the moment of desperation, I squeeze my eyes shut and clamp my hands together.

Please, God, please save me. Save my father.

My father stiffens beside me. But as I glance at him, I notice he shows no emotion. He's been trained, trodden on, to behave like this in the Devil's presence.

A pang of pity, and disgust, shoots through my chest.

"On January 11th, you were the doorman on duty at the Quinn warehouse. You deemed the package to be safe, you signed for it, and then you handed it to my father." His eyes glower, but his body language remains eerily calm. "You didn't do your job, Murphy. Your incompetence is the sole reason my family has been taken away from me." His gaze slides from my father to me. Once again, I'm frozen under the intensity of his stare. "And for that, I will take yours."

His words reverberate around my brain, bouncing off of the sides of my head as if they are balls in a pinball machine.

"Sir—"

Like Eleana, it only takes a certain look to silence my father, before he turns his unwanted attention back to me. "Poppy Murphy," he mutters, rolling my name around on his tongue, like he's seeing how it tastes. He drags a knuckle over his bearded jaw. "The day you turn eighteen is the day you belong to me."

Drawing in a lungful of ice-cold breath, I turn to my father in desperation. I don't know what I'm expecting him to do, but I'm expecting him to do *something*. A real man, a *real father*, would never let another man claim his daughter. They'd fight to the death to protect her. At the very least, tell the Devil to take him instead.

But it's in this moment I realize my father isn't just a bad man. He's a coward. One that stares at his shoes and clenches his fist and swallows his anger as his boss stakes a claim on the child he brought into this world.

And it's in this moment I realize I'm nothing like him.

I'm *not* a coward.

I can't be. Even if it's instinctive to squeeze my eyes shut and clamp my hands over my ears, I have to be brave. Because the only person in the entire universe willing to fight for Poppy Murphy, is, well, me.

"Go to hell."

The words come from my mouth like a hiss of steam. Only now does my father make a sound. A weird, strangled noise that sits deep in his chest. But still, he makes no move to come to my defense. The boy with the steel-gray eyes and the Doc Martens twists and stares at me, an amused smirk dancing on his lips. *You've really fucked up now*, his expression reads.

I stare back at him because I'm too frightened to lift my gaze to the Devil. The silence radiating from him is the scariest sound so far. It's interrupted by slow, deliberate footsteps.

Thud, thud, thud.

The sound of the Devil descending the three steps leading down from the sanctuary.

Thud, thud, thud, thud.

The sound of him walking down the aisle, stopping at the third pew.

What you can't see can't hurt you.

I'm not looking directly at the Devil, but his presence is suffocating so much that it *does* hurt. When Doc Martens boy turns back to face the lone coffin at the front of the church, I have no choice but to face him.

With only a few feet and a pathetic excuse for a father between us, I could reach out and strangle him. Wrap my weak hands around his thick neck and squeeze the breath from his lungs. Choke the evil out of him, at the very least. But as he towers over both me and my father, I know the idea is nothing but a sick fantasy.

“Move,” the Devil says simply at my father, not taking his eyes off me. The coward slithers past his imposing body, stumbling to get out of his way. Now there’s nothing between us but hatred. “Repeat yourself.”

Inches from me now, I can barely breathe. He was scary when on the sanctuary, but up close, he’s petrifying. It’s not just his larger-than-life build or the way he carries himself like he’s a million miles above the law. Because, in the ten minutes I’ve been in his presence, it’s as clear as day that he is.

It’s his eyes. Swirling around in the whirlpools of citrine and amber is a glint of something deeply unsettling.

A look of a man who has nothing to lose.

I take a deep breath like it might be my last. My life has been short and miserable and gloomy.

Looks like I have nothing to lose either.

“I said, go to hell,” I say evenly, forcing the tremor out of my voice.

The silence is hot and heavy despite the January weather. The Devil studies me with a poker face that any gambler in Vegas would die for. Then, his lips stretch, his deranged smile splitting to reveal a perfect set of white teeth.

“I’m already here, princess,” he murmurs, closing the gap between us. He’s so close now that the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. Mixed in with his oaky cologne is another scent, one that smells bitter and acidic.

Alcohol. I force myself not to shrink away from him. “And in three years, you’ll be right here with me.”

He widens the space between us as quickly as he closed it, shoving past my father and striding back up to the sanctuary, taking his spot behind the pulpit again. Adjusting his cufflinks and smoothing down a strand of wavy black hair that has escaped his mane, he nods towards the back of the church. “You’re dismissed,” he says, without looking at me again.

The patter of heavy boots as the Devil’s men make a beeline for my father and me. Marcus Murphy’s hands shoot right up, palms in the air, walking himself out of the church. Me, on the other hand, I find it a lot harder to budge.

The teen with the Doc Martens and his haggard father are the only ones left. And I have a feeling that the Devil makes a habit of saving the worst till last.

“Wait,” I stammer, trying to rip my arm out of one of his hound’s vice-like grip. I was torn between wanting to get the hell out of here and finding out how this ends. “What about them?”

It was obvious “them” referred to the only two people left in the room; the father and his Doc Marten-clad, ice-cold son. The punishments had gotten progressively worse, to the point where if I stay silent, it’ll eat me up inside for the rest of my life.

The Devil throws a stony look over the pulpit. “I said, you’re dismissed.”

The hounds of Hell kick into action again. I might be no match for them, but I’m tall for my age and have enough stubborn strength to dig the heels of my worn pumps into the floor. His lips twitch at my struggle, enough for me to realize this is nothing but a cruel, twisted game to him.

This knocks all of my fighting breath from my lungs and now I'm as limp as my father. The beige and brown colors of the church pass in a blur as the men drag us outside, dumping us on the curb like we're the day's trash.

The monsters that live in your head grow bigger and stronger and scarier as they feast on your fears. But when confronted by them in reality, you realize how much you've blown them out of proportion.

But not the Devil. He was exactly how I imagined him.

Catching my breath, I look up at the looming spire, letting the day's first bout of snow settle on my face.

Today has proven to me once and for all that God doesn't exist. If he did, the Devil would have gone up in flames.

Poppy

SEVENTEEN YEARS OLD

My relationship with my father was hanging by a thread before the funeral. But his final act of cowardliness was a sharp razor blade, severing any fiber of love I had left for him.

The last time I spoke more than three words to him was on the steps of the church, a fresh snowstorm building up momentum around us.

“How could you?” I’d screamed, my frustration snatched away by the wind. “I’m your *daughter*. How could you let *that monster* claim me?”

His weary eyes had looked through me. There was no sparkle in his emeralds, and I couldn’t remember a time when there was. What stood in front of me was a defeated man controlled by something much bigger than him.

“Lorcan Quinn,” he had muttered back, as if those two words were explanation enough.

When I shoved him with all of my force, wanting to elicit something—*anything*—that showed he cared, he closed his eyes. “I’m sorry, Pops. What the Quinns want, the Quinns get.”

It was also the last time I called him “Dad.” He’s Marcus Murphy to me now.

On my seventeenth birthday, the reality of my future hits me like a ton of bricks. I have one year to figure out a plan and change the fate the Devil bestowed on me. I have to escape the crumbling walk-up I share with the man formerly known as my father. I also have to get as far away as possible, out of Boston and anywhere the Quinn's power might reach.

But moving means money, something I've never had. I have to turn something out of nothing, and then that something into something more.

I'm clambering through the cobbled streets of Beacon Hill one day after school when I see that nothing. It glitters in the low winter sun, forcing me to look at it.

A mirror. Beautiful and broken. The gold, oval frame twists into intricate knots, and the glass is cracked and streaky. It rests against the railings of a townhouse, a damp post-it note stuck to it, flapping in the breeze.

Free. Help urself. :)

I peer up at the towering house, with its polished stone steps, red brickwork, and shiny black door. *How rich must you be to discard something so precious?*

The next morning, I head into school early, the broken mirror tucked under my arm, and make my way to Mrs. Harjo's office.

She responds to my shy knock by peering around the door, her caramel eyes widening in surprise. "Hello," she says politely, "how can I help you?"

I'm not surprised she's surprised. I've never stepped foot inside her woodworking class. But she's the only person I can think of that might want to help me.

And I was right. Her eyes light up when I show her the mirror, and she ushers me down to her workshop at the bottom of the small grounds. It

smells like coffee and sawdust and *hope*.

She shows me how to sand down the frame, how to cut a new sheet of oval glass with a diamond-tipped scribe. She guides me through her personal collection of paints, oils, and stains, giving me the rundown on what could be used on each material.

Within a few stolen hours before and after school, we restore the mirror.

“It’s French, early nineteenth century, I’d guess,” Mrs. Harjo says, holding up our finished work to admire it. She looks back at herself in the polished glass, at her beautiful olive skin and cascading black hair. “And now, thanks to you, it has a new lease of life.” She places it carefully on the workbench and reaches for some tissue paper to wrap it up in. “This is exactly why I love restoration. Even the most broken things can be beautiful. They just need a little love.”

I nod, something unfamiliar swelling in my chest. Pride. “Thank you, Mrs. Harjo, I’ve learned so much.”

Her face stretches into a warm, easy smile. “What are you going to do with it? I’m sure your parents would love it.”

I skirt around the awkward topic of my family dynamic like I always do. “Actually, I want to sell it. Do you know how I can go about doing that?”

Mrs. Harjo’s eyes meet mine, that smile melting into concern. She pauses for a moment, drinking me in, as if looking at me for the first time. Those kind eyes slide over my so-worn-its-shiny sweater, my sneakers that are busted around the toe because they are two sizes too small. The ratty shoestring holding my thick red hair away from my face.

“I’ll buy it,” she announces. “I’ll give you a hundred bucks for it.” A pause. “Actually, make it one-fifty.”

Red hot shame burns at my ears. “Oh, no, I wasn’t suggesting—”

She slaps the dust from her overalls in a way that ends the conversation. “One-fifty it is. Come back with me to my office so I can get my wallet.”

When she puts three crisp fifties in my palm, I could cry. It’s my first step towards getting out of here. Getting as far away from Lorcan Quinn as possible.

“Come back to me with another gem soon, all right?”

I do. I head back to the wealthy Beacon Hill area and scour the streets like a hungry stray. Poking holes in the garbage bags that sit against the wrought iron fences, slipping into the back of luxury condos. My next gem is a mantel clock, clad in chipped ebony and sporting broken hands, which me and Mrs. Harjo painstakingly restore to its original eighteenth-century glamour. Then there’s the stained glass lamp— (Venetian, much to Mrs. Harjo’s delight—), and a hand-painted set of Babushka dolls.

“You have a talent for finding beauty in the most unexpected places,” Mrs. Harjo tells me with a smile as she touches up the floral paintwork with a delicate brush.

I may have a passion for finding the piece and learning about its history, but I also find a passion for the business side. Mrs. Harjo couldn’t buy all of my pieces (not on a teacher’s salary, that’s for sure), so she helps me set up an eBay account.

I find the beauty in numbers. The lamp sells first, and watching the bidding war whiz onward and upwards into triple digits sends me dizzy. With the pile of cash growing under my lumpy mattress, scouring the rich parts of town for promising-looking trash turns into browsing flea markets and thrift shops. When I’m not buffing, oiling, or painting in Mrs. Harjo’s workshop, I’m in the library, poring over *Basic Business Economics* and

Starting a Business for Dummies. Return-on-investment, profit-and-loss, price-to-earnings. I fill my brain with the knowledge and vocabulary they don't teach you in high school, and not just to learn to make money, but to fulfill the second part of my plan too.

Eventually, a thick letter lands in the mailbox.

My acceptance letter to Stanford Business School.

I could collapse under the weight of relief. Three weeks before my eighteenth birthday, I'll be on the other side of the country, far, far, away from my cowardly father and cockroach-ridden condo.

But most importantly, far, far away from the Quinn territory.

Tears of relief slosh onto the golden ticket in my hands, smearing the 'C' in congratulations.

I belong to nobody.

Especially not the Devil.

Poppy

EIGHTEEN YEARS OLD

I'd had a million nightmares about my eighteenth birthday. They always started in the same way: the clock striking midnight and the world as I know it melting away around me. My dorm room, my new-found friends. Everything that makes me feel like a normal girl attending one of the best colleges in the world is pulled from underneath me and everything plunges into darkness.

And then I see his eyes. Wolf-like and hungry, shining even brighter than they were at the funeral. He pounces, enveloping me in his strong body, the smell of his oaky cologne and alcohol filling up my throat until I can't breathe.

I didn't have that dream tonight, because I simply didn't go to sleep.

I waited, one eye on my dorm room door, the other on the clock. And when the clock struck midnight, I expected the Devil to appear.

But... nothing.

No sudden darkness, no piercing yellow eyes hiding in the shadows. The earth didn't tremble and judgment day didn't come.

I passed the hours by curling up on my desk chair, my sweater stretched over my knees, sipping on lukewarm coffee. It wasn't until the first of the

day's sunrays broke through the gaps in the curtain, splashing golden streaks over the cheap carpet, did something new and foreign bloom in the pit of my stomach.

Hope.

Maybe my plan worked. I can imagine him storming into my father's condo, ripping the door off my childhood bedroom and roaring with anger when he realizes the bed's empty.

Maybe I *have* won.

"Hey, birthday girl!" comes a croaky voice from the other side of the room. Nellie, my roommate, is propping herself up on her elbows in bed. "What the hell are you doing awake? It's like..." she taps the screen of her cell and groans at the sudden brightness. "Fuckin' early, that's what it is."

I smile over my coffee as she flops back down onto her pillows. "Sorry," I whisper, uncurling myself and padding across the room back to my own bed. "I hope I didn't wake you?"

But the soft sound of her breathing tells me she's already out for the count again. I slip between my sheets and curl into a ball. With the comfort of daybreak, my eyes get heavy, and I'm able to slide into a Devil-free sleep.

* * *

Nellie casts a judgmental eye over my silhouette and frowns. "I don't understand. It's like your entire wardrobe is tailor-made for a nun."

With a fresh scowl, I turn back to the full-length mirror propped up against the door and run my hands over my black maxi dress. The waistline

sits under my bust and falls straight to the floor, the light and billowy fabric pooling at my feet. “I think it’s cute,” I say blankly, “Is it not cute?” I glance up at her reflection in the mirror, watching as she tugs out silky and shimmery dresses out of her trunk. We moved in three weeks ago, and she still hasn’t unpacked her stuff. All my possessions, on the other hand, are neatly folded in drawers or hung up in closets.

Nellie lets out a snort. “Cute if you’re a nun. Here,” she says, tossing a strip of fabric into my hands. “This will look incredible on you.”

Holding it up against myself, it’s my turn to snort. “I’m not a nun, but I’m not a three-dollar-hooker either.”

She laughs. “Just try it on, loser.”

In the short time I’ve lived with Nellie, I’ve realized how similar we are in some respects and how different we are in others. We’re both stubborn and always have an opinion at the tip of our tongues, and neither care if it’s solicited or not. In everything else, we’re polar opposites. Looks: Nellie’s California tan and sharp blond bob make her look like a *Hollister* model, whereas my pasty skin and frizzy red hair have had me mistaken for Princess Merida from *Brave* by a handful of kids at the grocery store.

Oh, and dress sense. Nellie wears ass-flashing booty shorts and cropped tops by day, and plunging LBD’s by night. I, on the other hand, own three pairs of jeans and two maxi dresses that *might* flash my ankles if the wind is blowing in the right direction.

“Jesus Christ and all of his disciples,” Nellie gasps as I smooth down the fabric of her dress against my body. “You look insane.”

Rolling my eyes, I humor her and brace my reflection. All I can see is *flesh*. So much goddamn flesh. The scarlet red silk clings to the dip of my waist, the sweetheart neckline pushing up my breasts to only inches under

my chin. The cut of the dress ends just under the curve of my ass, but the side slit reveals even more, most noticeably the hem of my boring cotton panties. “This is ridiculous,” I laugh. But I can’t stop staring at myself.

“It’s decided. You’re wearing it—and no protests.” She stabs a perfectly manicured finger in the direction of my little workshop in the corner of our dorm, where my paint pots and my newly thrifted mirror lays half-stained. “I’ll fuse it to your body using your own glue gun if you dare to take it off.”

“Fine,” I grumble, but the butterflies in my stomach aren’t so gloomy. “But I’m going to need a few shots before we head to the common room if I’m going to enter like this.”

Nellie grabs the bottle of *Svedka* from her desk and two egg cups we’ve been using as makeshift shot glasses. “Done and done.”

* * *

The butterflies buzzing in my stomach are acting like they’ve dropped too much acid, dancing around erratically. Drowning them in cheap vodka didn’t work. “Are you sure I don’t look ridiculous?” I whisper to Nellie as we walk down the hall towards the common room. “I don’t want to be known as the whore of the course.”

She raises a microbladed eyebrow and gives me an unsteady twirl. Her shorter-than-short skater dress floats up to reveal the lace of her panties. “If you’re the whore then I’m the whole brothel. And besides, you’ve known these people for less than a month. You can always swap courses—or if you

really made a fool out of yourself, it isn't too late to change colleges!" She throws me a wink and pushes through into the common room.

It's busier than I expected, especially considering Nellie only found out it was my birthday three days ago and created a last-minute Facebook event for a party at our building. The sea of bodies is overwhelming. Some are moving collectively to the house music blaring over the speakers, and the others are sprawled over the seating area, red cups in hand and heads together.

"You're a popular girl, Poppy," Nellie says, squeezing my hand.

I laugh her off. Looking around the room I recognize three people, two from my finance class, and the other from global management. Everyone else is here because, well, even the smartest students in the country can't resist a good party.

"I need a drink," I mutter, clutching my hands to my chest to claim at least a fraction of my modesty back.

"Wish granted, I'll be right back," Nellie chirps, sliding between the bodies towards the makeshift bar set up in the fireplace.

Without my sidekick, I hover awkwardly by the entrance of the common room, wondering if I should get my cell out of my purse and pretend to text one of my non-existent friends.

This is way out of my comfort zone. I spent my entire childhood at the end of the lunch table, nose in a book, or in Mrs. Harjo's workshop desperately repairing a piece I could flip. I don't know how to socialize. I don't know how to make friends or—

"Cool party, huh?" a voice comes from over my shoulder.

I whip around too quickly, stumbling on my borrowed stilettos and twisting my ankle underneath me. I grab whatever's closest to me—the

hemline of a plaid shirt, and a big chunk of it comes with me as I tumble towards the carpet. Before I'm fully on my ass, a hand swoops under my elbow and pulls me back to my feet.

“Whoa,” the voice says again, “are you all right?”

I look up at the big brown eyes in front of me, then down at the bundle of fabric in my hand. “Oh my god, I'm so sorry. I ripped your shirt. I—”

The guy laughs, looking down at the skin now poking through the hole in his shirt. “Hey, don't worry about it. Just glad you didn't snap your ankles. I'm studying economics, not fractured bones, so I'm afraid I wouldn't be much help if you did. I'm Sam, by the way.” He sticks out a warm hand, and I blink twice to clear the vodka haze before I have the common sense to take it.

“Poppy.”

A flash of recognition in his eyes. “Oh—you're in my managerial class, right? Poppy Valentina?”

A beat passes before I nod. The second I bought my plane ticket to Santa Clara County, I changed my surname from Murphy to Valentina, which was my mother's maiden name, getting rid of the final traces of my cowardly father in the process. “Yeah. Sorry. I haven't really been paying attention to anything but the lecturers, I'm struggling to keep up.” That was a lie; I've ranked top of the class in all my preliminary exams so far, but I feel rude that I don't recognize him at all.

“No worries,” he smiles, raising his beer to me. He's quite handsome, but I don't know if that's the cocktail of vodka and adrenaline talking. Toned body—I can see the outline of abs peeking through the hole I made in his shirt—neat brown hair, and big eyes a few shades lighter. “Let me get you a drink.”

Right on cue, Nellie's tanned arm brushes against my shoulder. "Here you go, birthday girl," she announces, thrusting a questionable-looking drink under my nose. "Don't ask what's in it, you don't want to know."

"Oh," Sam flashes me an apologetic grin. "You're *that* Poppy. Birthday girl. Damn, I'm so rude."

I wave the fabric in the air. "Not as rude as me." I laugh back.

Nellie's eyes dart back and forth between us, and I can practically see the cupid cogs whirring in her brain.

"And not as rude as I'm going to be, Sam," she says with a sickly-sweet smile, linking her arm with mine. "I'm going to have to steal my friend for a few minutes, but you can have her right back, I promise."

Before he can protest, Nellie is guiding me through the throng of dancers towards the restroom at the back. "What was that about?" I moan, wincing as I take a sip of her mystery cocktail. "He was kinda cute."

"Yeah, kinda," she dismisses, "but you look far too hot to limit yourself to one guy all evening. Make him sweat."

After a quick hair check, a reapplication of lipstick and a drinks top-up, I feel more confident to work the room, and as the music gets louder and the party-goers get blurrier, I'm introducing myself as "the birthday girl" to anyone that will listen.

I'm draped over the arm of an armchair chatting to two girls who live on the floor below when the lights suddenly dim, and a hushed wave ripples through the crowd.

"What's going on?" I mutter as freshmen part like the Red Sea to reveal Nellie, holding a large chocolate cake with eighteen dancing candles on top.

She starts the *Happy Birthday* song a little too loud, wobbling towards me like she's balancing on a high beam. The crowd joins in, reckless and

cheery, chanting the words like it's the latest Number One hit on the Billboard charts.

“Make a wish, Pops!” she squeals, her blue eyes shimmering at me over the candles.

Unable to squash the cheesy grin splitting my face in two, I squeeze my eyes shut.

I wish that I pass the semester with flying colors.

I wish that I make loads of friends.

But most importantly, I wish that I never have to see the Devil again, even in my nightmares.

Poppy

NINETEEN YEARS OLD

This is it. You have one shot, so don't fuck it up.

With my tongue peeking between my lips in concentration, I dip the detail brush into the gold paint, tap it on the side of the pot to shake off the excess, then glide it over the freshly waxed oak into a delicate swirl pattern.

No time to breathe a sigh of relief. I dip the brush again, tap, then glide the tip on the opposite side—

“Poppy!” A shrill voice cuts through the silence and jolts like a lightning bolt, down my arm, and into my wrist.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I whimper, snatching up the damp cloth and swiping it over the smear of gold now tarnishing the sixteenth-century jewelry box I’m restoring.

The door flies open behind me and then a dramatic gasp. “Oh my god, was that me?” Nellie asks, tugging an AirPods out of her ear. “Is it fixable?”

I smother the annoyance bubbling in my gut and concentrate on wiping the gold off the lid. It’s less of a delicate *Fleur-de-Lis* symbol now and more of a doodle that a Kindergarten kid would bring home for their mom to stick on the fridge door.

“You better have some incredible news if you’re hollering for me like a banshee all the way from the elevator,” I say through gritted teeth.

The smug smirk stretching across her lips tells me she believes this to be true. “Here,” she says, peeling off the top letter from her stack of mail. “This was in our mailbox, and it’s addressed to you.”

It’s a butter-soft, cream envelope. “What the hell is this?” I mutter, glancing at my name then flipping it over. A red, waxy seal with an intricate ‘O’ symbol is embossed on the flap.

Nellie wiggles her eyebrows up and down. “No idea, but I can guess who it’s from.”

A smile tugs at the corners of my lips. *Sam.*

I slide the tip of my carving knife under the flap and a small card falls onto the carpet.

Dearest Poppy,

You are cordially invited to dinner at Le Papillon tomorrow evening, 8 p.m. sharp, in celebration of your nineteenth birthday. Dress code is formal.

Bring an overnight bag.

I can’t wait to celebrate this special occasion with you.

“It’s not signed,” I laugh as Nellie snatches it out of my hand and hungrily scans each word. “It could be anyone.”

She lets out a squeal of delight and clutches the card to her chest. “You know Sam is the only guy in the world cute enough to do something like this! *Le Papillon*. Jesus, he must be swimming in cash.”

“Bring an overnight bag,” I muse, sitting back on my heels. The flood of warmth that initially spread across my belly cools a little. You don’t have

to be a genius to figure out that he's booked a hotel for the night. A lump forms in my throat.

A hotel reservation comes with expectations.

Under Nellie's strict instructions, I avoided Sam the best I could for the rest of my eighteenth birthday party. But when the music got louder and the bodies got sweatier, I found myself drawn back to him. His hot breath tickled against my ear as he asked me questions about myself, and as the beer and vodka flowed, the space between us grew smaller, until his hand was on the curve of my back and his lips were against mine. I stayed the night at his. Not because I really wanted to, but I thought he might offer an extra layer of protection if the Devil came for me. And when he didn't, I slipped out of his dorm in the early hours, his torn shirt and the ripped piece of fabric tucked under my arm and my virginity intact.

The next day, I brought the shirt back as good as new, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Sam is *nice*.

He sends me half a dozen roses every other Friday *just because*. He'll meet me after class so he can carry my books to the next one, and that one time I drank too much at the Sigma Nu frat party, he held my hair and rubbed my back as I threw up in one of the many marble toilets.

But we still haven't had sex. Sam being *nice* means he's patient and understanding about it, even if I don't understand it myself. I feel happy when I'm around him, and I enjoy kissing him, sure. I guess I've spent a lot of money and effort to get to Stanford, and now I'm here, I can't let stupid things like losing my virginity distract me from my studies. Because I'm here to become everything my father wasn't. *Successful*.

“Better pack some sexy lingerie then,” Nellie drawls, sliding open my panty drawer and peeking inside.

I jump to my feet and slam it shut. “Yeah, let’s worry about that later,” I say. “I’ve got so much to do before tomorrow.”

“Like tanning, getting a blow-out, and a manicure in preparation for your birthday?” she says with a glint in her eye.

“No, like finishing this commission.” I point in the direction of my near-ruined jewelry box, “Then editing my political economics paper.”

Nellie rolls her eyes. “I don’t know how you do it. You’re running a full-time business all while still getting the best grades in every class.” She takes three strides over to her mini-refrigerator and cracks open a can of Coke. “Remember me when you’re a billionaire CEO, yeah?”

I flash her a smile and grab the earphones off my desk to drown out the incoming sound of her latest Netflix binge, ready for the second attempt at painting a Fleur-de-Lis on the jewelry box.

Poppy

I'm going to do it.

I'm going to sleep with Sam tonight.

The emerald silk dress clings to my curves, dipping in at my waist and draping my breasts in a cowl neckline. A little ruffle running along the thigh split draws attention to my freshly-tanned legs, and the black *Yves Saint Laurent* Opyum stilettos make my five-foot-ten frame even taller.

A lot has changed since my eighteenth birthday. Bi-weekly pizza nights have given me hips and an ass, and I've finally invested in a pair of good hair straighteners.

My panties are still pathetically sensible and my pajamas are still *Sesame Street* themed, but I'm feeling more and more like a woman every day.

So why not? Why not sleep with him? That's what nineteen-year-old women do. They have sex.

Right?

I take a swig of wine and pick up my cell from my dresser. I wish Nellie was here, but Matty, the guy from our Investing 101 class she's had a crush on all year, has finally asked her to come over to Netflix and Chill.

My cell lights up with two messages. One from Nellie wishing me good luck tonight, and another from Sam saying that he can't wait to see me.

The nervous tension vibrates around my body and I feel like I'm physically buzzing. A quick glance at the time tells me I've got five minutes before Sam arrives. I spritz the perfume he bought me for Valentine's Day, then pick up my overnight bag and head down to the lobby.

There's a black car waiting at the bottom of the stone steps but it can't possibly be for me. It's sleek and expensive-looking with tinted windows. As I approach the automatic doors, the driver's door opens and a man in a well-fitted suit comes out to greet me.

"Let me help you with that, madame," he says, taking my duffel with one swift motion. I stand awkwardly as he slips it into the trunk, then opens the passenger door for me.

Jeez, Sam has really gone all out, I think, sliding my ass across the butter-soft leather seat. The red brick buildings of Stanford University fade in the rearview mirror, and as the wide, tree-lined streets pass in a glittery blur outside the window, I reach into my clutch and pull out the original letter. It's still in its envelope; I couldn't bear to throw something so beautiful away, mainly because of the intricate wax seal. The cursive writing feels textured under my fingertips, and I trace the outline of my name: *Miss Poppy Murphy*.

Suddenly, a feeling of unease creeps over me. It starts at the nape of my neck, raising every hair and goosebumps on my skin as it travels down my arms and legs. In my excitement in receiving the letter, I tore it open and didn't give the address on the envelope a second thought.

Poppy Murphy.

Nobody at Stanford knows my last name is Murphy. I took my mother's maiden name, Valentina, the second I touched down in California.

Murphy is from my past. From the life I've worked so desperately to out-run.

An ice-cold hand claws at my throat, and with trembling fingers, I flip over the envelope and bring the wax seal up to the blur of the passing streetlamps to see it clearer. The pads of my fingertips trace the "O" and it feels disgustingly oily under my touch. Only now, do I realize that the near-perfect shape is interrupted at the bottom right with a small flick.

It's not an O. It's a Q.

Q for Quinn.

I. Can't. Breathe.

It takes me three attempts to enter the passcode of my cell allowing me to tap out a frantic message to Sam.

Did you send a car for me?

The reply is instant.

Car? No, lol. I'll come and pick you up in ten mins. Booked a table at your fave place. Guess where? x

My heart plummets to the soles of my stilettos, and my mind goes into overdrive, flicking through the last week, going through every conversation I've had with Sam with a mental fine-tooth comb. Never once did he hint about taking me out for my birthday. When he called me last night, he never dropped any kind of hint about the letter — and I was too stupefied with the idea of sleeping with him to bring it up.

“Can you pull over?” I croak towards the partition. The words come out of my mouth like thick syrup. No response. “Hey—can you pull over please?” Nothing but the purr of the engine. I lunge over, rapping my sweaty knuckles against the glass. “Pull over!” I scream, hysteria rising in my throat like bile, “Let me out, now!”

We slow to meet the red light. Only then does the driver turn around. “I can’t do that, Miss Murphy,” he says.

The air leaves my lungs as I try the door handle. Nothing. I slam my fists and elbows and even the pointed heel of my stilettos against the passenger window, and it doesn’t even vibrate under my touch.

As the car turns into a glittery street lined with sleek bars and restaurants, I find myself squeezing my eyes shut.

What you can’t see can’t hurt you. What you can’t see can’t hurt you. What you can’t see can’t hurt you.

But I’m not a naive little girl anymore.

I know that I *will* see the Devil tonight. And he will hurt me in ways I can’t even imagine.

Poppy

The car comes to a stop outside *Le Papillon*. We're in the rich part of town, where wine menus don't have prices and chic boutiques are manned by burly bouncers with earpieces.

Trying to control my breathing, I scan the sidewalk. A well-dressed couple passes by, unsteady on their feet after a boozy dinner. A woman tottering across the pedestrian crossing in a skirt too short and heels too high.

"I'll scream," I say, digging my stilettos into the car carpet. "The second you open that door, I'll scream like hell. There are people around, they'll see something's wrong."

The driver glances at me in his rearview mirror. "I wouldn't."

There's something about the venom behind his voice that makes me instantly decide I won't.

With the laziest sigh in the world, he gets out of the driver's seat and opens the passenger door for me. He offers me his hand. I don't take it.

"After you," he says, opening his arms wide enough to block the left side of the sidewalk. When I turn to my right, another man appears in a sharp suit and does the same.

The only way is forward, into the Devil's lair.

Le Papillon. The type of restaurant that no student, even one that goes to Stanford, can afford to eat at unless their very rich parents are visiting. It has like a million dollar signs on Trip Advisor, and there's not even a name above the door. Just a large shop window set in a steel frame with a stern-looking man out front. I have a feeling he's not employed by the restaurant.

With a curt nod, he opens the door for me. I turn, one last time, to scan the sidewalk. The driver meets my eye, and with a short shake of his head, again mouths "I wouldn't."

I'm beginning to think that he's not only a driver after all.

I step over the threshold and blink to adjust my eyes to the dim lighting from the dozen gas lamps lining the brick walls. Their amber glow washes over the small room. I can imagine loved-up couples holding hands over the small, circular tables, and the businessmen making dodgy deals in the corners of the tufted velvet booths. But tonight, there's nobody but the Devil and me.

Despite him sitting in the shadows right at the back of the room, he's unmissable. His imposing figure is like a black hole, sucking me in. My heavy legs take me closer to his table. I see a glint of something expensive on his wrist and hear the rattle of ice cubes as he brings a drink to his lips.

It is only when he stands does he step into the light.

Those eyes. Those wolf-like eyes haunted my dreams from nine to eighteen. They catch the amber glow and come alive, like two flickering flames.

The shock of it all snatches the air from my lungs and I stumble backward. But he's quick, snaking an arm around my waist to steady me.

"Miss Murphy," he drawls, all velvet and nails. I can't escape him even when I close my eyes; the bulging muscle in his forearm is hard and cold

against my back, and his oaky cologne and whiskey breath creeps up my nostrils, bringing me right back to that cold church in Boston. I suck in a lungful of air. His scent burns the back of my throat but I need the oxygen.

The scrape of a chair. “Sit,” he says, in a way that is anything but a suggestion.

My legs are like jelly and I have no choice but to sink into the seat. Silently, he slips a napkin from its glitzy holder and drapes it over my bare thighs. A shiver ripples down my spine. I feel a mix of horror and something else I can’t quite place.

As he takes the seat opposite me, a curtain twitches in my peripheral vision, its silk fabric giving way to a blonde waitress. She strides over, eyes lowered to the silver platter she’s holding in one hand. A huge chocolate cake with one, comically small candle flickering in the center of it.

She sets it down in front of me, before meeting my gaze. In an instant, I know there’s no use screaming at her for help, to beg her to call the police. The sheer terror clouding her eyes tells me she’s as unwilling in this situation as I am.

“Happy birthday,” the Devil says, bringing his glass to his smirking lips. He runs a greedy eye over my body. “You certainly dressed for the occasion.”

I stare at the candle in disbelief, watching the wax drip down the side and pool onto the glossy chocolate surface. None of this feels real.

“Do I frighten you, Miss Murphy?” The Devil’s treacle-thick voice brings me back into the restaurant. When I force myself to look up, he’s pouring me a glass of blood-red wine.

There’s a manic excitement swirling in those amber eyes. It feels like he’s practically salivating at the idea of hearing me say yes. Like it’d be

more delicious than this enormous chocolate cake that separates us.

I've been here before. Face-to-face with the Devil, feeling sick with fear. But I've worked too hard to escape him.

Despite the tremor running through my bones on a continuous loop, I make up my mind right here and now.

I. Will. Not.

I refuse to give the Devil what I know he wants. My fear.

You're not a coward like your father, remember?

"I'm not scared, I'm surprised." He raises a thick eyebrow, waiting for me to continue. "I assumed a man like you could at least count." With a shaking hand, I plunge a fork into the cake and then scoop the bite into my mouth. It sticks to my dry throat, threatening to clog my airway. Even with the fear that the wine could be drugged, I have no choice but to swig from it to stop myself from dying in front of the Devil. Because death by chocolate is not the way I'm going down. "You said you'd come for me on my eighteenth birthday. Math clearly isn't your strong point."

The fire that flashes across his eyes gives me a hit of both satisfaction and terror. It's quickly replaced with an amused smirk.

"I assure you I can count, Miss Murphy. But you were expecting me on your eighteenth birthday. I'm a man that enjoys the element of surprise." He glances over his shoulder. "Another."

Like a dog responding to its owner, the waitress rips back the curtain and brings another glass of whatever he's drinking to the table.

A buzzing sound interrupts the silence. We both stare at the source. My YSL clutch on the side of the table. *Sam*. He'll be worried about me, wondering where I am. This is it. This is my lifeline.

My body reacts before my brain does and I lunge for my purse, ripping back the gold zipper.

“It’s adorable that you’re even contemplating answering that, Miss Murphy,” he drawls, taking a lazy sip of his drink.

I tear my eyes away from his hard gaze and glance at the screen. Sam’s name is like a beacon of light, the sliver of hope in the darkness of hell. My finger hovers over the answer button. If I can just say enough to let him know I’m in danger, he’ll figure out the rest. If I just answer and scream the name of the restaurant down the line, he’ll come and save me. Call the police. I glance up at the Devil and my heart sinks.

He’s huge. His beastly frame pushes against the expensive fabric of his suit, unable to hide the bulging biceps and broad shoulders. Sam, with his slender, runner’s body is no match against this man. With or without the Stanford police force behind him.

“Pass me the phone,” he says. The words slide from his mouth like ice, so calm that I shudder. There’s that hypnotic gaze again. The one that pinned me to the pew at the fake funeral all those years ago. I might have grown up, filled out, and became a strong, independent woman, but it still has the exact same effect on me.

Unable to move, I have no fight in me when he slips my clutch out of my grip and tugs my cell out. He glances at the screen, sneers, and drops my phone into his glass.

The brown liquid sloshes onto the white table cloth and I stare in disbelief as my cell snaps, crackles, and pops like a bowl of cereal before the screen goes black.

“Another,” the Devil says over his shoulder. The waitress arrives with a new glass and leaves with my only lifeline.

“You can’t do that,” I choke, “that’s mine.” I know how pathetic I sound.

The Devil laughs. Finally, he has a reaction out of me. He leans across the table, closing the gap between us. “Look at me, Miss Murphy,” he demands. My breath hitches in my chest as I force myself to meet his gaze. “You have a lot to learn, but we’ll start with the very basics. Nothing belongs to you now, because you belong to me.”

I can’t breathe. It’s happening. It’s really happening. My never-ending nightmare has finally caught up with me.

I shake my head. “I don’t live in your world anymore,” I say with as much confidence as I can muster, but fear has its grip around my vocal cords. “You can’t just *take* me. That’s not how the real world works. There are people who will look for me. My friends. My boyfriend. It’ll only be a couple of days until my school realizes that I’m not showing up for classes. You really want all that heat on you?” As the words come tumbling from my trembling lips, I’m beginning to believe my own desperate spiel.

The little flicker of hope is dashed the second the Devil opens his mouth. “You don’t think I can take you?” He snarls. “I’ll show you how easily I can take you, Miss Murphy.”

When he leans forward this time, I can’t help but flinch. Despite my attempted bravado, it’s instinctive. “Please,” I find myself saying, “let me go.”

The Devil sits back, draping his arm over the back of his chair. Cocking his head to the side, he studies me for a few heavy seconds. “I’m a fair man. Tell me one good reason why I shouldn’t take you, and if you convince me, I’ll let you go.”

My eyes narrow, looking for any trace of humor on his face. There's nothing but hard lines and darkness. "Seriously?"

He nods.

I swallow the lump in my throat and scan the restaurant as if the right answer is hidden between the plush velvet cushions or twinkling tealights.

"I'm not my father," I eventually say. "You have beef with him, not me."

The Devil stares into my soul over the rim of his glass, before slamming it to the table with a force that makes me jump.

The emerald ring catches the light as he gestures above my head.

"Go."

The hope comes back. It rises in my chest like bile. "Really?" I all but whisper.

He nods. "You can go, Miss Murphy."

I don't spend another second looking into the eyes of the Devil. I scrape my chair back, scrambling away from the monster and his chocolate cake, and stumble towards the door, unsteady on my heels.

I tug at the handle.

Locked.

I rap on the glass to catch the attention of the guard standing outside. He twists his head enough to flash me a pitiful smile, before turning his attention back to the street. "Let me out," I all but squeak, slamming my hand against the door. The thing that stands between me and freedom.

The noise that floats across the restaurant is demonic. Low, gruff, yet eerily melodic. I turn, horrified, and meet the amber gaze of the Devil. His face is split in two by a psychotic smile.

The waitress appears from behind the curtain with another platter, stooping low enough so that he can pick something off of it. It glints in the low lighting, just enough for me to make out the sharp tip of a needle.

A scream rips from my chest, my own demon trying to escape my body. I slip a pump off my foot and slam the heel into the glass, desperate to escape. When I turn around again, he's holding the needle up to the light, one eye closed. He flicks the barrel, once, twice, then squeezes the plunger a fraction, enough for a spurt of liquid to come out.

"Please," I wail, hammering on the door. More men have appeared outside of the restaurant now and are standing shoulder to shoulder, their backs to the door. Blocking my view of the street. Blocking the street's view of *me*.

When I turn back around, the Devil is on his feet. Striding, gliding across the restaurant. In three strides he's on top of me. It's scary, how easily he flips me around to face the glass, pushing my breasts against the cold surface. How easy he pins down my flailing arms and pulls back my head to reveal my neck.

His hand smells like cigars and leather as he clamps it over my mouth.

The cold tip of a needle against my neck. The hot rush of breath and beard against my ear.

"Welcome to hell," comes the throaty voice. "I told you you'd be joining me here."

Poppy

I wake up in a dark abyss.

My head is groggy and my throat is dry. I've felt like this before after nights of too many Gin Fizzes and Nellie forcing Jagerbombs down my throat.

But it only takes a few moments of being conscious to remember this isn't a hangover. Rolling over and going back to sleep for a few more hours isn't going to solve my problem.

Realization and panic flood my body, and I force myself to open my eyes. My arms are too heavy to push myself up, but through the sedative-filled fog, I try to take in my surroundings. With the help of a sliver of moonlight, I can make out the outline of a bedroom. A bedside table and a lamp. I clamber around, finding a switch, and flood the room with a soft amber glow.

Gold. Marble. Mahogany. I squeeze my eyes shut again, willing the blurriness to go away. This time, when I open my eyes I can focus on actual objects, not only materials.

The first thing I focus on is the foot of the bed I'm lying on. The frame is curved in the middle, tapered at the edges and coated in glistening gold. Embroidered curtains hang above it, tied to the pillars on either side with oversized silk ribbons. Beyond the elaborate bed is a chest of drawers with

the same curved silhouette and decadence. I can just about turn my head to the left to take in an overstuffed chaise lounge and an oval mirror hanging above it. To my right is a glass cabinet, full to the brim of trinkets and ornaments.

Where the hell am I?

It takes a few attempts, but I eventually prop myself up on my shaking elbows. Looking down at my body, I realize I'm wrapped in a silk robe. Even in my numb state, it feels incredibly expensive and smooth against my bare skin. The shame seeps in.

He drugged me. He took me. He *undressed* me.

I feel dirty at the thought.

There's a glass of water on the bedside cabinet, and I greedily gulp from it before I can consider whether it's poisoned or not.

I need to get out of here.

My legs aren't cooperating as well as my arms, so I have to shuffle them slowly off the side of the bed. The gold, glitzy room spins around me so I close my eyes to steady myself.

Come on, Poppy. You have to fight this. Get up. Get the fuck up and get out of here.

First things first, I have to figure out where "here" is. There's a bay window on the other side of the room, that'll be a start.

I push myself up onto my feet, but my legs collapse underneath me again.

"Fuck," I croak, cursing myself for being so pathetic.

Suddenly, there's a scraping sound from the other side of the door and it flies open.

The Devil darkens the doorway.

It's instinctive to cower. To pull my legs up to my chest and tug the silk fabric around me. He did it. He really did it. There's nothing about this beast I should underestimate.

He steps into the room and drinks me in. "You're awake." My eyes fly to the corners of the room, scanning the intricate ceiling molding for any trace of a camera. "Relax," he drawls. "I could see the light turn on from the main house."

Main house?

"Where am I?" I croak. My throat hurts from all of the screaming.

Instead of answering my question, he takes another step into the room, dominating the space with his imposing presence. He looks different today, and I can't quite put my finger on why. His thick waves are pulled backward, tucked neatly behind his ears, and his tie sits tight under his Adam's apple.

"Step into the light," he demands. I don't move. "I won't ask you again."

One thing I've learned about Lorcan Quinn in the few interactions I've had with him is he's a man of his word. That, and the growl in his tone, forces me to stand. Unsteady on my legs, I step into the amber glow of the lamp.

"Look at me."

The lump in my throat swells, threatening to block my airways. Clenching my jaw, I raise my eyes to his. He's closer than I thought he was, so close that I can smell the cocktail of aftershave and soap lingering on his skin. So close that I can feel his chest vibrate when he lets out a small groan.

“When I claimed you at fifteen, you were nothing but collateral damage. But now, I think I might actually have a use for you.” A smirk tugs at the hard line of his mouth. “Come.”

He strides across the room and opens a door I didn’t even realize was there. My heart hammers against my chest as he shoves it open and flicks on a light. Through the doorway, I’m staring at a dozen versions of myself.

He stretches out his arm to guide me inside, his forearm pushing against the small of my back like a persistent tide.

A French-style boudoir. On one half of the room, five gilded mirrors reflect my shaking body from every angle. On the other side, another chaise lounge and a door that leads to god knows where. China plates, stained glass lamps, and gloomy oil paintings cover every white wall and surface.

The Devil looms over my shoulder.

“Take your robe off. Show me what I own.”

The shock of his words sends me stumbling forward, trying to get away from him. In one swift motion, he grabs my arm and spins me back around, so I have no choice but to stare at my reflection. I meet my own gaze.

I hate what I see. The sheer fear in my eyes. The streaks of mascara staining my cheeks from wailing like a baby at the restaurant.

Don’t be a coward, Poppy. Fear won’t get you out of here alive.

I reset my jaw and turn my gaze to his reflection. His amber eyes bore into mine. “Fuck off,” I hiss with all of the venom I have left.

He takes a step towards me, the fabric of his suit and the solid warmth of his body presses into my back. “You’ll learn very quickly not to talk back to me,” he snarls into my ear. “Now take it off or I’ll have you on your hands and knees, watching me fuck you from every angle.”

Lorcan Quinn is a man of his word, a small voice creeps into my head. *Especially the most poisonous ones.*

My cards are dealt. With a trembling hand, I tug at the cord and let the silk puddle on the plush carpet.

“Very good,” he murmurs, taking in my naked body. The shame flushes my pale skin pink. It’s hot and prickly, creeping up from the base of my neck, across my cheeks, and down my breasts. “Now lie down and spread your legs.”

My breath hitches in my chest. “No,” I stammer, taking the steps away from him.

“No isn’t part of your vocabulary anymore, Miss Murphy,” he hisses. “Get on the chaise lounge. *Now.*”

But the urge to protect myself outweighs my fear of the devil. “I can’t,” I manage. And then comes the one word I never wanted to escape from my lips. The one that hands him all the power. “*Please.*”

It’s enough to make him stop and cock his head. His gaze drags along my curves and ends at the mound of my pussy. “Are you—?”

“Yes,” I say quietly. The shame is getting hotter; I am truly in the furnace of hell.

He makes a swift sidestep and tugs me to face him. “Say it,” he demands, lifting my chin. “Look me in the eyes and say it.”

I have no choice but to meet his gaze. He’s hungry, salivating at the thought.

I hate that I have no choice but to give him the answer he wants. It might be the only thing that saves me.

“I am a virgin,” I say, trying to keep my voice steady.

Lorcan's face splits into a demonic smile. He's drunk with delight and it sickens me to my stomach.

"Then you are even rarer than I thought," he mutters, "I am a very lucky man." He traces my collarbone with the rough pad of his forefinger. His touch is surprisingly light, almost gentle. "A princess with an unspoiled flower," he mutters, more to himself than me. His finger dips below my bone and lingers over the swell of my breast. "I am going to savor every second of this." The warmth of his hand is a stark contrast to the stone-cold sensation of his ring. They both run over my nipple, and it instantly stiffens.

I clench my jaw, and my eyes shut and I wrap my hands around my chest. But it's too late. The deep, throaty laugh tells me he noticed.

I'm more than flustered and I've reached my limit of embarrassment for the day. I push past him and grab the robe off the floor, scrambling to cover myself. "Why?" I find myself saying, the tears prickling in my eyes are the ones I promised wouldn't come. "Why did you pull me away from my life? How can you hold a grudge for so goddamn long? Where is your *heart*?" The desperation claws at my vocal cords but I don't care. I'm overwhelmed with the injustice of it all.

In my own personal storm, Lorcan remains deathly still, watching me claw at the silk around my chest and drag the tears away from my cheek with a balled fist.

After a few seconds filled with nothing but my sobs, he speaks.

"There's something you should know about me, my little China doll. I don't have a heart. I have things," he says smoothly. He picks up one of the ornaments from the dresser. It's an intricate, egg-shaped box, covered in delicate flowers and crystals. Even in my distress, I recognize it immediately. A Faberge egg. A replica, no doubt, but still, it's striking.

“Beautiful, shiny things. I collect them. Things nobody else has, that nobody else *can* have.” He holds the egg up to the light; the rubies and sapphires glisten like stars. “And when I’m done with them, I discard them.” A scream rips from my mouth as he hurls the egg like a football. It misses my head by inches, meeting the mirror behind me with an almighty crack, then smashes into a million pieces on the floor. He smirks at my reaction, before dragging his eyes away from me and to his reflection. He straightens his tie, smooths down his beard and tightens his cufflinks. “Don’t become worthless to me, Miss Murphy,” he says simply, heading towards the door without a second glance back at me. “You won’t like the way I’ll discard you.”

And with that, he disappears back into the bedroom and out the main door, leaving me as shattered as the Faberge egg.

Lorcan

My study is a six-minute walk from the museum. Not short enough.

The second I step inside, I slam the door, lock it, and pull out the silk hankie from my breast pocket and my cock from my zipper.

Fuck.

My cock is throbbing with missed opportunity, and I waste no time furiously fucking my fist, imaging it's Poppy's tight cunt.

I should have taken her as I told her I would. Telling me to fuck off was reason enough to get her on her hands and knees and take what's mine.

I slam my hand on my desk to steady myself, tightening my grip on my girth. Those big, innocent eyes and ruby-red lips... I could have at least fucked her face, enjoying watching her eyes water as I slide my length down her throat.

The thought of Poppy on her knees gagging on my cock is enough to send me over the edge. Thick, hot ropes of cum land in my silk hankie. When I get my breath back, I toss it in the trash can, tuck myself away and sink into my Herman Miller chair.

"Fuck," I groan, smoothing down my pants and stretching my neck over the top of the chair.

Is it too early for a drink? The sun has barely come up, so I'll take it that it's late, not early. It's only too early if you ever sleep, and I rarely do.

I grab a bottle of *The Smugglers Club* from the cabinet, pour it neat and knock it back in one gulp.

The liquor soothes my body and the post-nut clarity clears my brain. Enough for me to truly assess my new possession.

Poppy Murphy.

Fuck *me*.

When I claimed her when she was only fifteen, she was nothing but a debt. A one-up on her bastard of a father. Yes, incredibly rare, but I had no intentions of using her for anything other than a pawn in my long-term game. I'm a cruel bastard, but I'm not a sick one.

But in just four years she's aged like the fine whiskey in my hand. She's even rarer; a completely different kind of artifact. That porcelain skin... it'll break under my heavy touch. That tumbling copper hair, shimmering like a penny, and those emerald eyes that give away all of her secrets.

And when she slipped off that robe...

She has the grace and elegance of a Victorian queen, but the curves of a 1950's pin-up. My two favorite time periods rolled into one.

I pour another drink, one to sip this time.

And the fact she remains untouched... my cock prickles again with excitement.

She's *priceless*.

My only regret is that I didn't collect my wares sooner. But then again, I wouldn't have gotten to enjoy the surprise on her delicate face had I showed up on her eighteenth birthday.

I guess I've always had a passion for the eccentric.

I'm staring at the empty bottom of my tumbler when there's a sharp knock on the door.

There's only one man on God's green earth that would dare knock on my door with such force.

"Enter," I grunt, tugging at my suit pants to hide my bulge.

Antoin flies through the threshold and slams his palms against my desk. "We have a big fuckin' problem."

"Careful," I growl, swatting his hands away. "This desk belonged to Roosevelt. It didn't sit in the Oval Office for five fucking Presidencies for an oaf from Boston to break it."

Antoin ignores my brief history lesson. "One of the Bratnovs is dead."

I take another swig of whiskey and swill it around my mouth, pretending to be lost in thought. "The Bratnovs..." I mutter, "Hmm, name rings a bell."

"Don't play games with me Lorc, it's way too fuckin' early and I'm way too fuckin' stressed."

Of course I know who the Bratnovs are. The Russian mob has run New York City for decades, and we've had a treaty with them for just as long. They supply Boston's clubs, strip joints, and bars with enough party drugs to keep revelers juiced up every weekend, and we take a heavy cut of the profit.

"Donnacha said you ordered the hit."

Donnacha Quinn, you fucking snake, I think to myself. *I pay you to shoot bullets, not run your mouth.* A sigh escapes my lungs as I stand and move over to the window. In the reflection, I can see Antoin scowling at the back of my head.

"Oh, I remember now," I drawl. "Yes, I did. The kid was on our territory."

“He was on a *run*. Donnacha shot him right outside Mickey’s strip joint.”

“Yeah. I guess I forgot to tell you. I’m cutting the treaty. No more dirty Bratnovs on our turf.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Antoin hisses, thumping his fist against my desk again. I decide to let it slide this time. “You’re gonna start a war, Lorc.”

Good. Something to excite my cold, dead heart.

“Then let’s go to war,” I say simply, striding to the drink’s cabinet to fill up my glass. “Drink?”

Antoin eyeballs my tumbler, disgust curling on his lips. “It’s not even eight a.m.”

I ignore his jibe and fill my glass to the brim. “Boston is *our* turf. Those Russian roaches shouldn’t be supplying *our* businesses.”

Antoin rubs a hand over his sharp jaw. A girl I was fucking once said to me that you could spot a Quinn a mile away, no matter how distant they were to the main bloodline. Jet-black hair, amber eyes, and cheekbones that could slice through glass. Cut us open, we bleed green, because we’re Irish through and through.

Antoin’s my first cousin, but if he didn’t sport a menacing buzz cut and clean-shaven face, we’d pass as brothers.

I watch him as he strides up and down the length of my office. Up to the bay window and back to the bookshelf. It’s what Antoin does when he’s thinking. His Gucci loafers move as fast as his brain.

“I’d wish you’d do your pacing in the hallway,” I grumble, “these tiles are from the Palace of Versailles.”

“Okay,” he eventually says, coming to a halt. “We can fix this. You’ll reach out to Igor Bratnov. You say it was a mistake by a low-level

henchman who needs his fucking eyes tested, whatever. Go see him in person—bring a few of our men, ‘cause there’s a high chance he’ll be ready to slit your throat. And we don’t take our cut for six months.” He nods, satisfied with his solution. “And the body. We’ll return it and pay for the funeral. Where is it?”

My eyes drift towards the bay window, and I stop the smirk that tugs at my lips. “Under the rose bed.”

I’m laughing into the bottom of my tumbler when Antoin snatches it from my hand and hurls it at the wall above my head. Deathly calm, I turn to assess the damage. Sticky, brown liquid slides down the *Les Guerres D’Independence* wallpaper. A 19th Century battle scene from the War of Independence that took Zuber a year to paint. Ironic, really, that Antoin destroyed the thing I’m trying to strive for. Independence from all these fucking treaties my father signed.

“The most expensive wallpaper in the entire world,” I muse, scratching my chin. “You should learn to control your temper.”

But Antoin isn’t listening. “You and your *fucking* drinking,” he snarls, “In the four years since you became Boss, all you’ve done is drink and ruin the Quinn family reputation. If your father could see you—”

Antoin doesn’t get to finish his sentence. I’m inches from him in a few strides, my hand around his neck, choking out the last few words. I slam him into the bookcase, not caring that my collection of first editions comes crashing to the floor around us.

“Keep my father’s name out of your mouth,” I snarl. Antoin clenches his jaw, refusing to show his struggle. But the blood is rushing to his face, and his lips are turning blue. Only when I hear the gurgle at the back of his throat do I let him go.

I can't kill Antoin. I need him.

"Get out of my office," I bark, turning my back on my heaving cousin. In the reflection of the window, I see him straighten his shirt collar, dust down his suit pants, and slink out of the room without another word.

Antoin Quinn. He's thinking what everyone in the goddamn family is thinking, including me.

It should have been him that took my father's place.

But tradition rules this family with an iron fist. There's a strict hierarchy, spanning back over a century, and there's no tragedy big enough to break it.

At the heart of the network is the main bloodline, direct descendants from my great, great, grandfather, Earnest Quinn. Only we can become Boss. The title is passed from father to eldest son, and so forth. First cousins are on the next rung of the ladder. They help run the business at the top, and the eldest will step in as Boss *only* if the entire main bloodline is wiped out. Antoin is my right-hand man, and his brother, Donnacha, is head of the henchmen. That's the network of second and third cousins that are on the ground getting their hands dirty.

This was never meant to be my life. The title was meant for Eamon, my eldest brother. He was only months away from taking over from my father and had been training for that moment since he was in diapers. It was his destiny to take the title, but by some cruel twist of fate, the Quinn Claddagh ring was forced onto my finger instead.

I spent my life enjoying the perks of my last name, without undertaking any of the responsibility. Before the explosion, I spent my days traveling the world. Sourcing antiques from Europe and hookers from Brazil. Tanning on my yacht in Monaco one week, snorting lines from a stripper's

ass cheek in Paraguay the next. Only when I was burnt, broke, and bored would I come back to Boston, break a few noses and end a few lives in The Tunnels, before getting right back on my jet.

I run a hand through my hair and turn to the lone photo on my desk. It's of my father, Eamon, and my other brother, Fergus, at some fundraiser a few years before they died. They glare back at me with those signature Quinn eyes. I raise my glass in their direction. "Cheers," I mutter, before downing my drink.

Four years ago, I was plunged into the biggest gig of my life. And for four years, they've been watching me from their mahogany frame, watching me drown.

I reach for the bottle for another top-up.

Today, I'd rather drown in whiskey than responsibility.

Poppy

The sun setting is the only concept of time I have.

It was rising when Lorcan Quinn stormed out of the room, leaving me in a crying heap on the floor. It was high in the sky when I finally crawled back into the bedroom and curled up on the window seat, where I've remained ever since. Now, its golden rays are disappearing behind the towering hedges that block out any signs of the outside world.

There's nothing to do but cry and think and mourn. The tears come in waves, making my eyes swollen and sore, but the questions are an ever-present feature in my mind.

How long have I been here? How much time passed between being drugged in the restaurant and waking up in this... museum? Have Sam and Nellie contacted the police?

It's the mourning that drags me under, weighing heavy on my chest, making it hard to breathe.

I'm mourning the life I carved out for myself. I worked so *goddamn hard* to escape the fate the Devil bestowed on me all those years ago. Every business book, every restoration piece, every eBay bid got me further and further away from that monster, but none of it was enough. I've landed right back in his clutches.

My thoughts even go somewhere I never allow them to go—my father. All roads seem to lead back to Marcus Murphy. I wouldn't even be on Lorcan Quinn's radar if it wasn't for him. I wonder if he knows I'm here. If he even *cares*.

When the sky turns to an inky abyss, a chill creeps over my body. Despite it being summer, the evening wind rolls in, rattling the window frames and creaking the floorboards. I tug my knees to my chest and bury my head in the silk fabric around my thighs.

It's the perfect setting for a visit from the Devil.

My mind wanders back to our morning encounter. I've replayed it a million times in my head today, and a cocktail of white-hot embarrassment and anger swirl in my stomach every time. The way his greedy eyes washed over my bare skin. How he boldly staked his claim on me. The shame rises to my face when I remember how he forced me to look into his golden eyes and tell him I'm a virgin.

He is not going to take that away from me.

Fueled by a fresh wave of determination, I uncurl my limbs and stride to the small en suite, slam my hands against the Thomas Crapper basin and meet my swollen eyes in the mirror.

Girl, wash your face and fight.

I turn on the golden taps and splash freezing cold water on my face, then scrub away the streaks of mascara from my cheeks.

I need an escape plan.

In three strides I'm back at the bay window in the bedroom, grappling at the handle. With a lazy groan, it opens a crack, before being hindered by a child lock. I peer outside and sigh—I must be at least three stories high. Even if I bust this lock open, I'll snap my ankles on the jump.

Right.

I stomp over to the bedroom door and grapple with the knob. It's locked with a key from the outside. "Fuck!" I hiss, slamming my palm against the painted panels.

Into the dressing room. There's a door on the left—I fling it open to reveal a surprisingly plain walk-in closet.

Well, I'm not getting out of here tonight, that's for sure.

As I scan the dressing room, hoping for a portal to another world to magically appear, I notice the smashed pieces of gold, green, and pink on the floor. A pang of hope beats against my rib cage. I might not be getting out of here tonight, but I can play the long game.

I hastily scoop up the pieces and bring them back into the bedroom, laying them down on the bed covers.

A sickly feeling settles over me as I run my fingertips over the shards. The translucent pale green and latticed rose-cut diamonds. The light and dark pink enamel roses entwined with emerald leaves. Heart in my mouth, I hunt through the pieces that make up the bottom of the egg. And there it is.
1907.

With trembling hands, I lay the pieces gently back on the bed.

Fuck.

This is one of fifty-seven known Faberge eggs in the world, and it's *fucking real*. The Rose Trellis. I'm holding the shards of one of the rarest pieces of history in my hands. Worth millions and millions of dollars. So rare that it might as well be priceless. And the way the Devil just threw it across the room like he was throwing a soda can in the trash?

Rich. Ruthless. Unhinged.

If he can do that to one of the world's most famed artifacts then I have no doubt he'll do the same to me.

But I have no choice. I say a small prayer to Peter Carl Faberge and take the largest, sharpest piece, before carefully putting the rest in the bedside drawer.

It's pitch black outside now and having secured a makeshift, multi-million dollar weapon and a half-formed plan, I curl up on top of the bed covers and close my eyes.

A fighter needs her sleep.

* * *

It could be seconds, minutes, or hours that passed before I hear the scraping of the lock. Suspended somewhere between sleep and a nightmare, I immediately wake up and swing my legs over the side of the bed. Ready for the Devil.

He darkens the doorway like a demon. The floorboards groan under his heavy footsteps as he makes his way through the darkness towards the bed.

The bedside lamp flicks on, washing its amber glow over him. Immediately, I notice there's something... *different* about him.

"Good evening," he grunts, ripping his eyes away from my glare to dip below my collarbone. "I hope I didn't wake you."

My eyes narrow, following him as he walks to the foot of the bed. Slow, deliberate movements. He traces the curve of the gold frame, something

resembling a smile dancing on his lips. “How are you finding the bed? It was Marie Antoinette’s.”

Still, I don’t answer. I watch him instead. His hair is disheveled, thick, black strands curl on his forehead. The shirt that was so crisp and white this morning is now wrinkled, and there’s a dark stain on his chest.

He raises his gaze to mine, the somewhat-smile hardening into a scowl. “I’m talking to you.”

Three unsteady strides and he’s inches from me, looming over my body. I force myself not to cower away, instead, I look past him at the bedroom door. He’s left it wide open, and in that pit of darkness lies my freedom.

“Well, I don’t want to talk to you,” I mutter, lying down on my side as if returning to a sleeping position.

The bed dips under his weight. Glancing sideways, I see he’s sitting by my feet. “Then we won’t talk,” he growls, his cold, clammy hand curling around my calf. His touch slides slowly up my leg, over my knee, until it lingers on my thigh.

It’s now or never.

I slip my hand under the pillow, grabbing my weapon. There’s no time to think. I lunge forward and press the sharp enamel into the side of his face, before stumbling to my feet and bolting towards the bedroom door. The light of the lamp doesn’t stretch further than the threshold, so I stumble into the darkness, my shaking hands clamoring around me. They land on a long banister, and I follow the curve until the floor disappears underneath me.

Stairs. Going down. Yes, that’s good. That’s—

The bed groans. The floorboards creak. My breathing hitches in my chest and the slow, deliberate footsteps send a wave of terror washing over

my trembling body.

He's in no rush to stop me.

Because he knows I can't escape.

The realization paralyzes me with fear. Before my brain can scream loudly enough at my limbs *to keep it fucking moving*, a strong arm snakes around my waist, lifting me in the air like I weigh nothing.

"Put me down," I shriek, clawing, hammering, beating against any hard flesh I can reach. "Just let me fucking go, goddammit!"

A few seconds later I'm back in the glow of the bedroom, and when he releases me, I crash onto the soft mattress.

I scramble to get away from him, but he grabs me by the ankle, flipping me onto my back like a rag doll.

Suddenly, his weight is on top of me. His hands are pinning down my wrists, and his thigh is wedged in between my legs.

The fight has left my body by brute force, and I find myself reverting back to being a nine-year-old girl, peeking through the crack of my father's study. I squeeze my eyes shut. *What you can't see can't hurt you. What you can't see can't hurt you.*

"Look at me." Lorcan's breath tickles against my cheek. It smells like liquor and cigars. "Now."

Why make it worse for myself? With a lungful of stale air, I pop my eyes open and force myself to meet his furious glare. His eyes are glassy, unhinged, but the fury behind them is like the pits of hell. The blood drips from his cheek, onto my silk robe in small, warm drops.

He's going to kill me.

"I own you now," he says, eerily calm. "I own all of you. Every curve of your body belongs to me. Every hair on your head." He pushes his thigh

against my bare mound. The friction from his suit rubs against my clit, sending an unwanted shiver up to my stomach. “You will do as I want and as I say. You will eat when I tell you to eat. You will drink when I tell you to drink. Is that understood?”

I clamp my mouth shut in response. He pushes his chest closer to mine, and I can feel the strong beat of his heart. His silk tie dips between my cleavage, butter-soft and gentle.

I hate how my nipples stiffen under the weight of him. Hate the way my pussy is tingling from the pressure of his muscular thigh. It’s crazy, but instinctive, to want to push myself against it.

That’s all it is, Poppy. Instinctive.

I need to get myself out of this situation before I lose my goddamn mind. Whatever it takes. “Yes,” I croak.

“Yes what?” he growls back.

“I understand that I’m yours.”

Right now, I’ll say anything to get him off of me. To get him out of this room.

With one last lingering stare, he pushes himself to his feet, picks up my shank from the floor, and slips it into his breast pocket.

“You know what else belongs to me, China Doll? The untouched flower between your legs. And I’ll take it whenever I feel like it.” He looks down at his thigh, then a cruel smile tugs at his lips. I follow his gaze, blood rushing to my cheeks when I see the damp spot on his thigh.

“And it looks like you’ll open your legs and let me.”

Lorcan

I wake up to the sound of my iPhone alarm. Like every morning since the explosion, I wish I never woke up at all.

Through blurry eyes, I fumble for the snooze button, but when it keeps bleating at me, I hurl my cell against the wall, smashing it into pieces and finally getting it to shut up.

But silence is impossible to come by these days. The hangover beats against my temples like a badly played drum, and it's not the only thing that's throbbing. I touch the tender spot on my cheek, and then it comes flooding back to me.

That little bitch.

I leap to my feet and stride across the Persian rug to the window. My bedroom and the study are the only two rooms in the Manor where I have a perfect view of the Museum. A cobbled, three-story outhouse with Victorian windows and sprawling ivy snaking up and across the exterior. It's been here since my grandfather bought the estate. He used it as a guesthouse for when distant relatives visited from Ireland.

My father used it to stow away his mistresses.

Even though my mother died from cancer when I was still in diapers, he never felt comfortable bringing another woman into their shared home, so

whoever was his flavor of the month stayed there. They changed more often than the seasons.

When he died and I moved back to the estate, I transformed it into the Museum. The most expensive, rarest antiques and keepsakes I've collected from all around the world live there. With my armed guards surrounding the estate walls twenty-four hours a day and the same security system that they use in the Kremlin, it's safer than the fucking Louvre.

It's laughable that Murphy's little girl thought she could escape. Well, almost. I didn't find the slash across my face very fucking funny.

As the fog lifts from my brain, the fury seeps in. My hands curl into fists and my heart thumps against my chest. *Does this bitch not know who she's messing with?* There's not a single soul on the East Coast that would dare stand up to me like she did last night. And they sure as hell wouldn't still be breathing if they did.

She's lucky to be alive. She's even luckier that I didn't take her precious virginity right then and there to teach her a lesson.

My cock tingles at the thought of her warm pussy pressing against my leg, dampening the suit fabric by the second.

No. I swallow the lust building in my throat and head to the en suite. When I break in her pussy, it won't be out of anger. It'll be a reward, and I'll savor every fucking moment.

I want nothing more than to get back into bed with a bottle of *The Smugglers Club* and block out the rest of the world. But I've got a city to run and enemies to make.

I'm a busy man. Poppy Murphy isn't the center of my universe, only a little speck somewhere in the galaxy. Nothing more than a trophy and a toy. I need to keep my head in the game if we're to go up against the Bratnovs.

So, I'll bide my time.

I scrub away last night's sins in the shower, slip on a fresh suit, then press the buzzer by the bed. I'm slipping on my Audemars Piguet watch when there's a knock on the door.

"Enter."

Orna appears in the doorway, eyebrows raised. "Yes, your majesty?" she says, tone dripping with sarcasm.

"There's a chick in the Museum. See to it that she's comfortable."

My cousin's eyes narrow. "Please, for the love of God, tell me that you're talking about a bird."

"Sorry to disappoint."

Orna walks around the side of the bed and comes between me and my reflection. "A woman? You have a *woman* in the outhouse?" She frowns, glancing at the cobbled building outside my window. Poppy's room is on the other side; I can see the glow when the lights are on, but unfortunately, I can't see directly into the room. "I'm guessing she's not there by her own free will." She eyes my cheek. "What happened to your face?"

I ignore the question. "Then you guess correctly. Now move. I have things to do."

She folds her arms and her scowl deepens. I take back what I said earlier, about nobody in Boston daring to stand up to me. Orna thinks that because we spent every summer together as kids that she can give it a shot. Sometimes, she forgets that we aren't in the sandbox anymore. I'm the king of the castle now. Her boss. She's good for nothing but being the head housemaid, like her mom was before her.

"Jesus, Lorc. How long has she been there? When were you gonna *tell* me? She must be starving."

“Two days. She’s fine. She has water,” I grunt. When we got off the jet from Stanford, I sent a housekeeper to give her a robe and leave a glass of water by her bedside.

Orna mutters something about “dick” and “head” under her breath as she stomps out of the room.

I smirk at my reflection. If Orna wasn’t being such a little bitch, I might have warned her to pat Poppy down before she enters. She might find herself on the receiving end of a shank.

By the time I’ve chucked two aspirin down my throat and washed them down with an Americano, my hangover is almost gone.

Time to head to the Quinn Ventures H.Q.

Antoin’s waiting for me in the lobby. “We have a problem,” he announces, handing his coffee cup to the nearest maid.

“Another goddamn problem. Great.”

He stops in his tracks, a frown creasing his brow. “What happened to your face?” I nod to the pink and purple bruises creeping down his collar. “What happened to your neck?”

He offers me a small grin, one that I return. And just like that, the beef is squashed.

“I’ll drive us to the office,” he says, holding up the keys to my Bentley. “You’re probably still over the limit.”

I don’t disagree.

As soon as we pull out of the gates, he’s back to business. “I got a call from John Brasco.”

God, it’s nice not having to drive on a hangover. I sink into the plush leather seat and rest my head against the cold window. “Who?”

“Owns *Movers and Shakers*, the nightclub in the Theater District. He hasn’t received his coke shipment from Bratnov.” A vibrating noise comes from the breast pocket of his suit. His knuckles tighten around my steering wheel. “Hear that? My cell’s been blowing up all morning with calls exactly like Brasco’s. The whole city’s dry. Ain’t you been getting the calls too?”

My mind flicks to the shattered remnants of the iPhone that dared to wake me up this morning. “Phone’s broken. Anyway, it’s no big deal.”

“No big deal?” Antoin barks, shooting a death glare at me.

“You ran that red,” I drawl, closing my eyes again.

“Lorcan, it’s Friday morning. The clubs and bars can’t be dry for the whole fucking weekend. It’s gonna cause chaos.”

“We are the Quinns,” I growl back. “I already told you. We aren’t relying on other families anymore. We don’t need them.”

The purr of the Bentley’s engine and the quiet chatter of the radio float between us for a few minutes.

“You wanna know why your pops was so successful?” Antoin eventually asks. I peel an eye open to glare at him.

“I thought you learned your lesson about having my father’s name in your mouth.”

“It was because of the relationships he built with other families up and down the East Coast. He was a businessman, Lorcan. Not a mob boss. This ain’t the Godfather anymore, no ‘swimming-with-the-fishes’ type thing. You’re burning all of the bridges your father and brothers built, all ‘cause you’re feeling stubborn.”

My fists clench, itching to swing a right hook. If he weren’t driving my Bentley, they’d be connecting with his jaw right now. Finally, a red light

that Antoin actually slows to meet. He turns to face me, a serious expression clouding his face. “This game is about making money.”

“We have money,” I say through gritted teeth. “A ton of fuckin’ money. I want *power*. I want the whole East Coast.”

My father secured Boston, and I’m going to honor his legacy by doing one better. Expanding our reach—and I don’t give a fuck who we have to go to war with to get it.

I’ve been on autopilot since the Italian’s package bomb blew my family into pieces. From the penthouse office at the Quinn Ventures building, barking orders between gulps of whiskey and unleashing bullets from my Glock when anyone sends me over the edge. I sign the contracts Antoin slides across my desk. I give the final approval to Donnacha to clean up my whiskey-fueled rages. It’s time to take back control.

And I don’t give a fuck who we have to go to war with to get it.

The rumble comes deep from Antoin’s chest, and I watch, amused, as the vein tick, tick, ticks at the side of his temple. He’s a good cousin and colleague, sure. But he knows his place, and more importantly, he knows mine. Anything I say goes. I say jump, and I also say how high — he only figures out how to make it happen.

“So, what’s the plan, Boss?” he asks, swinging the Bentley into the underground parking lot of the Quinn towers.

“Send some men to trail the Bratnovs. If they are planning an attack, we want to be one step ahead. Then, I want you and Donnacha on the first flight to Colombia to talk to the Vargas family. That’s who the Bratnovs get *their* coke from. We’ll go direct. No more being the middle man.”

“It should be you who goes. It’s a big move and they’ll want to speak with the boss.”

As we pull into my parking space, I roll the idea around my head. Colombia... the second-best hookers in the world. And I *have* been wanting to get my hands on that Botero painting for some time now. But then I think about my most recently acquired artifact. The pretty little China Doll in my Museum.

“Can’t,” I mutter, sliding on my Cartier shades. “I have business to attend to here.”

“What business? I know all of your business.”

I might as well tell him. Orna is his sister, and she and my other female cousins have big mouths. “I have Marcus Murphy’s daughter in the Museum.”

Antoin freezes, the color drains from his face. “You crazy son of a bitch,” he mutters under his breath. “You did it. You actually fuckin’ did it.”

A satisfied smile stretches across my face.

Poppy

Another sunset, another sunrise. A few fitful hours of sleep somewhere in between.

I'm lying on the bed, counting the carved roses on the ceiling when there's a sharp knock on the door.

It's instinctive to tug open the bedside drawer and grab another gilded shard. "Go away," I yell. I hate how the fear catches in my throat.

"Ah, come on," a soft, female voice purrs. "I'm nice, I promise."

Suspicious, I creep along the floorboards and peer through the keyhole. On the other side, I can just make out a pair of slim legs in black jeans and a hem of a white shirt. Not the Devil, at least.

"Fine," I say, but I don't let go of my makeshift weapon. "You can come in."

The lock pops open, and a small woman appears in the doorway. She drags wide eyes over the length of my body before her face hardens. "That fucking fool," she says, stomping into the room. "Look at the goddamn state of you."

Once the surprise settles, I realize I must truly look a mess. I haven't showered in three days, my hair is matted at the nape of my neck, and my face is swollen from bouts of sobbing.

I tug the robe tighter around me, ashamed. Her eyes land on my chest. “Is that *blood*?” She asks, incredulous. “Yours or his?”

“His.”

“That explains the cut on his cheek. You got him good, huh?”

Her face splits into a wide grin. This woman is *beautiful*. Thick, black curls tumble down to her waist, a stark contrast to her pale skin. She smells like French vanilla and soap, a welcome scent in this stale room. And those amber eyes... the same as Lorcan’s.

“I’m Orna,” she says, softer this time. Only now do I notice a tinge of an Irish accent. “I didn’t catch your name, lovie?”

“Poppy,” I say meekly. “Poppy Valentina.”

She nods. “Poppy, all right. Look, I’m sorry you’re in this situation, but I’m here to give you anything you need.”

“My freedom? A one-way ticket back to Stanford and a restraining order against that monster?”

Her smile this time is sympathetic. “I can’t help on that side of things, I’m afraid.” She sinks onto the chaise lounge and pats the velvet fabric next to her. After a few reluctant seconds, I take a seat. “Look Poppy, I’ll keep it real with you. Lorcan... he *collects* things. Those things usually don’t come with a pulse, granted. But he’s been a little bit unpredictable since his father and brothers died. Could be the stress. Could be the...” she lifts her hand to her mouth, pinky out, like she’s taking a sip from a glass. “You know. Anyway, one thing that always remains true is that he gets bored easily. This won’t be forever, I’m sure of it.”

My mind flicks back to the night I woke up here. *You won’t like the way I’ll discard you.*

“Have there been others?” I all but whisper.

She shakes her head.

“So, where am I?”

“The Museum. It’s where Lorcan keeps his...” she flashes an apologetic smile, “most *prized* possessions.”

I scan the room with fresh eyes. Marie Antoinette’s bed, Monet’s *Poppies* on the wall.

“And... I’m back in Boston, right?”

She nods. “Back? You’re from here, are you?”

My mouth forms a tight line. “Unfortunately.”

Orna doesn’t press the issue.

I glance out the window, clapping eyes on one of the men who patrol the perimeter. “Who are they?”

“The Henchmen. All my second and third cousins, so I forget that they can look a little scary. Don’t worry, you’ll get used to them and they’ll be part of the furniture soon enough.” Then, she scans the room and lets out a loud sigh. “Right, well, let’s make your hopefully short stay with us more comfortable.” She leaps to her feet and disappears inside the dressing room. “No clothes?” she says, reappearing in the doorway. I shake my head. “Fucking hell. All right, I’ll get you everything you need—in fact, I’ll put a good dent in Lorcan’s Amex as a big ‘fuck you’. And you must be starving, poor thing.”

Right on cue, my stomach growls like an angry stray dog. But I shake my head, remembering what Lorcan said to me last night as his weight pinned me to the bed. *You eat when I tell you to eat.*

“I’m not hungry.”

Orna dismisses me with a sweep of her hand. “Nonsense. I’ll be back with food.”

As friendly as she is, she still locks the door behind her. I pin my ear to the wooden frame, straining to listen to her movements. Down the stairs. Across some more floorboards. And then there's a beep, beep, beeping, sound, as if she's tapping in a pin. A whirring noise—some sort of mechanism, I'd guess—and then the hiss of a door opening.

My heart sinks.

It's going to be impossible to get out of here.

Left alone with nothing but hundreds of antiques once more, I hash over the conversation with Orna. In a way I feel lighter; her anger towards Lorcan seemed genuine. At least I know that this isn't the norm around here. Maybe gaining her trust will help me escape?

It feels like only a few minutes pass when Orna comes back with a huge tray of spaghetti and a stack of books tucked under her arm. She sets them down on the bedside table. "Hopefully these will keep you entertained," she says. "And please eat. Don't starve yourself for a man."

But I'm not starving myself *for* Lorcan, but *because* of Lorcan. I'm sending him a message. He can lock me in a gilded cage, along with his other artifacts, but he'll never have control over me.

When Orna comes back a few hours later, I'm curled up on the window seat, three chapters in to *Pride and Prejudice*. She takes away the cold tray of food by the door and replaces it with another meal. The smell drifts across the room, making my mouth water and my stomach growl in protest, but I refuse to bring even a morsel to my lips.

I will not give in to the Devil.

Another sunset framed by the bay window. When the last of the golden rays disappear behind the towering hedges, I close the book and curl up on the bed, weak with hunger.

Poppy

I dream I'm running down a long corridor. It's a never-ending tunnel lined with the world's most revered paintings. *Mona Lisa. The Starry Night. The Girl with the Pearl Earring.* In any other world, I'd stop and admire them, drink in every brushstroke and color. But fine art is the last thing on my mind. I keep running, my legs heavy and my chest burning, towards the small door at the end of the corridor.

Freedom.

But the floorboards are old and creaky, groaning under the weight of every desperate stride. They get more and more worn the closer I get to the door, until they fall away under my feet, revealing a burning fire underneath me. I keep running but the floor keeps falling until there's nothing left. I'm so close, so goddamn close to the door but I'm not going to make it. I curl my fingers around the frame of the closest painting to stop myself from falling. Picasso's *Weeping Woman*. Her haunted face stares at me, mirroring my own horrified expression. But she's melting. The kaleidoscope of colors blurs into one, dripping into the pits of Hell below.

I'm dangling, then I'm falling. Falling into the raging fire below.

Welcome to hell, the Devil's voice says, *I told you you'd be meeting me here.*

I wake up screaming, my lungs burning.

I'm back in Marie Antoinette's ridiculously ornate bed and a room stuffed with precious things. For a brief moment, they give me comfort.

"Bad dream?"

Another yelp escapes my lips as I whip around to follow the voice. The Devil himself is sitting on the window seat, watching me.

Immediately I know he's not drunk today. His curls are slicked back behind his ears, revealing his sharp cheekbones and jaw. His navy suit is neatly pressed, an elaborately folded, emerald green handkerchief poking out from his breast pocket. Those eyes aren't glassy and wild today either. They are tinged with amusement.

I wonder how long he's been sitting there, witnessing me screaming and withering in my sleep.

"What do you want?" I mutter, tugging the covers up to my chin.

"For you to eat," he replies, his eyes fixed on my sweating face.

"No, and you can't make me."

Lorcan Quinn takes his time responding. Powerful men seem to have the luxury of time. He turns to the window, closing his eyes and tilting his face up to meet the early morning rays. As they wash over his tanned face, I can't help but think how handsome he is. This man could have been anything, anyone. A model, an actor, or with that enormous build, even a sportsman. Instead, he chose to be an asshole with a god complex.

Eventually, he turns his attention back to me. "I can, and I will," he says simply. "Not so long ago, you woke up in this beautiful room with no recollection of how you got here. I can make it happen again, only next time, you'll wake up in the hospital with a feeding tube forced down your throat."

I know the threat is all too real, but I refuse to give anything away. Instead, I pick at the embroidered hem of the covers, feeling his heavy gaze burning into the side of my cheek.

“Miss Murphy—”

“I’m not Miss Murphy anymore,” I snap. “My last name is Valentina. Murphy is my father and I’m nothing like him.”

He studies me for a moment, before taking the three strides to sit at the end of the bed. I curl my legs up to my chest, trying to get as far away from him as possible. Up close, I can see the cut on his cheek and I’m disappointed. There was so much blood, I was hoping it’d be bigger.

“You might look nothing like him, but you’ll always be a Murphy in blood,” he growls.

There’s so much anger in his eyes. *Why?* My father was nothing but a lackey to his family, and he was only one tiny piece of the puzzle in the death of his father and brothers.

How can he hate him that much?

Before I can work up the courage to ask, he reaches over and runs the rough pad of his thumb over my bottom lip. “Such a pretty little mouth,” he murmurs, that amused smirk softening his cruel face. “Such a delight that it belongs to me now.”

I whip my face away from him, pushing my back against the headboard. “Get off me,” I hiss, my lip still burning from the ghost of his touch.

“Have you ever sucked a cock before, Miss Murphy?”

Heat rises to my face, betraying my stern expression. “None of your goddamn business.”

He laughs, a hard, gruff laugh. “A pretty little mouth but filled with poison. I’d like to fill it with something else.”

Lightning quick, his hands fly to my cheeks, locking me in with a vice-like grip. “Remember, that mouth belongs to me now,” he murmurs. He’s so close, I can feel his coffee breath tickling my nose.

My breath hitches in my throat. I want to look away, but I refuse to give him the satisfaction of cowering. Instead, I meet his powerful citrine gaze. It’s filled with lust and longing.

I wish I could say I felt sickened by him. But my body betrays me, the heat rushing away from my face and to the pit of my stomach and beyond.

Goddamnit, Poppy. What the fuck is wrong with you?

After what feels like forever, he unpins me from his gaze, turning his attention to below my collarbone. His eyes run over my new silk pajamas, courtesy of Orna, and stop on the swell of my chest.

I know what he’s looking at. I can feel it happening.

The smirk is now splitting his face in two, revealing a row of pearly teeth. He releases my face from his grip and runs a surprisingly gentle finger over my nipple. It stiffens even more under his touch, and I have to force myself not to gasp.

Push him away, Poppy, a voice somewhere in my head screams, push him away and kick him in the balls, while you’re at it.

But I don’t push him away. Not even when he undoes the top button of my shirt. Or the second.

The voice in my head is getting louder, angrier. But his touch has me stupefied, pinned to the headboard.

His hands are demanding as he pulls my shirt apart, allowing my heavy breasts to escape.

I can’t take my eyes off of him. The way he stares at my heaving chest with pure, unadulterated fascination and lust. The heat of his hands makes

my skin prickle with goosebumps as he hovers them over the swell of my chest. I find myself closing my eyes, waiting for his touch.

It doesn't come.

The bed dips and I open my eyes to see him standing. He straightens his cufflinks and strides towards the door, stopping to turn back to me, just as he's about to turn the key in the lock. "Eat," he growls, pushing through the door. "I already told you, I discard things that aren't any use to me. And a weak, pathetic woman is no use to me."

And with that, he disappears, locking me in this room with my treacherous thoughts.

Lorcan

I can't get to my study quick enough.

"Jesus fucking Christ," I growl, taking a leaf out of Antoin's books by pacing up and down the tiles.

I need a drink, and I need a wank. Not in that order.

The lust is burning through my body. It's all-consuming.

Poppy is all-consuming.

I was always the impulsive one of the family. I'm known to act now, think later. One of the many reasons why I was never destined to take the throne. But that impulsiveness goes beyond popping a cap in a traitor's ass before I can torture them to find out what they know. It bleeds into my personal life. If I see it, I want it. And if I want it, I have to have it.

I see Poppy. I want Poppy. And I have to have Poppy.

I knew the second I touched her it was game over. But I'm trying to change, goddammit. Trying to think with my head instead of my trigger finger, or in this case, my cock. Trying to be less impulsive.

I'm not going to take her virginity on a whim. I'm going to savor every fucking second of it.

But I can't wait much longer.

Orna stomps in without knocking as I'm pouring a whiskey. "Learn to knock," I growl, flashing her a menacing stare.

“Oops,” she retorts dryly, dragging the vacuum in behind her. Without another word, she plugs it in and starts furiously pushing it back and forth over the tiles.

I pick up the letter opener off my desk and slice the cord in one, swift motion.

“You’re one sassy word away from being demoted to pot washer.”

My threat falls on deaf ears. “What the hell are you doing with that poor girl, Lorc? What has she ever done to you?”

“Clearly you’re quite charmed by her,” I snarl, “but the girl isn’t as innocent as she’ll have you believe.”

Orna crosses her arms over her chest, her scowl unwavering. “If you’re talking about the cut on your face, then you deserve it.”

No, I’m not talking about her smart mouth and adequate aim.

But it’s none of Orna’s business. “Quinn women clean,” I sneer over my tumbler, “leave the business to the men of the family.”

If I had even half a heart, I’d regret the words that just came tumbling from my lips. Orna, as much as I hate to admit it, is as close as I have to a sister. But my heart turned to stone long ago, so I ignore her wide eyes and slacked jaw, busying myself with the stack of papers on my desk. She picks up the vacuum, and its broken cord, and stomps out of my office without another word.

The door is shut for less than a second before there’s a timid knock. I have to force myself not to hurl my whiskey glass at whoever’s about to walk through the threshold.

“What?” I snap.

It creaks open and Eileen appears. My father’s old secretary. She’s older than Jesus himself but even I wasn’t cruel enough to put her out on her ass

when I took over. Instead, she sits in a dark corner of the Quinn Ventures building, trying to make all of our investments look legit. She always picks up on the second ring, and I'm sure she has my schedule tattooed on the inside of her wrinkly eyelids.

Like everyone who walks into my study, she runs a judgmental eye over the half-full whiskey bottle on my desk.

“Whatever you're about to tell or ask me, couldn't it have been done on a phone call?”

Eileen pats her gray bob, her stern mouth tightening. “I tried calling your cell a dozen times,” she nods towards the phone on my desk. “That one doesn't seem to work, either.”

“Cell's broken, and calls to this phone divert directly back to you. What do you want?”

She slips off her purse from the crook of her elbow and pulls out a file. “I wanted to run through your itinerary for the week.”

I stifle the groan. The sooner I let her rattle on, the quicker she'll leave me in peace. “Shoot.”

The old bat gets a fraction of my attention; I say yes to the right meetings and no to the phone calls from angry club-owners littered around the city. I'll deal with them when I get word from Antoin that he's secured the deal in Colombia.

“Eileen, I'm counting down the seconds until you get the fuck out of my office. Can you speed this up?” I grunt, dragging my knuckle over my jaw.

She never lets anything I say faze her. I wonder if my father gave her the same shit?

“There's nothing else that can't wait until Monday, I suppose. One last thing—shall I confirm your ten p.m. appointment this evening?”

Her steely gray eyes meet mine over the stack of files in her hand. They are full of judgment, contempt. I couldn't give less of a fuck.

"My ten p.m...." I muse out loud, leaning back in my chair. Who's my Saturday girl? A curvy blonde with big tits pops into my head. Elisa. Or is it Ellie?

Years ago, I remember my brother telling me that Quinn men can't let their dick rule their decisions. Today, I'm all about trying to stick to that rule. And besides, my dick doesn't even tingle at the thought of my Saturday night hooker.

"Cancel it."

I drain the rest of the whiskey in an attempt to drown out that small, niggling voice at the back of my head.

If I'm not getting it from Poppy, I don't want it from anyone.

Poppy

Up, down. Up, down. To the *Monet* painting, back to the bay window seat, then back to the *Monet*. After pacing that route what must be a hundred times, I switch course. *Left, right. Left, right.* From the old English grandfather clock to the Venetian dresser.

If I was only visiting this room, I'd be swooning in delight at all of the beautiful antiques covering every square inch. But knowing I can't leave, I can see it for what it really is: A gilded cage.

And this little bird needs to stretch its wings and escape before it loses its damn mind.

I've been locked in this museum for around five days. I've read every book Orna gave me—twice. I've tried on every outfit she bought me, and I've stood in front of the bathroom mirror, braiding my hair in every way possible. Hell, I've even started picking at the food that she brings four times a day. Not because I'm giving up my protest, but because I'm *just so goddamn bored*. It's become somewhat of a twisted game, finding the balance between quieting the constant rumbling in my stomach and not making it obvious that I've eaten anything at all.

Mentally exhausted from pacing the same three floorboards, I flop back down on the window seat. The midday rays warm my face through the glass, trying to entice me outside.

I close my eyes and imagine what I'd be doing back at Stanford. If it is a weekend, maybe Nellie and I would be hiking The Dish trail, stopping at the top to drink wine coolers while looking out at the rolling hills of San Jose. If it's a weekday, then we'd be in lectures, probably nursing a slight hangover, itching to get out in the sun.

A pang of guilt washes over me, bringing me back to the gilded museum with a thump. Not once does my little daydream include Sam.

Sam.

He must be going insane wondering what the hell has happened to me.

A familiar knock on the door pushes him, Nellie and wine coolers back in the box labeled real life in my mind. "Come in," I say, hopping off the window seat and waiting expectantly for any type of stimulation.

Orna pushes through the door, a tray of croissants and orange juice in hand. She runs a surprised eye over me. "Wow, you look amazing, Poppy! That dress is beautiful on you." I offer a polite smile and mutter some sort of thanks. I must admit, ninety-nine percent of the clothes Orna picked out for me are gorgeous. This Neiman Marcus summer dress fits like a glove, dipping in at my waist and falling past my thighs in floaty, ethereal fabric. Faced with another day of doing absolutely fuck all, I decided to get up, shower, spend an hour doing my makeup with the Sephora haul Orna also got for me, and actually get dressed in something that isn't pajamas.

Orna sets down the tray and beams at me. "Honestly, you look like a model."

It's hard not to like Orna, and I have to keep reminding myself not to unravel in front of her. She may play the role of the worried housekeeper, keeping me fed, clothed, and mildly entertained with a handful of battered *Harlequin* novels, but those amber eyes are a constant reminder that she's

not to be trusted. She can flash me her dazzling smile when my sarcastic comments make her laugh, and she can knit her perfect eyebrows into concern when I'm moments from bursting into tears, but she's still a Quinn. She still locks that door behind her the second she steps into the room, and she locks it against the moment she leaves.

But today, she's my only hope.

"I want to go outside."

She looks at me like I'm crazy.

"I'm sorry, lovie, you know Lorcan wouldn't—"

"Please," I say, clasping my hands together. I'm one more "no" away from falling to my knees and praying to her like she's God. "Please just *ask* him. Tell him I'm losing my goddamn mind in here."

Those brows knit into concern again. "Fine," she eventually mutters, "I'll *ask*. But I'm not making any promises. You've seen firsthand how stubborn he can be."

She disappears out of the room, locking it behind her, of course. I press my ear to the door, and I can hear her somewhere else in the building, having a one-way conversation in muffled tones.

I'm holding my breath when she comes back into the room, slipping her cell back into the pocket of her apron. "He says only if you eat."

"Deal," I say, not caring about the rest of the sentence lingering on her lips.

"And only for one hour, limited to the south gardens, and you have to have a chaperone."

I groan, my eyes darting to the window at the beastly-looking men that patrol the perimeters of the gardens. Whatever the weather, they are always in all-black, with rifles slung across their beefy chests. "Fine. I'll take it."

I don't care about my protest right now. My desperate need to get out of this gilded cage is two-fold. First, I'll simply crawl up the walls if I have to spend another day locked in here. Second, I'm not going to find an escape route staring at the locked door for eighteen hours a day. I need to get on the ground, figure out where I am and how the hell I can get out of here.

"I'll take your brunch outside," Orna smiles, picking up the tray. "You can have it on the terrace."

She steps aside to let me pass through the bedroom door. And it's in that moment I realize the lock and key on this room means nothing. Her easy smile reminds me of the night I slashed Lorcan's face and tried to escape. The sound of his lazy footsteps coming to get me. Like him, she isn't worried about me trying to escape, because she knows that even if I get out of this door, there'll be at least one more standing between me and freedom.

"After you," she practically sings. The one and only time I've been out of this room (conscious, at least), it was pitch black. With the daylight streaming through the large window at the end of the hall, I can finally see what's on the other side of the Museum. And the answer to that is nothing. A simple corridor lined with plush, white carpets and closed doors on either side. At the end is the staircase, leading down to the bottom floor. I take in every inch of the corridor as I walk down it, running my hands over the smooth oak banister, eyeing up every lock and knob on every door as I pass. The bottom floor leads to a spacious entrance hall, as plain as the floor above. It's when I see the main door that my heart sinks.

"Retina recognition," Orna says, coming up behind me. "Plus, a password that changes every goddamn time you try to leave."

I stare at the steel contraption in front of me. Any trace of hope seeps from my body like a slow, painful bleed. It wouldn't look out of place in a

Bond villain's lair.

"The password changes? Then how do you know the answer?"

Orna eyes me suspiciously for a split second, before deciding it's safe to answer. "It's always a question that only a Quinn would know. Or *should* know," she laughs. "I've had to call Lorcan a few times to come and get me out of here when I can't remember his mother's birthday."

I'm suddenly shocked at the thought of Lorcan having a mom. I knew his father was dead, but where his mom is never crossed my mind. I immediately picture a beautiful yet cruel woman, with the same piercing amber eyes that every Quinn has. "Does she live here?"

Orna flashes me an apologetic glance. "No, Nancy died years ago," she says softly, passing me the tray of croissants and heading to the iPad-size screen next to the door. I watch as a laser scans over her eye. "I was too young to remember her, and Lorcan was only around five." After a pause, she adds, "Cancer."

I take in this small slither of information as she taps away on the on-screen keyboard. I hate the pang of sadness that shoots through my growling stomach. I know how it feels to mourn someone that is such a large part of you, but you don't even remember meeting. It's a strange, empty void that is impossible to fill.

"I'm so sorry," I find myself muttering. But my feeble words are lost in the hiss of the door's hydraulics coming to life. It heaves open, revealing a wide stretch of grass and sunshine.

The fresh air hits me immediately, filled with freshly cut grass and the warmth from the sun. "Oh my god, thank you," I murmur, closing my eyes and turning my face up to the sun. It's crazy what we take for granted until it's snatched away from you.

“Let’s get you fed,” Orna says, nodding to the patio area to the side of the house. While she sets down the tray, I step away from the house and look back up at it, taking in the exterior of my cage.

It’s pretty, yet shockingly ordinary. Like the simple, white corridors and looming steel door, it doesn’t match the gaudy aesthetic of the bedroom I’ve been locked in.

I sink into the swinging love seat under the veranda, wolfing down three croissants while Orna makes small talk. I’m only half-listening; most of my attention is on the beautiful, buttery taste of food, and the other is scanning my surroundings for any sign of an escape route. But from the patio I can’t see much, it’s the same view from the bedroom but from a slightly different angle. Long stretches of perfectly manicured grass that meets towering hedge walls somewhere in the distance.

“Need anything else to eat?” Orna brings me back with a question. “You must be literally starving.”

“No, no,” I say, dusting the crumbs away from my mouth. “If you don’t mind, I’d love to stretch my legs.”

“Sure. Let me find you a chaperone. I’d love to come with you, but I have way too much work to do, I’m afraid.”

She steps out from under the shade, looking to the left of the building. She waves, presumably at someone, and then beckons them over. “Cillian will give you a tour of the grounds,” she says, smiling at someone that hasn’t come into view yet. “He actually works in the gardens in his spare time too. Don’t try to outsmart him with rose varieties, you’ll definitely lose.”

She turns back to me, a satisfied smile on her face. “Enjoy yourself, Poppy. I’ll be back in about an hour, okay?”

I nod, rising to my feet. “Thanks, Orna. I really appreciate—”

We’re interrupted by the crackling sound. It’s coming from the radio clipped to the waist of her jeans. She flashes me an apologetic smile and mouths sorry, before lifting it to her lips and throwing me a wave over her shoulder as she disappears around the corner.

I step out into the sun, looking to the left of the house. Immediately, I see who Orna was beckoning over. A tall, tanned man with a mop of dark hair is striding towards the house. He’s not dressed like the other henchmen that line the perimeters of the garden, instead, he’s in Nike shorts, running sneakers, and a wife-beater tank.

When he’s only a few feet away, I offer him a small, awkward wave, one that he doesn’t reciprocate.

Of course. Orna might be pleasant enough, but that personality trait probably doesn’t extend to anyone else who lives or works here. Lorcan’s men are probably used to sniping enemies from their watchtowers, not looking after their boss’s latest keepsake. And judging by the way this one is dressed, he’s not meant to be working today at all.

That’s fine. I’m not looking for good company, I’m looking for an escape route. As long as he keeps his mouth shut and keeps his distance, I couldn’t care less what he thinks of me.

He’s less than a foot away from me now when a feeling of familiarity washes over me. *Was he at the restaurant when I was kidnapped?*

No, I muse to myself. None of those men were that young, and this guy seems to be around my age. He probably passes by the museum window a few times a day on patrol. That’s how I recognize him.

But there’s a niggling feeling in the pit of my stomach that tells me I’m wrong. It’s in the way he walks—stomps, across the grass to meet me.

The realization soccer punches me in my chest. But he beats me to it.

“Poppy Murphy,” he says, only inches from me now. His voice is low and he’s only talking out of the side of his mouth, like he’s concerned about who will hear. “Fancy seeing you here.”

I can’t breathe. “It’s you...” I just about manage, as my ears ring from shock.

It’s the boy with the Doc Martens from the funeral.

Poppy

“It’s you. From the funeral,” I gasp.

I feel like I’m staring at a ghost. A window into a memory that makes my skin crawl.

His dark eyes trace the outline of my face, before they drag over my head.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he says, as I turn to follow his gaze.

A camera. Nestled between the leaves of the bushes. A few feet along, there’s another. I try to regain my composure, forcing a nonchalant veil over my face.

“Shall we walk?” I manage.

My plan to absorb every inch of the outside world that I’m allowed access to has gone straight out of the window. Elaborate flower patches bursting with colors pass by in a blur. I barely even register the sprawling manor that forms the heart of the estate. Big buildings. Colorful flowers. Cillian, the boy from the funeral.

Only one of those things do I need an immediate answer for.

He walks a few feet behind me at all times. Every gardener, maid, or landscaper I pass offers me a polite smile, before looking over my head and breaking into a grin at the sight of him.

Their reactions dash all possibility that he's just like me. Held here against his will.

Is he a Quinn?

Nothing about this makes sense. The questions bubble up in my stomach, and when they threaten to overflow, I spin around to face him. "What are you doing here?" I hiss, not caring about the cameras or the henchmen watching us.

His face doesn't move an inch. "Perhaps you'd be interested in the rose garden, Miss Murphy? It's a personal project of mine that I'm truly quite fond of."

I'm numb as I follow him down a cobbled path. It snakes away from the looming manor, shaded by a cluster of willow trees. At the bottom, there's a wrought iron gate that lets out a heavy groan when he pushes it open.

I'm taken aback by the unexpected beauty of it, if only for a moment. From dusky pinks to sun-kissed yellows, roses of all forms burst from bushes and grass verges, snaking up the cobbled walls and stretching around a white veranda. A narrow stone path leads to the middle, where a water fountain and benches offer unwanted relief from all of the beauty.

Cillian stops to rub a velvety petal on a nearby white rose. "Marcus Murphy's daughter. He finally came for you too." My mouth opens but nothing comes out. "Relax. No cameras or microphones in here."

His pale face is a cocktail of sharp lines and darkness. His gray eyes are framed with black circles, and the way his lips contort upwards tells me he hasn't smiled properly in years.

"What are you doing here?" I eventually ask.

"The same thing you're doing here. A debt owed."

The weight of his words pushes me down onto the bench, and I fight the nausea rising in my stomach. I remember every line of Cillian's sharp face, even after all these years. The boy with the Doc Martens and the attitude. I remember how he shoved past me to sit right at the front row. He was fearless.

If he hasn't escaped by now, then what chance do I have?

"Cheer up, Murphy," he says, tugging out the clippers from his tool belt. "It ain't that bad."

"What do you do here?"

"What everyone else does in the Quinn estate," he frowns, leaning closer to inspect the nearest rose bush. With an expert snip, he clips away the dead leaves surrounding the petals. "Anything and everything Lorcan wants."

"And he wants you to tend to his roses?" I ask, tone dripping with skepticism.

Cillian smirks. "I'm one of his henchmen, Murphy. He clicks his fingers and I pull the trigger. This," he gestures to the rosebush he's tending to, "is a hobby he allows me to indulge in."

I watch him as he plucks a tool from his belt and clips another leaf, discarding it in the soil below the bush. He can't be older than me, yet I feel like he's aged a million years since I saw him at the funeral.

Suddenly, I remember the coldness of the church floor against my heels as I dug my feet in, desperate to find out his and his father's fate. "What did your father do?"

His jaw hardens. "Oisín was working with the Italians. The ones that made the bomb that killed his family." His voice is laced with venom. I

can't tell who he hates more, his father, who he calls by his first name, or Lorcan.

"Why haven't you escaped?" I ask, feeling the tears prickling in my eyes. I don't think I want to know the answer.

"I have a plan."

Hope hitches in my throat and I rise to my feet. "A plan to escape?"

His eyes narrow at me for a second. Then, he crosses the garden path and turns his attention to a pink rose bush. "I've already said too much."

"No," I breathe, grabbing his arm. "Tell me, please. When? How?"

He stares at my hand around his wrist. I know it's clammy and desperate but I don't fucking care. *Help me*, I want to scream. *Help me get the fuck out of here.*

"I have to go. The other henchmen will notice my absence soon."

When he strides back down the narrow path, I'm at his heels like a lapdog. I can feel the window of opportunity slipping away from me. Before we reach the iron gate, I grab onto the hem of his T-shirt.

He turns, pinning me with a challenging stare. "You should go back to your cage, little girl," he says sourly, before nodding in the direction of Orna.

"No," I stammer. There are a million questions I still need answers to. I can't bear the thought of being back in that goddamn cage with them swirling around my head, unanswered.

"What did he do?" I blurt out. "To your father? What was his punishment?"

Without moving a muscle in his hardened face, he says, "don't ask questions you don't want to know the answer to."

I swallow the lump in my throat. "I want to know."

“You’re too innocent.”

The snort that escapes my lips is borderline manic. *Is he insane?* “I haven’t been innocent since the day of the funeral.”

He turns to me, gray eyes boring into my soul. Then, he stoops down to the nearest rose bed, clipping a single red rose from the root. As the thick silence swirls between us, he removes each thorn with expert ease.

Eventually, he speaks.

“Buried him alive. In that coffin.”

My knees buckle underneath me. Cillian watches my reaction, emotionless.

“That’s horrific, I’m—”

“Sorry. I know.”

He clips off one last thorn from the rose and he passes it to me with the tenderness you’d handle the Queen’s crown jewels with. I take it, running my fingers over the blood-red velvet petals. “Thank you,” I mumble, trying my hardest to keep the tears at bay.

“We need to get going,” he says, striding towards the gate and tugging it open.

“Do you miss him?”

He turns, piercing me with a stone-cold stare.

“No,” he says with so much bitterness that I know it’s the truth. “My father was a traitor. He deserved everything he got,” he spits.

I physically recoil at the harshness of his words. It makes Cillian smile. “I don’t know what you’re so surprised about, Murphy. Your father wasn’t so innocent either.”

Before I can ask what the hell he means by that, he pushes me through the gate and we’re back in the main grounds, being watched by every

housekeeper and henchmen in sight.

Lorcan

I park the Bentley in front of the estate and toss the keys in the direction of one of my men. He'll park it in the basement where it belongs, right between the Rolls and the Lambo. I don't have the patience for such technicalities today, not with my cock raging like it is.

Poppy mother fuckin' Murphy. That little bitch has been on my mind all day, through every investment meeting and finance report. And I hate her even more than usual for it.

Rule number one of business is don't let your dick get in the way of decisions. I can't remember who said that, Warren fucking Buffet, probably. Anyway, Poppy Murphy isn't just a minor roadblock, she's a whole-ass eclipse. How am I meant to run Boston's most dominant venture capitalist firm and fight a full-on war when all I can think about is breaking in her tight pussy?

Once again, thanks to my erratic mind, my plans have changed. It's obvious that I can't wait to take her and savor every moment. I have to get it out of the way and rid her from my mind. It'll make my pretty little keepsake a little less rare... but it's a hit I'll have to take.

It's a beautiful goddamn day; a perfect day to take Poppy Murphy's virginity, in fact. I stare up at her bedroom window as the museum comes into view. The little princess in her ivory tower. I'm assuming the inch of

freedom I gave her today will have softened her attitude towards me—but not too much, I hope. The feisty side of Poppy is half of her appeal.

I tap out the master code on the front door, and it hisses to life, welcoming me into the cool lobby. The ironic contrast of technology isn't lost on me as I slip the large, metal key out of my suit pocket, the one that opens her bedroom door. Yeah, you have to scan your goddamn eyeball and answer twenty-one questions to get into the Museum, but there's nothing but a simple mechanism for the bedroom.

It's empty.

"Poppy?" I growl, bursting into the en suite, then striding through to the dressing room.

Now, my cock isn't the only thing that's raging. I stomp back down the stairs, the new cell Eileen brought into the office to my ear. Orna picks up on the third ring. "Where the fuck is she?" I snap, "I said an hour, not the whole fucking day."

"Relax," she matches my tone, "she's in the garden. Chaperoned, as you insisted. As if there isn't enough security in this place."

"Chaperoned by who?"

Orna says his name at the same time my eyes land on him through the window of the bedroom.

White, hot fury. It starts where it always does, at the pit of my stomach. Then it travels up to my chest, pounding against my rib cage like a trapped beast, desperate to be let out.

There they are, walking along the length of the hedges. Talking like they are best-fucking-friends. *And what is that in her hand?*

I force myself not to run. Men like me don't run towards a goddamn problem. They remain cool, calm, and collected. Deal with it like a boss.

The Glock is out of my waistband and in my hand, safety catch released, before I reach the lobby again. I round the house and cross their path. “Boy, I will give you thirty seconds to get out of my sight, or you’ll be buried under the vegetable patch.”

Yeah, cool, calm, and collected didn’t last too long.

Poppy stifles a gasp, but the kid barely moves. He turns to her like he has all the time in the goddamn world and offers her a lazy smile. “Boss’s orders,” he says, before turning on his sneakers and heads towards his rose garden. If I was a less honorable man, I’d shoot him in the back to teach him a lesson. But I like to look into a man’s eyes before I take his life.

I make a mental note to burn his precious rose garden to the ground instead, and turn back to Poppy.

I brace myself for her feisty wrath, but it doesn’t come. In fact, she won’t—or can’t—look at me.

The disappointment sinks to my stomach. “Upstairs, now,” I growl. She doesn’t move. I follow her gaze down to her hands, which are wrapped around a single red rose.

Jaw clenched, I snatch the rose from her hand and toss it to the ground. I take my trusty hip flask from my jacket, untwist the lid with my teeth and slosh the brown liquid over it. Then I take my Cartier lighter from my breast pocket, flick it open and drop it onto the sodden pile. The flames instantly lick the stem, curling the petals and turning them to ash.

I do one of the things I hate to do the most: repeat myself. “Upstairs,” I say again, stabbing a finger in the direction of the Museum. “The threat of the vegetable patch applies to you too.”

Head down and mouth closed, she walks two steps ahead of me towards the cobbled building.

Damn, she looks nothing short of ethereal today. Heaven-sent. Her long, copper hair cascades down her back, catching the light. As much as Orna has pissed me off by taking her eyes off Poppy today, I have to mentally thank her for stocking up her closet. The floral dress she's wearing billows in the light breeze, riding up her thick thighs as she makes slow, deliberate movements towards the Museum.

I grit my teeth, beating down the monster inside of me that wants to pick her up, sling her over my shoulder and march her into the outhouse and away from all of these nosy bastards on my payroll.

She doesn't pick up the pace, moving tantalizingly slow as I let her into the lobby, and then order her up the stairs. The most I get from her is a flinch when I slam the bedroom door behind me, locking it with my key. Immediately, she flees to the window seat, peering out into the grounds. Like a moth to a flame.

Is she looking for him?

I clench my fists. "I saw the way you were looking at him," I growl.

Now, she gives me something. A little eyebrow raise, enough to show she's surprised. "Who?"

"That kid, Cillian." She turns back towards the window, but I can see her frowning in the reflection. "You belong to me. What part of that don't you understand, Miss Murphy?"

Now, she cracks.

"I'm not yours," she cries, whipping around so fast that her fire-red hair fans around her like flames. "I'll never be yours! I have a boyfriend and soon enough he'll realize what's happened to me and will come to find me."

I seethe, taking in her defensive stance, her glowering emerald eyes and arms folded across her chest. This is not a woman that will bow down to

me. Not willingly, and definitely not while she has some asshole college kid on the brain. I always say that if you cut me, I'll bleed green, but that's not usually because of jealousy.

Grinding my molars together, I weigh up my options.

Nuclear: I'll hunt that weedy little fucker down and drag him to Boston by his goddamn glasses. Because geeky college kids always wear glasses. Then I'll get him on his knees, put the barrel of my Glock to his head and make her watch as I blow his brains out.

Or, I could teach her a lesson in another way.

The hot, thick tension lingers between us. I rip through it by grabbing her arm and dragging her over to the chaise lounge. "Let go of me," she squeals, but she must know by now, that isn't going to happen.

"I'll show you that you belong to me," I growl, flipping her onto her front and sprawling her across my lap. "If you want to behave like a spoiled little bitch, I'll treat you like one." She wriggles underneath my palm on the small of her back, her protests lost in the velvet upholstery of the couch. But the feeling of her lower stomach pushed against my cock only makes me want to devour her more. "If you don't stop squirming then I'll use my belt."

With my free hand, I lift the hem of her skirt, revealing her sensible cotton panties. Her smooth, porcelain skin looks so fragile and delicate, I'm practically salivating at the thought of breaking it.

So, I'm hoping that she doesn't answer my question the way I'd like.

"I'll ask you once, Miss Murphy. Who do you belong to?"

My teeth clench together and my eyes close as she takes a deep breath, pushing harder against my bulge.

"Fuck you," she whimpers.

I can't stop the smirk that splits my face. In one swift motion, I tear off her panties, revealing the beautiful curve of her ass. My hand comes down on her soft, untouched skin. I use only a fraction of my strength, but it's enough to trigger the yelp that I was begging to hear. "I *said*, who do you belong to?"

"No," she gasps, pushing her mound into my cock to get her ass away from the wrath of my hand. The friction makes me want to moan out loud, but I stifle my pleasure to dish out her punishment.

Another slap to her ass, a little harder this time. The noise it emits is less of a yelp and more of a moan. My eyes travel up to her face, covered by thick strands of her red hair. I can't see her expression, but I don't need to—the way her fist is curled around the corner of the cushion tells me everything I need to know.

I need confirmation.

"Open your legs."

For once, she does as she's told. My touch is softer as I trace the length of her inner thigh, stopping when I feel the slick wetness in the curve of her mound.

Poppy Murphy is dripping wet.

For me.

I slip my hands under her thighs and breasts, rising to my feet and taking her with me. She gasps as the couch disappears underneath her, and moans again when I drop her onto her back on the bed. "Spread your legs," I growl. The lust is coursing through my veins, pumping my heart a million beats a minute. This time, she does exactly what she's told. "Good girl," I say, softer, drinking in her swollen clit and moistened lips. I drag my eyes up to her face, and it's a sight just as beautiful. Her emerald eyes are wild

and her pale skin is flushed a rose red. Both betray the scowl etched onto her forehead. Her chest heaves, up and down, up and down, her hard nipples puckered tight against the thin fabric covering her chest.

Poppy Murphy wants me.

I slide my hand up her thigh, my attention never leaving that beautiful face. She squeezes her eyes shut, jaw stiffening as she grits her teeth.

Yes. Poppy Murphy wants me, but she doesn't *want* to want me.

Here I am again, weighing up my options. Only this time, my throbbing cock has a hand in the decision-making. I could take what I came here for—her virginity. I could slip my dick in her tight, dripping pussy and claim her innocence.

Or, I could *make* her want to want me.

Before my manhood gets to lay out his debate, I tear my hand away from her hip and run both my hands from her knees all the way to the top of her inner thighs. Her breath hitches in her chest as I get so close to her precious flower, and it escapes her when I slide right past it, hovering just above her mound. "Look at me," I say, pinning her with my gaze. Our eyes lock. My thumb slips down into her wetness, brushing over her engorged clit. My touch is as light as I can possibly muster, but it still makes her throw her head back, a soft moan escaping from her perfect lips. "I said, look at me."

She meets my eyes again, and there's no mistaking the lust swirling in those emerald green irises. Never leaving her gaze, I stroke her clit in small, circular motions, enjoying every quiver, every shake under my touch.

"Who does this pussy belong to, Poppy?" I demand.

"Don't," she mutters, but her pleas get lost in her gasp as I apply a little more pressure.

“You know by now, I don’t ask twice.”

I can feel the tension mounting in her pussy, and it’s impossible to ignore the tension dancing between our bodies, either. “Yours,” she gasps.

Mine.

“Then come for me,” I demand as her breathing becomes more labored, “give yourself to me.”

She grits her teeth and bundles the bedding on either side of her in her tiny fists. “N-no,” she stutters, so quietly that it almost gets lost in crackling heat.

I press my thumb more firmly against her sensitive sweet spot. Circling faster, harder. “I’ve already told you, no isn’t part of your vocabulary anymore. Now, *come for me.*”

Maybe it’s the added pressure against her clit, but I could swear she shivers at the harsh tone of my voice. Whatever it is, the way she throws her head back and mutters an oath under her breath sends me wild. With a firm hand pinning her thigh to the bed, I alternate between tracing demanding circles on her clit and lightly trailing my fingers along the length of her soaked lips. Her inner conflict fascinates me. There’s no doubt her body is begging for release under my touch, but the way she’s clenching her fists, biting on her bottom lip, tells me her brain isn’t on the same page.

But I always win. I always get what I want. Eventually, her pleasure overflows under my hand, her legs trembling as she lets herself go, withering on the bed.

Betrayal. That’s what clouds her eyes when she floats down from her high. Her soft mouth hardens, her body tenses, moving it away from my touch.

I'm suddenly overwhelmed with the need to let her know it's okay. She opened up like a blossoming flower underneath my touch, and now she's curling back up, trying to get as far away from me as possible. I press my palms into the bed on either side of her, leaning over to brush my lips over her glistening forehead. "My good China Doll," I say, low and steady.

I rise to my feet, towering over her. She's silent, watching as I rearrange my throbbing cock in my suit pants, straightening my cufflinks. "Next time I hear you mention another man, your punishment won't have such a happy ending."

I don't bother asking her if she understood. Instead, I slip out of the room, leaving her laying on her bed, a little less innocent than before.

Poppy

I strain my ears to hear the front door open and close, but I can barely hear anything over the hammering of my heart against my rib cage.

After I'm sure he's gone, I swing my legs over the edge of the bed, needing to feel the cold floorboards on the soles of my feet to bring me back to reality.

What the fuck?

On shaking legs, I stumble into the en suite and perch on the edge of the freestanding bath. I twist the knob marked cold—I really don't need any more heat today.

As the water sputters out of the tap, I stare at the mosaic tiles lining the mirror, trying to make sense of what just happened.

I'm disgusted with myself. How my body reacted under the strong hand of Lorcan Quinn. My fingers dip below my sundress, brushing over my sensitive mound. And *boy*, did it react. The hard feeling of his bulge against my pussy as his heavy hand ran over the back of my thighs and ass. The coldness of his ring as it slammed down on my cheeks. The white-hot sting that shouldn't have felt so *goddamn good*. Especially not after Cillian's revelation that he buried his father *alive*.

How could I go from being sickened by him to arching my back for him in less than ten minutes?

It was a poisonous cocktail I had no right to enjoy. But I kept drinking from his cup. I could have ended it by succumbing, by telling him what he wanted to hear. But I kept drinking from his cup. I could have ended it by succumbing, by telling him what he wanted to hear. I could have curled my hand around the Faberge egg shard that I constantly keep under my pillow, and used it to slice his throat. Instead, I spread my legs when he demanded it, I looked him in the eye when he told me to, and I *let him*. I let him tease an orgasm from my aching pussy while staring the Devil in the eye. He didn't take it, I let him.

And despite my better judgment, I enjoyed every goddamn second of it.

Another realization washes over me, crushing the air from my lungs. "Fuck," I whisper, putting my sweaty face in my hands.

I cheated on Sam. His kind brown eyes, his wide, innocent smile that stretches across his face every time he sees me pops into my brain.

He's so...sweet. And I've completely betrayed his trust.

The Devil himself isn't in the room anymore, but a variation of it sits on my shoulder, spewing its poison in my ear.

When has Sam ever made you feel like that?

To distract myself from any more intrusive thoughts, I slip the dress over my head and plunge myself into the ice-cold water. The air escapes my lungs, leaving me gasping for breath. But I force myself onto my ass, then onto my back, until I'm neck-deep in punishment.

The Devil has a hold on me.

I'm staring at the chandelier—it's incredibly impressive, actually. Vintage Givenchy, if I'm not mistaken, made in Germany by the one and only William Kent—when there's a timid knock on the door.

Orna.

Despite the numbness veiling my brain and body, shame seeps in. *God, I hope she doesn't know what just happened.*

"I'm in the bath," I call out, thrashing about to get out and wrap a towel around my shoulders. "You can come in—I'll be out in a second."

"No worries, lovie," she calls, breezily. "I'm only bringing some dinner."

Dinner? I think as I tug on a silk robe. Guess the time flies when you're dancing with the Devil.

I emerge from the bathroom and am immediately greeted by Orna's apologetic face. "Listen, I'm sorry about Lorc. It was completely my fault. I lost track of time and—"

"Don't be silly. Really. Thank you for even asking him. I'm surprised he agreed."

She flashes me a grin. "Seems like you know him too well already."

I fluster, lowering my eyes to the floor. *Better than I'd like after today.* I turn my attention to the tray on the dresser and let out a small laugh. "Come on, Orna. That meal is ridiculous."

It's not dinner, it's a banquet. Tacos on one plate, a huge serving bowl of Mexican rice on another, and a whole host of dips.

"I thought you'd be starving after breaking your hunger strike," she grins. "I'm sure you'll find room for it. I'll be back in a few hours and I hope to see shiny clean plates!"

As she turns to leave, the sudden realization that I don't want to be left alone with my thoughts hits me like a ton of bricks. "Wait," I stammer. "Share this... *buffet* with me."

"No, no, I'll—"

“Please,” I say, not caring that desperation is seeping into my tone. I can tell Orna recognizes it from the way her eyebrows soften. She agrees.

“Fine—I’ve been run off my feet today and I’m in enough trouble as it is.”

She sets the tray on the chaise lounge, sitting to one side of it. I try not to think about what Lorcan was doing to me in that exact spot less than an hour earlier.

I sit on the other side of her, reaching for a taco and cramming it into my mouth. I didn’t realize how hungry I was until now. “Damn,” I say through a mouthful of pulled pork, “this is amazing.”

Orna grins. “I’ll pass on the compliments to the chef—she also happens to be my sister.”

I cock my head. “Really? You both work at the Quinn estate?”

“Uh-huh, and our eldest sister too. She’s another housekeeper like me. You’ll probably see her around—us Quinn girls are easy to spot.”

“How long have you been here?”

She laughs. “Forever, lovie. I grew up here, and now I work here.”

I look out the window at the sprawling grounds. Golden hour is setting in, washing an amber glow over the hedges. Orna picks up on what I’m thinking. “It’s a strange little hierarchy, right,” she says, dipping a taco into the pot of salsa. “Quinn men run business, Quinn women run the home. In other words, they make money and we make the beds.”

There’s no hiding that bitterness dripping from her tone. “That sounds shitty,” I say honestly. “What if you don’t want to?”

“Come on,” she says softly, lowering her eyes to the food that separates us. “There’s no such thing as choice in this family. You’ve witnessed that first hand.”

My heart aches for her. I've been held here against my will for less than a week and I'm crawling up the walls—I can't imagine being here *my entire life*.

“Well then let's escape.” The words tumble from my lips before I can stop them. *She locks the door behind her, Poppy. Orna is not an ally.*

Orna takes the time dusting the crumbs from her pants, before looking up at me from behind her thick lashes. “Sorry, lovie. I think I've given you the wrong impression. I'm not...” she wrings her hands, conjuring up the right word. “*trapped* here like you. Yeah, this is the life that I've been dealt, but spending my days cooking and cleaning really isn't that bad. I love my family—” she raises an eyebrow “—yes, even Lorcan, believe it or not. I get to spend time with them all day. I take holidays whenever I want and—not to be crude or anything, but I have more money than I could possibly ever spend in my life. Being a Quinn is great.”

I study her face. “Then why do you look so sad?”

She raises her shoulders to her ears. “Everyone has dreams, right?”

I nod. “And what's yours?”

She flashes me a shy smile, as if I'll find whatever comes from her lips ridiculous. “Business school. I love numbers,” she gushes. “I'd be an accountant if I could.”

My heart warms and aches for her at the same time. “So, why can't you... help out? In the family business?”

She looks at me like I'm stupid. “And go against over fifty years of Quinn family tradition? No dream is worth that amount of aggravation.”

The radio on her belt crackles. She glances at the screen and sighs. “I gotta go, Antoin needs me.”

“Who's Antoin?” I ask as she rises to her feet.

“You haven’t met him yet?” She frowns. “He’s my brother. Lorc’s right-hand man.”

I nod, taking everything in. “Well, thanks for dinner.”

Orna stops by the door, a smile warming up her face. “Thanks for inviting me. Finish up—I’ll be back in a few hours to clear up. Need anything else?”

I shake my head and she disappears through the door, locking it after her.

Pushing a half-eaten taco around my plate, I let out a loud sigh into the silence. Whatever weird, unwarranted feelings I had for Lorcan dissolved within seconds of hearing Orna speak about her duty here.

If he can’t even let his own cousin live out her dream, there’s no way he’s going to let me return to mine.

Lorcan

Why is your light still on, China Doll?

I stare out of my office window, at the soft glow washing over the leaves of the old oak tree. It comes from the side of the Museum, where Poppy's bedroom is located. A glance down at my Audemars Piguet and I realize it's almost midnight. Why is she still awake? I wonder what she's doing. If she's thinking about me. If she's replaying me touching her—

“Lorcan?” A sharp voice comes from over my shoulder. “Are you listening to me?”

Antoin's annoyed tone pulls me back from my thoughts and into the darkness of the study. He appears by my shoulder, following my gaze out of the window, a frown denting his brow. “Pussy that good, huh?”

“Shut up,” I hiss with more venom than I intend. Antoin, not wanting another repeat of last week, shoots his hands up along with his eyebrows. “It was a joke, Lorcan. Chill.” His eyes drop to my half-full glass of *The Smugglers Club* in my hand. They narrow. “I drove past my penthouse downtown to come to the estate tonight, and it wasn't to watch you drink,” he says sourly. “We need to talk business.”

I turn with him, watching him sink into the chair across from my desk. He runs a large hand over his face, and it's only then I realize that he's looking tired. Real tired.

“Then talk.”

“I just landed. Colombia didn’t go too hot.”

Fuck. In the midst of lust and rage, all directed at Poppy Murphy, I’d forgotten that I’d ordered Antoin to get on the next private jet to Bogota. *Get serious, Lorcan.* I scold myself. I pour the rest of my whiskey into the nearest plant pot and slide into my Herman Miller. Back straight and ready for business. “Why?” I demand.

“The Vargas family won’t even *consider* supplying us directly. Turns out they are ridiculously loyal to the Bratnovs. Something about one of the oldest sons courting one of their daughters. Some Romeo and Juliet shit. Whatever. Anyway, they told me flat-out that the Bratnovs are the only family they will supply on the East Coast.”

“And?”

“And,” Antoin continues, rubbing a hand over his sharp nose. “The Vargas family has the monopoly over the East Coast. No other dealers will touch us.”

The anger beats inside my chest and I slam my fist against the table. Antoin doesn’t even flinch. “Do they not know who we are?” I growl. “We’re the fucking Quinns. Kill them all,” I announce. “We rule these fucking streets. They aren’t even in the goddamn country.”

Antoin closes his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Lorcan... *please,*” he hisses, “*please.* I’m truly begging you. Think like your father—even for one second.”

It’s instinctive to want to lunge over my desk and wrap my hands around his throat. But I’m done with thinking irrationally today. I *have* to be. Instead, I swallow the fury and settle against the back of my chair. It’s also instinctive for my fingers to twitch towards my crystal tumbler. I’m

mildly disappointed when I remember I chucked its contents into the nearest vegetation moments earlier.

Think like my father. What would Donal Quinn do?

I turn my attention to the photo of him and my brothers on my desk and think. Everyone respected my father, not solely because of his last name. They respected *him*. Restaurants would close for the evening if he had a reservation, bars would always have his favorite champagne on ice, just in case he decided to swing by. They gave him his cut of their business *willingly*, not because he didn't give them any other choice.

Why?

Because they were giving the money to *him*, not to the Quinn dynasty. They trusted *him* to protect them. My father wasn't a name, he was a face.

I clear my throat and say, "I'll collect payment this week. All the clubs and bars have been dry all weekend, they'll be pissed. I'll show up—" I raise my hands as Antoin opens his mouth to protest "—not to throw my weight around, but to apologize. Maybe it'll help to see my face."

Antoin watches as I crack my knuckles. "Your face or your fist?"

A grin tugs at the corners of my lips. "Depends on how forgiving they are."

Antoin lets out a laugh, and I can tell by the glint in his eye he's impressed. Something tugs at my cold, dead heart—satisfaction. It's the first time my cousin has sat in that seat opposite me and not scowled the whole time. "I like it," he considers, reaching for the whiskey bottle and topping up both our glasses. He raises his to mine and chinks. "'Cause all it takes is for a few of the business owners to get their heads together and revolt. Decide to go to Bratnov directly." He takes a swig of *The Smugglers*

Club and eyeballs the contents of his glass with an approving nod. “Shit’s good.”

You’re telling me.

“All right then,” I say, clapping my hands together. “I’ll go tomorrow.”

Antoin cocks his head in the direction of the window. “Murphy’s daughter. She hot?”

My teeth clench together instinctively. I soothe down the prickle of jealousy with another swig of whiskey.

He still gets the side-eye from me. “Why?”

“Bring her,” he says, setting down his glass and rising to his feet.

A snort escapes my lips.

“I’m serious.”

Seeing I’m not convinced, he leans against my desk, weight on his palms and sighs. “You know I won’t sugarcoat it for you, Lorc. Even if that means I end up pinned to that bookcase again,” he jabs a thumb over his shoulder. “You know what they’re saying in the streets? You’re a one-man band now. What you say, goes.”

I grunt. “But it does.”

He offers a tight smile. “I know, but there’s no respect for that totalitarian image, anymore. Your father was so respected ‘cause he was a family man. Loyal to your mama long after she passed. He was relatable. So much so, that everyone could overlook the fact he’d pop a cap in your ass if you gave him the side-eye.” I smile at the memory of my father. “Bring the chick, give the impression of a family business.”

“Women don’t get involved in business.”

“But a woman’s touch softens everything. Maybe even you.”

He raps his ring against my desk and gives a curt nod. His leaving signal.

When the door clicks shut behind him, I spin my chair around to face the window. The glow is still radiating from the side of the museum and Antoin's parting words are ringing around my ears.

Maybe even you.

I let out something between a grunt and a laugh into the silence. *Hell will freeze over before Marcus Murphy's daughter softens me.*

Poppy

“Get up. We’re going out.”

There are only two scenarios where I hear that gruff voice. The first is when the Devil visits, and the other is in my nightmares.

I happen to be in a dreamless sleep, so I pop an eye open.

The Devil is staring down at me, amber eyes glowering in the morning sun. Despite my groggy vision, I can see how handsome he looks. The razor-sharp outline of his bespoke suit, not a single curl escaping his pulled-back hairstyle. The smell of expensive aftershave, leather, and man waft down towards me.

When I get further away from my state of sleep, I come to my senses, tugging the duvet up to my neck. “Out?” I croak, blinking rapidly to wake myself up. “Where?”

“Don’t ask questions. Just get ready.”

His jaw ticks but I match his hard face with a scowl. “I’m not going anywhere with you,” I snap, rolling away from his looming silhouette.

Bad idea.

He rips the duvet from my body in a motion so quick that it could be its own wind energy source. There’s nothing but my thin nightie between my body and his hungry gaze. “What did I tell you about talking back to me? I’d bend you over my knee and spank you, but you enjoyed it too much last

time.” His fingers graze against the hemline of my nightie, leaving a blazing trail of fire on my skin.

Goddammit, body. Why do you go into meltdown every time he touches you?!

I only swing my feet over the bed and leap up to get away from his wandering hands and my conflicted emotions, not because he told me to. His eyes follow me around the room, and when I turn to him, hand on hips, his gaze falls to my mouth, then below my collarbone. My nipples stiffen at the attention. “Where are we going?” I demand, crossing my arms over my chest as if it’s the most natural movement in the world.

“None of your fucking business,” he growls, “Get dressed. Look pretty, and keep your mouth shut. Got it?”

A cocktail of fear and fury swirls in the pit of my stomach. I can’t trust the Devil as far as I can throw him—and by the way he makes this room feel ten sizes smaller, that’s not very far. The voice in my brain is telling me it’s a trap, but the early morning sun warming my cheeks, and the small wisp of a breeze swirling in from the small, child-friendly crack in the window is begging me to reconsider.

I follow the voice that got me far away from Boston in the first place. The one that always tries to protect me. “I’m not going anywhere with you,” I say simply, putting some more distance between us. “Not unless you tell me exactly where we’re going.”

A rumble comes from deep in his chest, one that doesn’t sound human. But I raise my eyes to his. Challenging him.

Why are you going toe-to-toe with the Devil? The sensible voice chimes in again.

I hate that I know the answer.

Because I enjoyed the last punishment he dealt me.

There's a mild pang of disappointment somewhere deep inside of my loins when he grits his molars together and glances at his watch. "You know," he says, through clenched teeth. "I'll tell you this one time, because I don't have time today for this back and forth. But mark my words, China Doll," he purrs, closing the gap between us until I can feel the silk fabric of his tie against my chest. "I'll be sure to punish your disobedience later." My knees are close to buckling under the weight of his words. "I'm taking you to meet a few clients. It's collection day and I need a woman's touch."

Clients. Collection day. Buzzwords that snap me right out of his intoxicating spell and bring me back to my reality with a heavy thump.

Collecting who?

Because it seems that I have 'debt' written across my forehead.

"No chance." I'm unable to keep the wobble out of my voice as I try to dart past him and into the bathroom. But he's too quick and too strong. As he wraps his arms around me and the floor disappears underneath my feet, I immediately regret my decision.

He takes me over to the window, flipping me around to face the gardens below. With an aggressive hand, he tugs at the straps of my nightie, ripping it off my shoulders so the fabric pools around my waist. He pushes me up against the window, the cold glass against my nipples makes me gasp. His voice is low and syrup-like, designed for my ears only.

"See those men?" he purrs, his beard tickling the nape of my neck. With ragged breaths, I glance down at the henchmen patrolling the grounds. Cillian in the distance, trimming bushes. White, hot shame creeps over me. *If anyone one of them were to look up right now, they'd see me in all my glory.* "I asked a question."

I manage a nod; there's no air left in my lungs.

"If you don't do as your told, I'll fuck you right against this window, and all of my men will watch me take your virginity. Is that understood?"

An unwanted ripple of excitement makes the short journey from the pit of my stomach to between my legs. Lorcan pushes his hard body against my ass, and I stifle a groan when I feel the bulge at the front of his pants. "Yes," I breathe, choking on the thick, sweaty tension.

"Good girl," he purrs. There go my knees again. "I'll be back to collect you in fifteen minutes. Don't make me wait."

He pulls away, leaving me to slide down into the window seat in a panting mess.

I spend five of those precious fifteen minutes getting my breath back. *What the hell just happened?*

Whether I like it or not, my body reacts to Lorcan Quinn in ways that make me want to dig a very deep hole and jump inside. When he's around me, touching me, talking to me—I'm under some sort of sick, twisted spell. He does things to my body that my brain can't—or doesn't want to—understand. And then when I'm left alone again with nothing but a roomful of antiques and my own conscious, I come back to reality with a thump.

Lorcan Quinn is the Devil. And I'm *not* here with my own free will.

I can't look at myself in the bathroom mirror as I quickly shower, braid my hair and slip on a camisole dress. Sliding my hands over the thin fabric, I immediately change my mind. Too much breast, too much ass. The words *clients* and *collection* linger at the back of my mind like a bad dream. I *really* don't need to lean into that right now. Instead, I slip on a Ted Baker maxi dress. The floaty white fabric will keep me cool, but the long, puffy sleeves and Victorian collar cover almost every inch of flesh.

The lock rattles a few moments later, and Lorcan Quinn darkens the doorway once more. I step out of the dressing room, bunching the fabric around my thigh. I hate that I'm watching, waiting for a reaction. Like I'm seeking his goddamn approval.

His jaw sets as his eyes wash over the length of me. He moistens his lips, chest rising and falling quicker than normal. "Very good, China Doll," he murmurs.

I hate that I feel a burst of pride when I get that approval too.

He steps closer to the door frame, gesturing for me to lead the way. Ironic, considering that I have no idea where I'm going. In the lobby, he turns away from the security screen and drinks me in once more. I flinch as he reaches around to the tip of my braid, but he's surprisingly gentle when he pulls out my hairband. "Wear your hair loose," he says, transfixed on my eyes. "I like it loose."

I swallow whatever sarcastic retort is brewing in my chest. We walk through the grounds in silence, Lorcan leading the way. I learned long ago, when you say less, you observe more. As we pass the gardeners and henchmen, Lorcan's presence is unmistakable. Eyes lower, heads bow. Nervous energy can be felt from every person we pass.

I can't deny the power is alluring.

We round the corner and the manor comes into sight. This time, I'm not distracted by the bombshell of seeing Cillian here. Instead, I look up at it, in all of its glory, under the early morning sun, drinking in its grandeur.

It's like nothing I've ever seen. An imposing, multi-story building crafted from what can only be Bath stone. No other brick has that dusky yellow hue. Endless windows line each floor, sprawling and snaking away

from my line of sight. Like the building I've been put in, ivy snakes up the side of the building, like nature is trying to reclaim it for its own.

"It's been in the family since my great, great grandfather came over from Limerick." Lorcan's voice brings me back to reality. "Built it himself."

"It's beautiful," I mutter.

He offers a curt nod, revealing nothing. We follow the perimeter of the house, stopping when the endless windows give way to two white pillars, a large oak door and a set of stairs leading up to it. There's a man standing in front of it, hands in the pocket of his suit pants. I cup my hand to my eyes to get a better look. The first thing I notice is that he doesn't look away or fidget when Lorcan comes into sight.

He's not one of the henchmen.

"Keys," Lorcan grunts, taking the steps two at a time to meet him. The man's eyes narrow. As they glint in the sun, I realize they are the exact same color as Lorcan's.

Great, another Quinn. Let's hope he leans more towards Orna's personality instead of Lorcan's.

He shakes his head. "Not unless you pass a breathalyzer. The driver's bringing the X7 around."

Before I can digest what he means about a breathalyzer, he pins me with his glare. "Marcus Murphy's daughter."

It's not a question, and I don't answer.

But his words add to the itch somewhere in the corner of my brain. *Why does everyone give my father's name such weight?* First, the venom in Lorcan's eyes when he mentioned him. Then Cillian's off-handed comment in the rose garden.

His eyes are hard, cruel. I immediately take a disliking to him, and I'm not sure that it's only because he's clearly related to the Devil himself. He drags his attention back to him. "Need any men?"

"Fuck no," Lorcan says darkly. "I can handle myself."

A chill runs down my spine. I don't like the thought of where we're going, and why we'd need any 'men' to go there. The crunching of gravel in the distance makes me turn my head. I follow the noise and watch as a black SUV rolls up.

"Ready?" he asks, with a bored expression that shows he couldn't give a flying fuck if I was or not.

I guess I don't have a choice but to be ready.

Poppy

As the SUV snakes through the grounds and out of a large, wrought iron gate, something hits me like a ton of bricks. Something I hadn't considered when I woke up this morning to Lorcan Quinn asking—no, demanding—I get up and get dressed.

We're in Boston. My hometown. Of course, I already knew we were here, but it's the first time that I've put two and two together.

The shops and cafes and the neighborhoods pass by in a devastating blur of familiarity. We pass the playing fields my school used to hold Sports Day in. Then there is the hill with the fancy houses — I'd always rummage through their trash to find broken treasures. I worked so hard to leave this city behind, yet the man that chained me to it is sitting less than a foot away.

We drive into the Sumner tunnel, plunging us into sudden darkness. In the reflection of the car window, I can see Lorcan watching me.

“Who is he?” I ask.

“Who?”

“The man outside the house. You look alike.”

As we come out of the tunnel, Lorcan plucks the aviators from his top pocket and slides them up the bridge of his nose. “Antoin. My second in command.”

I nod. "He looks scary."

Jaw set, he turns to stare at me. "Scarier than me?"

An unwanted smile tugs at the corners of my mouth. "I don't think that's possible."

"Good," he grunts back.

We spend the rest of the ride in silence until we pull into the Theater District and come to a stop down an alley. On my side of the car, there's a steel gray door with two trash cans on either side. My heart sinks. I think it's pretty safe to assume that's where we're going.

"Keep your mouth shut and your smile pretty."

Suddenly, the partition rolls up, separating us and the driver. *Great. What's better than being in a car with Lorcan Quinn? Being alone in a car with Lorcan Quinn.*

"Look at me." Lorcan's voice is so quiet that it draws me to him immediately. There's something unusual clouding his face. Concern? No chance, I must be imagining it. "You're nervous."

The lump in my throat is too big to swallow. Maybe it's because he's showing something that *almost* resembles humility. "I... please, don't hurt me," I choke out. The tears prickle behind my eyes but I refuse to let them fall. My pathetic words are embarrassing enough.

I'm surprised by the deep scowl that dents his forehead. He searches my eyes with confusion, before softening his gaze. His hand reaches for my cheek, and I don't pull away. "I don't like you, Miss Murphy," he says, each word that leaves his lips is short and strangled. "But you're mine. And nobody gets to hurt what's mine. And if they do, I will do more than hurt them. Understood?" He stares with such an intensity I find myself nodding. The palm against my cheek feels almost reassuring.

A stray butterfly that didn't get the memo flutters in my stomach. I nod.

"Good," he says sourly, reaching past me to open the car door. "Get out. Oh, and Miss Murphy?" I turn to face him. The hardened expression is back. "Don't even think about running. I found you all the way in California, I'll find you on my own turf embarrassingly quickly."

I don't doubt it.

He steps out of the car and raps on the driver's window. He murmurs something, and I see the back of the driver's head nod in agreement.

Then, he comes around to my side of the car and tugs the door open.

Lorcan leads the way to the building, trying the door handle. He rap, tap, taps on the metal door with the irritation of a man that's never come across a locked door in his life. I watch him, setting his jaw, clenching and unclenching his fists. And when the door rattles and creaks open, he transforms into a completely different Devil.

A broad smile stretches across his hard face, without a trace of his cruel menace. "Mickey," he says, with a deep nod.

Mickey steps out from the shadows of the doorway. Stout, bald—late fifties would be my guess. Too many rings on his fingers, and too many chains around his neck. He cups his hand to his forehead to squint up at Lorcan.

"Mr. Quinn?" he clarifies, unable to hide the surprise from his voice. "I didn't expect—i-is everything okay?"

Lorcan claps a hand to the man's shoulder, causing him to stumble. "Everything's great, Mick," he purrs. "May we come in?"

Only now does Mickey realize there's a "we." He turns to drink me in and the confusion clouding his face melts into something else. An

expression that every woman has been the focus of at some point in their life. “And who is this beauty?” He leers.

Lorcan claps his hand against his shoulder again, this time, it’s deliberately hard. There’s a crack from one of his joints and it makes me wince. “Off limits,” he growls, bearing his teeth. “Let’s talk inside, shall we?”

We follow Mickey into the building. Lorcan stays close and places a firm hand on my hip. It burns with protectiveness. I don’t know whether it’s his way of reminding me of his promise that nothing bad will happen to me, or he’s reminding me of what will happen if I run.

Either way, as we emerge from the staff entrance of a seedy nightclub, I’m grateful for his presence.

Stripper poles on podiums, red velvet booths, and matching curtains leading to the unknown tell me everything I need to know about this place, and everything I need to know about Mickey.

There’s a lone woman leaning over the bar, and Lorcan’s eyes are immediately drawn to her. Denim cut-offs disappearing up her ass crack, huge tits attempting the Great Escape from the tiny triangles of her bikini top.

Jealousy prickles at my skin, and I mentally scold myself for being so pathetic. I have no doubt that men like Lorcan Quinn fuck everything with a pulse.

“Let’s go to your office,” Lorcan says, dragging his eyes off the stripper and nodding to a door off the side.

My sandals stick to the floor as we cross the club and enter a small office.

Mickey lets out a nervous laugh and sinks into the chair behind the desk. His finger hovers over a button on his telephone. “Drink?”

“We won’t be staying that long.”

Lorcan commands the space while I find the nearest corner to disappear into. The fear of the unknown is brewing in my stomach.

“So, what can I do for you, Mr. Quinn?”

“I’m here to ask you for a favor, Mickey.”

Mickey’s eyebrows shoot up in alarm. I guess nobody wants to do the Devil a favor. “Anything,” he says with an expression that betrays him.

“I’d like you to accept my apology for the confusion with the supply this week. There was an... *administrative* issue on our supplier’s end.”

Mickey scratches the scuff around his jaw and says, “W-well, yes. It’s been a hard weekend.”

Lorcan nods. “I understand. Unfortunately, we’ll have the same issue for a couple more weeks. Of course, we’ll be happy to compensate you.”

Mickey is all ears; it’s clear that money is a language he likes to talk. “Compensate?” he says with a gappy grin, eyes brushing over the emerald ring on Lorcan’s finger and the oversized watch on his wrist.

“We’ll take off five percent of our fees for the next four weeks.”

Mickey’s not quick enough at hiding the disappointment. “We lost half a mil in profits this weekend, Mr. Quinn,” he says, his carefully chosen words burning with anger. “I can’t speak for the other clubs and bars in the theater district, but a little more slack would go a long way.”

“I don’t negotiate.”

Lorcan’s tone is all ice and daggers; his looming body scarily still.

The standoff lasts for less than a beat; Mickey bows his head and clasps his hands together. “Of course, Mr. Quinn. Forgive me.”

“Talking of fees, I’m here to collect.”

If I wasn’t so observant, I wouldn’t see it. The way Mickey’s demeanor shifts. It’s less than a degree—his face remains neutral, his jaw still clenched. But I notice the whitening of his knuckles; the straightening of his back.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand to attention.

“Conor usually collects. I-I was expecting Conor today.”

“Yes, one of my henchmen. But instead, you have me. I wanted to deliver my apology in person. Problem?”

Lorcan’s words are more loaded than a gun.

“Of course not,” Mickey says, keeping his voice even. With slow, deliberate movements, he rises to his feet, takes the two steps to the safe against the back wall, and sinks to his knees to punch in a long passcode.

I feel more and more nauseous with every beep, whir and clink. Suffocated by the unknown. Mickey drags a duffel out of the safe and drops it onto the desk with a heavy thud. He drags open the zipper and takes away a few stacks of cash. “The five percent,” he says, glancing towards Lorcan, as if to double-check this deal is still good.

“Count it.”

Mickey falters and he says, “Oh, come on, Mr. Quinn. Conor never counts—”

“Not you.” Lorcan turns to my little corner of the office, eyes grazing mine. “You.”

I’m pinned to the chair by the sudden attention of both the men. My mouth flaps open and closes as quickly.

“You can count, right?” Lorcan challenges me.

The heat rises to my face, along with a prickle of annoyance. “Yes,” I say through gritted teeth. “But—”

“Then count,” he growls with a tone that immediately shifts the atmosphere in the room. In one, swift motion, he picks up the bag and dumps it on my lap. Then, he turns back to Mickey, a broad, menacing smile stretching over his lips. “How about that drink, then?”

Mickey fumbles on the buzzer, ordering something French-sounding on the rocks. The words pass right over my head. The only thing I can focus on is the stack of money weighing down my thighs and Lorcan’s intense, unwavering glare.

I pick up a bundle of hundred-dollar bills and begin to count. I’ve never held this much money in my life, but I’m not a *complete* stranger to counting cash. Running my restoration business in college, I had a handful of old-school collectors that’d prefer to pay in crisp Benjamin’s rather than bank transfer.

I snap the band off, passing each hundred dollar bill from one hand to the other, trying my hardest to do basic arithmetic under the weight of the thick tension swirling the room.

But as I thumb note after note, something seems off.

I pause, running a trembling finger over the edge of the bill.

I’m sure I’m right...

“Is there a problem?”

Lorcan’s ice-cold voice cuts through the suspense. Again, my mouth flaps open and closes.

“Shouldn’t be a problem,” Mickey says, but the breeziness in his tone is forced. “It’s all there. I counted it twice—”

“I wasn’t talking to you,” Lorcan growls, cutting him off. “Poppy,” he says, eyes glowering, “what’s the problem?”

I take in a lungful of thick air, knowing that I have mere seconds to assess the situation.

I hate Lorcan Quinn. I hate everything about him. He might look like a movie star but evil intentions trickle through his veins.

I owed him nothing but yet he took everything. I have nothing to give him, apart from two things:

My virginity, and the truth.

There’s a part of me that hopes if I give him the latter, he won’t take the former.

“The security thread should be on the left.”

Lorcan’s jaw sets. “Explain.”

I clear my throat. “On a hundred dollar bill, the security thread should be on the left of Franklin’s portrait. All of these bills... the thread is on the right,” I blurt out.

“Don’t be ridiculous, I—”

The way Lorcan slips the gun from his pocket, releases the safety catch and points it at Mickey’s head is eerily fast. He works with the skill of a man who could do this in his sleep. “Stop talking,” he growls out of the side of his mouth, his eyes still trained on me. “Are you saying the money is fake?”

“I—”

“It’s a yes or no answer, Miss Murphy.”

But the answer is stuck in my throat like a wad of cotton balls. I manage a nod.

“Fake! Of course it’s not fake!” Mickey erupts, slamming his palms against his desk and making me jump. Spittle flies from his lips. “I’d never *dream* of giving you fake money, Mr. Quinn. Do you really think I’d insult your intelligence—”

“Then prove it,” Lorcan snarls, nodding to the small, black machine on the corner of the desk. Without taking his aim off Mickey, he strides over and snatches the bundle of notes from my hand, peels one off and holds it up to the dim light. “Let’s run it through the counterfeit machine. If the light turns red, I’ll shoot you.” Then, he turns his glare back to me. “And if it goes green, I’ll shoot her.”

The blood rushes to my head, and if I wasn’t already sitting down, my legs would buckle underneath me. Before I can work up the words to protest, he slides the note through the machine.

In the nineteen years I’ve been alive, I’ve learned to trust my gut. I know what’s coming. I squeeze my eyes shut, bringing my knees up and my arms over my head, blocking out the office.

What you can’t see can’t hurt you. What you can’t see can’t hurt you. What you can’t see can’t hurt you.

A whir.

An alarm.

A gunshot.

A scream.

It comes from me. Ripping from my throat and piercing through the gap in my thighs. Strong hands grab my shoulders, but somehow I manage to slip from underneath them, running towards the door on buckling legs. I ignore the horrified-looking stripper frozen by the bar and focus on unsticking my feet from the floor, one at a time, as I stumble to the door we

entered through. I'm plunged into darkness, fumbling through the corridor, the horror of what I just witnessed clutching at my throat.

Footsteps behind me. "Poppy," a calm voice echoes down the corridor. I hate how out of place it is. *How can you be so calm after you shoot a man dead?!* But the horror clutching at my throat won't let me ask the question.

I fumble along the brickwork, slamming into the walls because I'm so unsteady on my feet.

It takes no time at all for those heavy footsteps to catch up with me.

I can't see Lorcan Quinn, but I can feel him. He throws his body against mine, wrapping his arm over mine. I struggle like a fish out of water, my throat burning from my screams, until I tire myself out. My legs finally give way, like they've threatened to do since the gunshot rang in my ears.

The Devil doesn't let me fall.

"Shh," he murmurs in my ear, pulling me closer into his chest. "It's okay. You're okay."

I'm gasping for a breath that I can't quite catch. "You're a monster," I croak with whatever energy I have left. "You're pure evil."

My words bounce off his hard body without even making a dent. His arms are relentless, refusing to let me go. "You're okay, Poppy. You're safe with me. I promised you that, remember?" His voice hardens. "But we need to go."

I trip over my own feet as Lorcan pulls me further down the corridor and into the alley. The car is waiting, and Lorcan folds me into it without another word.

Familiar buildings pass by in a blur of tears and numbness, until we eventually slow to meet the iron gates of the Devil's lair.

Lorcan spends the journey in silence, and I can't even glance in his direction. The only sound cutting through the tension is the constant tap, tap, tapping of his cell phone.

Only when the driver comes to a stop outside the stone steps of the manor does he turn to me. "What do I have to do to stop your crying?" he says blankly. It's so black and white for him. With every cold word that comes from his lips, he separates himself more and more from humanity. Out the window, I see Orna running down the steps of the manor towards the car, eyes wide in panic.

"You can leave me the fuck alone," I croak, flinging myself out of the car, brushing past Orna and into the thick of the gardens.

The one small mercy is that the Devil doesn't follow me.

Lorcan

“What the hell have you *done*?”

I don't have to break my staring contest with the museum exterior to know that Orna has burst into my office.

“Get out of here, Orna,” I growl, swigging the last drop of whiskey in my tumbler. It burns my throat in that familiar wave of pleasure and pain. “Mind your fucking business.”

In the reflection of the window, I see two more figures darken my doorway. A growl rumbles somewhere deep in my chest. I don't need to see anyone right now, not Orna, not Donnacha, and especially not Antoin. All I need to do is drown my problems in whiskey and wish I wasn't fucking alive.

“What happened?” Antoin says tightly.

News spreads like wildfire in this goddamn family.

“I shot Mickey,” I say, turning to pin him with a glare that says: *and don't you fucking question it.*

Donnacha lets out a low whistle, followed by a chuckle. He flops down into an armchair and thumps his heavy legs on the side of my desk. Typical Don. So laid back.

Antoin, on the other hand, his jaw starts ticking. Tick, tick, tick in time with the English grandfather clock above my fireplace. His fists clench and

unclench. Then, he rolls his shoulders back, cricks his neck and returns to cool.

He has the restraint of my father. A Quinn trait that I was never dealt.

“Why?” he asks calmly.

“Because the money he tried to give us was faker than your favorite hooker’s tits.”

Donnacha roars with laughter, slapping his thigh. Then he grabs the whiskey from my desk and swigs straight from the bottle. “I knew he was a slimy cunt. I woulda popped him years ago if you’d let me.”

Antoin swallows, ignoring his brother, and turns his attention to Orna. “Could you leave us for a moment, sis?”

Orna’s scowl burns into the side of my head. “With pleasure,” she drawls, making sure her exit is known with the heavy slam of my door.

“Well, then. You did the right thing.”

I throw him a warning look over my freshly filled glass. “I don’t need you to tell me that.”

He clasps his hands together and says, “next, we need to figure out whether this was a one-off, perhaps in revenge for leaving his joint dry all weekend, or if he’s been doing this shit for a while. I’ll check the cash and have a word with Conor.”

“Yeah,” Donnacha says, rising to his feet and slamming the bottle back on the desk. I’m in no mood to give him a history lesson about its precious origins. And even if I was, Donnacha wouldn’t give a flying fuck. “And I’ll get my men on the clean-up.”

I nod. There’s no denying they are good right-hand men. They’ll both get their hands dirty in different ways when all I want to do is wallow in my own shit. “And let all the other businesses know what happened. I want to

send a message that even though my father is no longer with us, the Quinns are not to be fucked with. You can go now.”

I turn away from them both, staring back at the museum through the window.

I don't give a fuck about Mickey. I did what needed to be done, and I'd do it again in a heartbeat.

But something is stirring in my chest, interfering with the cocktail of numbness and anger that I've been drowning in for the last four years.

Guilt.

I down the rest of my drink. *I must be fucking drunk.*

But every time I blink I see Poppy's face behind my goddamn eyelids. The sheer terror in those big emerald eyes, the quiver on her plump lips. How her soft body trembled in my arms.

I don't even realize Antoin's still here until his shoulder brushes mine as he joins me at the window.

“Was she there?”

I offer nothing but a curt nod. It's enough.

“Don't do it.”

“Do what?”

My cousin turns to face me, eyes boring into mine. “Fall for her,” he says carefully, taking the tumbler from my fist. “Because falling in love with Marcus Murphy's daughter is nothing but bad news.”

Lorcan

I swallow my pride and knock.

“Come in.”

Poppy’s in her usual position, curled up on the window seat. Her expectant gaze darkens the second I creak open the door.

“I thought you were Orna,” she hisses. She clutches a pillow to her stomach and turns away from me.

I take three strides towards her and her scent hits me immediately. She must have just taken a shower or a bath. Her vanilla perfume and mix of whatever floral shit she smothers over her body and hair create an alluring cocktail that my dick instantly reacts to.

Fuck me, you could bottle this shit and trap a million men.

“I’m taking you to dinner.”

She scoffs. “Not a goddamn chance.”

The anger rises up to my chest, but I just about manage to keep it there. “You know that’s not a question,” I say evenly.

Only now does she turn to face me. “It should be. Because I’m not a dog you can bark at. If it’s not a question, then you won’t get an answer.”

A growl rumbles deep behind my rib cage. Poppy hears it and draws her eyes back to mine. “I’m not afraid of you,” she says simply. “Not anymore.”

I've already looked death in the eyes today. You were one green light away from putting a bullet in my head."

I grab her by the waist, lifting her from the window seat with such ease that she lets out a gasp, and pull her against my body. My dick instantly stiffens at the warmth of her chest radiating against her thin T-shirt.

She feels like comfort.

Wrapping one arm around her hips, I cup her face with the other. "Look at me," I say, biting back the urge to shout. Her wide eyes draw back up to mine and her lips part. Goddammit. I just want to crush my face against hers and claim her.

But I want her to want it too.

"I was never going to kill you, Poppy. I trusted that you were telling the truth. I'm..." the word is stuck in the back of my throat like a fucking fur ball. "Sorry." It takes like poison and weakness, and I need a drink to wash it down. "Scaring you wasn't my intention. Now, join me for dinner."

"Ask me." I raise an eyebrow. "Ask me to dinner, Lorcan. It should be a question, not a command."

I draw in a deep breath and reset my jaw. "Will you *please* come to dinner with me?" I bite.

Another "please" I have to choke out, but the way her face softens I know it was worth looking like a pussy for this moment.

"Fine," she says, her tone lower this time. Am I imagining that her back muscles have relaxed against my forearm? That she's pushing herself against me? "But I'm going like this. In my sweats."

She makes a gesture towards her damp hair pulled back into a braid and her gray track pants, like her joining me for dinner in her loungewear is some kind of threat.

“I couldn’t give a flying fuck what you wear. Someone will collect you in fifteen minutes.”

Poppy

When the door locks behind Lorcan and I hear his heavy footsteps descending the stairs, I sprint into the bathroom and face myself in the mirror.

My act of defiance is joining him for dinner in an outfit that's one step up from pajamas, but it doesn't hurt to put a little bit of concealer over my puffy undereyes. And maybe I'll dry my hair. Even run a little serum through it, perhaps.

I lock eyes with myself as I finger the false eyelashes in my new makeup bag. *Get a goddamn grip*, I say telepathically to my reflection.

There was a kidnapping case a few years ago that made the rounds in the news. Angie Baker, she was called. A girl around my age, walking home from her shift at a cafe when a van pulled up to the sidewalk and bundled her inside. I was obsessed for a little while because the fear of being kidnapped has always rightfully lingered over me. I watched every news segment, where stern-looking police officers would stand outside the station in front of a bunch of microphones and flashing cameras to appeal for witnesses. I remember her family sobbing on a talk show, staring down the camera lens, and begging their daughter to come home. I forgot about it entirely until six months later she reappeared as easily as she disappeared. She was healthy, a smile on her face as she waved to the press walking into

the police station. She refused to give the name of her kidnapper, stating that he wasn't a bad person.

Stockholm Syndrome, the newspapers called it. When you come to like your kidnapper.

I think about how my lungs caved inwards as Lorcan pulled me from the window seat and pressed his hard body against mine. How I involuntarily melted as the hand he used to kill a man just hours earlier grazed against my cheek. And now, here I am, goddamn mascara wand in my hand, ready to paint my face to go to dinner with this monster.

Even against the backdrop of constant fear, the sound of gunshots ringing in my ears, I'm on the verge of having Stockholm Syndrome.

I'm just too weak to fight the feelings right now.

A housekeeper I don't recognize comes and collects me a few moments later. She has the same thick curls as Orna and the hallmark amber eyes. She's uncomfortable as she guides me through the gardens, making small talk about the balmy weather and commenting on how much she likes my hair. I can see the visible relief on her face as we pass through a side door into the main manor and she points to the end of the corridor. "The dining room is right there," she smiles at me.

She has the same pitiful expression as Orna too.

As she clicks the door shut behind me, my eyes are instantly drawn to the ceiling of the hallway. It's painted with the intricacy of the Sistine Chapel, with pastel cherubs and men in flowing robes smiling down at me. Several gold chandeliers light my path to the dining room, and as I pass under their crystal ornaments, I'm overwhelmed with how palatial everything is. It triggers something deep inside me—my passion for antiques. If this

wasn't the Devil's lair, I'd love nothing more than to comb each section of this house, looking at every relic and keepsake, drinking in all the history.

But dinner with the Devil awaits.

I turn into the doorway of the dining room, and it's as extravagant as I expected. The same painted ceilings of the corridor carry on into the cavernous room. Underneath them sits a sprawling dining table, upholstered chairs lining each side. The beauty of the dining setup takes my breath away. Dozens of flickering candles perched atop candelabras create a warm glow over the textured wallpaper and oak cabinets.

At the head of the table, Lorcan is leaning back in a chair, watching me.

"You came."

"I doubt I had a choice."

Is that a smile tugging at his lips? I scan the table and feel like I'm back in the school dining hall, looking for somewhere to sit. My eyes settle on the chair on the complete opposite end of the table. "Don't even think about it," he drawls, dragging out the chair next to him and patting the overstuffed seat cushion. "Sit."

Holding my tongue, I take the seat. Lorcan's eyes burn into the side of my head. Eventually, the magnetic force of his gaze is too overpowering, and I drag my eyes up to his face.

I hate how breathtakingly handsome he is. The soft lighting from the million candles flickers against the hard lines of his face, making him look almost human. But there's no denying the otherworldly presence that he has. Good or bad. His suit fits him like second skin, and I realize that I've never seen him in anything else.

Suddenly, I feel embarrassingly underdressed.

A woman that looks like Orna puts a plate in front of me—an elaborate prawn cocktail dish, deconstructed across a marble plate like a piece of art. I'm thinking too hard about how the hell I'm going to eat it when Lorcan's voice stabs the thick air.

“How did you know the money was fake?”

His eyes search mine, curiosity brewing behind them.

Straight to the point, I see.

I offer my most nonchalant shrug as if I spot counterfeit money in strip joints for a mafia boss every day. “I created the props for the theater productions in high school. One year, the production was *Guys and Dolls*.” I can't help but smile at the ridiculousness of it now. “Lots of fake money to be made. I wanted it to look as real as possible, so I read up on counterfeits. Once you know what you're looking for, it's pretty easy to spot fake bills.”

He watches me for a beat, then laughs. Yes, the Devil just laughed. A delicious throaty laugh that throws him back in his chair. A wave of unwanted pleasure washes over me.

“So, you're good with your hands?” he asks. The way his eyes twinkle tells me it's a loaded question.

“I'm good at restoration,” I say, stabbing a prawn with my fork.

“Restoration?”

“Antiques,” I mumble. “I've done it for years.”

He cocks his head, watching me cram another prawn into my mouth.
Damn, this is delicious.

Surprise laces his voice. “You're interested in antiques?”

I nod.

“Then why didn't you say?”

“Say when? Before you kidnapped me or after you held a gun to my head?”

There’s that damn laugh again. “You must love the Museum, then.”

The snort that escapes my lips is unladylike. I dab my mouth with a napkin, mostly to hide my mortified face. Then I compose myself and say, “No, I hate the Museum. It’s overcrowded and dusty and I’m stuck in it for twenty-four hours a day.”

Silence fills the air, broken only by the scraping of my fork against the plate.

“When did you start restoring things?”

“When you decided to claim me.”

The truth slips from my mouth like butter on a warm day. Lorcan fingers the rim of his whiskey glass, then leans in, closing the gap between us. “Why?”

Heat rises to my cheeks; for once it’s not because I’m embarrassed but because I’m annoyed at his naivety.

“To make as much money as I possibly could. To get the hell out of Boston. To *escape you*.”

He regards me now with sheer fascination. “And how did that work out for you?”

“How do you think?”

A small chuckle this time, before reclining in his seat, framing me with a gaze.

“So, Stanford.”

My fork clatters against the plate. “Are you trying to write my autobiography?”

“No, I’m trying to get to know you. Stanford. Why?”

“They have the best business school in the country. I loved restoring antiques, but I loved the money it made me too,” I say truthfully.

“That’s an incredible achievement.”

Our eyes lock. He seems like he means it. Suddenly, my heart is too heavy and plummets into the depths of my stomach. I’ve spent the last week focusing on the present, trying my best to forget about the past and not think about the future. Yes, getting into Stanford *was* an incredible achievement. It was an opportunity of a lifetime, and now the Devil, in all his glory, has taken that from me.

“Your father must be so proud,” he says, each word coming from his mouth slow and deliberate. He’s watching me, assessing me, for my reaction.

“I wouldn’t know,” I say through gritted teeth. It’s crazy how much anger bubbles in my gut the second my father pops into my head. “I don’t speak to him.”

Lorcan’s drink doesn’t make it to his lips. He frowns over his glass. “You don’t speak to your father?”

“No,” I all but hiss. “I haven’t spoken to him since the day he let you stake your claim on me.”

It’s my turn to study him, and it’s fascinating watching the Devil unravel. His perma-scowl slips from his brow, only long enough for me to see the pure shock underneath. He slowly returns his drink to the table, without ever having taken a sip.

I feel something. A shift in the room. One that might give me an edge.

Maybe this is my way out.

“My father doesn’t care that I’m here, Lorcan. My father probably doesn’t even *know*.” My hands are sweaty as I roll the silk napkin between

my thumb and forefinger. “Taking me was a way to get back at him, but it hasn’t worked.” Lorcan’s staring at a spot above my head. I’m not sure he’s even listening. The panic rises in my throat like I can see the countdown clock on a bomb. It only has seconds until it explodes, and I have to do everything I can to stop that from happening. “He doesn’t *care*, Lorcan,” I all but squeal. “My father doesn’t care! I’m not part of this world. There’s no reason to keep me. *Please*. Just let me go. Let me—”

The Devil is quick to cut me off, sliding his hand around my neck, moving my hair to expose my throat to him. The sudden move knocks all the desperate air from my lungs.

His lips slide over my throat, leaving a trail of goosebumps. They glide over the throbbing vein in my neck, up to the curve of my chin, and settle below my ear. “Fuck your father, Miss Murphy,” he drawls. My eyes squeeze shut. “Because this isn’t about your father anymore, it’s about you. *You*. You’re mine. My sweet, rare, China Doll. I collect things, and you’re one of my things now. I’ll let you know when I’m ready to let you go. When I’m *done* with you.”

His whiskey breath against my ear lobe. His warm, strong hand stroking the base of my neck. It sends an electric shock through my nervous system, and I have to stifle the moan. Stifle the feeling of lust building up inside of me.

Godfuckingdammit, Devil. Have me. Have your wicked way with me and let me go.

But my body can’t overtake that little niggling feeling in my mind.

I don’t know where the strength comes from. “Let me go,” I croak.

I’m suspended somewhere between pleasure and terror for a few moments longer before he unwinds himself from me. I rip myself away and

run from the dining room, without looking back.

Lorcan

I wash down Poppy's revelation with another swig of whiskey. But even the burning sensation as it slides down my throat doesn't take the edge off the shock.

Poppy doesn't have a relationship with Marcus Murphy.

Marcus Murphy doesn't know that his daughter is here.

In my head, it was obvious. Marcus Murphy would find out I had his daughter when she stopped replying to his texts. Stopped FaceTiming him every Sunday to give him updates about college life.

It explains why he hasn't come.

I have a lot of emotions toward Poppy right now, but the whiskey haze is making it hard to make sense of them.

Admiration. She took herself from a slum kid with a pathetic lackey for a father to the best business school in the country. There's clearly more to her than a beautiful face and a razor-sharp tongue.

And anger. It's not directed at Poppy though. It's directed towards Marcus Murphy himself. It's fresh and raw, not the pent-up shit I've been stewing on for years.

When he stepped aside and let me stake a claim on his daughter at the fake funeral, I always thought it was because he had a plan. His revenge would come, but he'd serve it ice cold. That's what Murphy always did.

But he didn't. He let that precious, rare China Doll slip through his fingers and into my fists without so much of a protest.

A snarl rumbles behind my rib cage. Just when I thought I couldn't hate that bastard anymore.

There are voices somewhere down the hall, hushed but serious. Footsteps grow louder, faster. A smile pulls at the corners of my mouth. This must be Poppy coming back because she can't find a housekeeper to let her into the Museum.

I set down my drink and straighten my back, turning to the doorway expectantly.

I don't even bother to hide my annoyance when Eileen, my secretary, appears. As always, her face is hardened with frustration and crinkled from years of being a miserable old bitch. "Do you ever answer your cell?" she barks, clutching at her chest.

I raise an eyebrow. "I know you're not talking to me like that, Eileen," I snap.

A few deep breaths and she just about manages to control herself. "My apologies, Mr. Quinn," she says in a tone that is anything but sorry. "But it's an emergency. Your presence is needed at the office, *now*. Everyone is there."

The hairs on my neck stand to attention. "Everyone?"

"Antoin and all of your other cousins. The car is waiting for you out front."

Twenty minutes later, I'm stepping out of the elevator and into my penthouse office of the Quinn Ventures sky-rise building in downtown Boston.

A sea of suits around my boardroom table. All my first cousins. They all turn to me at the sound of the elevator ding, amber eyes burning. Antoin leaps to his feet. “Where the fuck have you been?” he growls, slamming a hand against my oak table. “We’ve been calling you for an hour.”

“Chill out, man,” Donnacha growls next to him.

Whatever the emergency, I need to stamp this shit out right away. He isn’t going to talk to me like that, especially not in front of my cousins. Three strides and I’m in his face. “Don’t ever talk to me like that again,” I hiss, matching his furious expression.

Like two lions standing off in the Serengeti. He’s the first to back down. Obviously.

He sinks back down to his seat and straightens his tie. “We have a problem.”

“No shit,” I snarl, “I wouldn’t be here if there wasn’t. What’s going on?”

I don’t notice the brown envelope in the middle of the table until Donnacha slides it in my direction. I rip open the flap and tug out the single Polaroid photo.

Amber eyes stare up at me. They are glassy. No Quinn fire behind them. I scan the rest of the body, taking in the bullet wound in the forehead, the broken limbs splayed across the concrete.

Ian.

“Fuck,” I growl, slamming the photo back on the table and dragging a knuckle through my beard. “Who did this?”

I stomp over to the floor-to-ceiling windows that offer a panoramic view of the city below.

My city.

Ian, my second cousin, and one of my henchmen, dead. I taught the kid how to drive. I bought him his first goddamn hooker on a summer trip to Paris.

“What happened?” I manage, eyes never leaving the twinkling lights of the city below. “Revenge for me killing that Bratnov kid,” Donnacha growls, face dark.

My jaw clenches. “How sure are we?”

“This was tucked into his top pocket.”

Donnacha pulls out an orange and black ribbon, tossing it on the table. Small, striped, made of silk.

It’s the Ribbon of St. George. A Russian symbol of fire and gunpowder.

The Bratnov’s symbol of war.

“War is coming, Lorcan,” Antoin says quietly.

Hot tension swirls between the table, along with the thick silence.

“I welcome the war.” I crack my knuckles and scan the faces of my first cousins. Men I grew up with, men who will fight with me to the death.

They are still, unwavering.

“It doesn’t make sense,” Antoin says, scrubbing at the scruff on his jaw. “They will risk losing the treaty because of one trigger-happy kid?”

Donnacha crosses his arms and says, “No. They saw how the Delfinos blew our family apart with one parcel bomb. Bratnov sees us as weaker now, and they want to finish what the Italian’s started.” He refuses to buckle under my stare. “Perhaps they forgot how quickly we massacred the Delfinos.”

Antoin chimes in. “They will be expecting a massacre. We need to think differently.”

“We’ll kill them all,” I roar, slamming my hand against the table. “Every single Bratnov—we’ll squeeze the life out of every single one with our own bare hands.”

“I’m with you on that one,” Donnacha says.

“Please,” Antoin interjects, eerily calm. His eyes meet mine and they plead with me. “Lorc, I’m begging you. We need a plan. For once, we need to think with our heads and not with our trigger fingers. Otherwise, it won’t just be Bratnov blood that’s shed. It’ll be Quinn blood too.”

I look around the table, locking eyes with each of my men. One by one, they give a slight nod of agreement.

The anger relents a fraction. “Then let’s get planning.”

My men jump up into action, pulling out cell phones and opening cabinet drawers, creating a tornado around me.

I sit with my whiskey glass in the eye of the storm.

Bloodshed is the consequence of war. And it’s crazy, sick, and twisted where my poisoned brain goes.

It goes to protecting Poppy from it all.

Poppy

Orna heard about my explosive dinner with Lorcan from her sister who escorted me back to the museum sobbing. Before I woke up this morning, she'd slipped into my room and left a kettle and a box of teabags by the door, along with a note that said, "In Ireland, tea is the solution to every problem."

I bring the cup of tea to my lips as I settle into my usual morning spot, the window seat. The sprawling grounds look a little different today, though. Busier. The men that guard the perimeters have doubled, and when I craned my neck to look to the left of the Museum, I could make out the tops of military-style trucks coming into the grounds.

What on earth is going on? Even from my ivory tower, I can feel something brewing in the air. Hopefully, something that helps me escape.

There's a timid knock on the door. One that definitely can't belong to the hands of that monster.

"Come in," I say. Orna appears with a tray of pastries and a wide grin.

"You like it?" she asks, nodding to the kettle on the bedside table.

"I love it," I gush, truly thankful for anything that breaks the monotony of my daily routine.. "Thank you so much."

"I have more good news today" she chirps, striding over to fluff up the bed pillows.

My heart surges. “I’m going to be free?”

“Not that good, I’m afraid. But Lorcan is going to be tied up at the office for a few days. He said you’re allowed out into the garden for two hours every day. You can also eat dinner with me in the main house.” She claps her hands together. “Great, right?”

I hate that I feel excited at the idea of an inch of freedom, no matter if it’s a false reality. But I also hate that I feel mildly disappointed that I won’t be seeing Lorcan for a few days.

Orna lowers her voice. “You won’t need a chaperone, either.”

Now, I really do feel excited. The possibility of escaping has increased drastically. “Really? I can just... be on my own?”

She winces and glances out the window. “Well... security has picked up quite a bit here, as you might be able to tell. There’s a whole army descending on the estate. And guess who has to feed and house them all?” she grumbles. “Anyway, I guess Lorcan didn’t see the point of needing a chaperone now.”

I follow her gaze. “What’s going on, anyway?”

“Who knows,” she replies, tone laced with bitterness. “Us women just change the sheets and wash the dishes.”

Now, I turn my attention back to her. “Would you want to be involved though?” I ask, gesturing down at the solemn-looking man in an all-black uniform, AK-47 across his chest. “In all of this?”

“There’s more to the Quinn family than being a seedy mob, you know?”

“No, I didn’t know. All I keep hearing is scary Russians and cocaine supply.”

“Yeah, that’s part of it. But Quinn Venture Capital is pretty legit. It’s our—well, I guess, their—investment company. It injects cash into a lot of the

local businesses.”

My mind immediately goes to Mickey’s strip club, with its oiled-up stripper poles and sticky floors. And then to Mickey himself handing over a bag of fake cash and ending up dead a few moments later. I guess the whole exchange makes more sense now—but I wouldn’t exactly call it legit.

“Anyway,” Orna says, slicing through my thoughts with a sweep of a hand. “What do I know? I’m nothing but a stupid woman.”

Annoyance prickles at my skin. “Don’t call yourself that, Orna. You’re not stupid, you just haven’t had a formal education. There’s a big difference. I bet you’d pick up any skill you like in a heartbeat.”

She flashes me a warm smile on her way out, stopping by the door. She twirls the key between her thumb and finger and says, “You know, I think we’d be friends if we hadn’t met in such unusual circumstances.” She lowers her gaze and slips out, locking me in the tower behind her.

A pang of emotion stabs at my chest. She’s right. I don’t have many friends apart from Nellie, but if I met Orna at Stanford, I know we’d be close.

I chow down a couple of melt-in-your-mouth croissants before showering and slipping on a pair of linen pants and an off-the-shoulder blouse. When Orna comes back half an hour later, I have a book tucked under my arm and the sunglasses she bought me balancing on my head. She takes me in with a grin, before leading me down to the lobby and cracking open the steel door for me. Sunlight floods my face, smelling like warm freedom. “Enjoy,” she says over her shoulder as she makes her way back to the house. “I’ll come and get you when lunch is ready.”

I slip off my sandals and let the damp morning grass tickle my toes. The sun warms my back as I stroll through the grounds, even flashing a small

smile at gardeners and the new security guards.

Despite the extra protection around the grounds, I feel almost light, and I can't put my finger on why.

Then the memory of Lorcan's mouth burning against my throat floods into my brain. Suddenly it's too hot out here, the grass is itchy and the hedges towering from every angle are suffocating.

The reason I felt lighter, almost human, was because the Devil isn't here sucking the life out of me.

The realization brings me back down to earth with a thump.

What the fuck are you playing at? Trying to find a nice spot in the sun to read Little Women for the fourth time this week?

I need to use this time to figure out how the hell I'll get out of here.

My shoulders straighten and I slip my sunglasses onto my face to hide my panic. It's hard to walk around the grounds like I'm simply enjoying the view, every security guard has their heavy gaze clamped on me as I pass.

But I know who I'm looking for. And I'm praying he has his clippers with him today instead of a bulletproof vest.

The relief washes over me as I find Cillian crouching down in a shadowy corner, tending to a patch of hydrangeas.

"Rose garden," I mutter out the side of my mouth as I pass. I loop around the grounds and dip down the narrow path that leads up to the gate.

I can only hope that he heard me.

I'm antsy, sitting on the bench, bending back the cover of the book in my sweaty hands. Just when I thought he definitely hadn't heard and I get up to leave, I hear the creak of the gate.

Cillian appears between two rose bushes and mops his brow with the hem of his T-shirt. I take a peek at the toned, brown skin underneath, before

averting my gaze.

“I can’t stay long,” he says.

“So, I’ll get right to it,” I gabble, closing the gap between us. It’s crazy how I’ve only met him once, exchanged less than a hundred words in our entire lifetime, but he feels like a piece of normality. “What’s your escape plan?”

He frowns, casting a suspicious eye over my desperate face. “I don’t have one.”

“You do,” I say, reaching out to grab his arm. “I know you do. You said it last time, remember?”

His eyes narrow. “No, I don’t.”

The desperation claws at my throat now. Cillian is a tiny, silver lining surrounding my enormous dark cloud. He’s a beacon of hope, but it’s looking like it’s nothing but a mirage.

My throat is dry. “We’re in the same boat, Cillian. *Please.*”

I reach out to grab his arm but he steps back to avoid my clammy fingertips. “We’re not in this together, Poppy.” His demeanor has never been kind, but he hardens from stone into carbon. The wall he puts up creates a bigger divide between us, even though he’s only a few inches away. “I can’t trust Marcus Murphy’s daughter, that’s for sure.”

The words spit from his lips with enough venom to stupefy me.

Marcus Murphy’s daughter.

I’ve heard this so many times now that it feels like a dirty slur. I think back to the day of the fake funeral, to Lorcan Quinn, standing behind the pulpit in all of his cruel glory, announcing to the small, unwilling congregation that Marcus Murphy signed for the package that contained the bomb that would kill his family.

An idiotic mistake from a bottom-of-the-barrel lackey. A mistake for which I took the punishment. But every time my father's name graces Lorcan's tongue, it's accompanied by sheer hatred. And now Cillian has that look too.

"My father isn't who I thought he is, is he?" I stammer.

His mouth hardens into a tight line. "It's not my place or my passion to walk you through your family tree, Murphy," he says, before spitting onto the stone slabs by my feet. "I'm trying to do my time and get out. Stay away from me—you're bad news, just like your father."

Cillian stalks down the path and out of the gate, taking my last fraction of hope with him.

I sink down onto one of the benches, the weight of his words too heavy to carry. A sob comes deep from my chest, and I try my best to stop it from materializing.

Left on my own again. Like I've always been.

Think, you silly girl, I beg my brain, racking it for a plan B.

Then they come to me: his words, fully formed.

I collect things. And when I'm done with them, I discard them.

When I'm no longer of any use to him, he'll let me go. When he gets what he wants from me.

A hard lump forms in my throat.

I know exactly what he wants.

Rising to my feet, the sun feels warm on my face once more. It's decided. As I walk the path out of the rose garden, I feel a little lighter in the mind but heavier in my heart.

My virginity is a high price to pay, but my freedom is priceless.

Lorcan

My eyes flick between the pliers resting in the open drawer of my desk and the industrial padlock on the drink's cabinet on the other side of the room. A few specks of rusting blood on the jaws remind me that these pliers are usually used for breaking fingers, not padlocks.

I promised Antoin I'd keep my head straight while we come up with a plan, which means not getting black-out drunk. He had Eileen lock up my liquor and now I feel like the fat kid whose mom has to lock up the treats in a cupboard. But I'm tweaking like a crackhead, fingers itching towards my torture tool to smash it the fuck open.

I don't like having a clear mind. Because when I do, all I can think about is her.

For want of a distraction, I rise to my feet and stride across the office to the window. The sun's rising on my city, and directly below, my men are guarding the front door to the building. We've doubled down on security while we get our game plan straight. But how can I think of winning a goddamn war when all I think about is Murphy's daughter.

A growl rumbles deep in my chest, my eyes flicking instinctively to the cabinet.

I'm too erratic for plans, always have been. They come and go, passing through like a bad smell on a breezy day.

I'll blow up the Bratnovs and make an example out of them. No, I'll plan a sneak attack.

I'll claim Poppy's innocence the second I lay my hands on her. No, I'll wait and savor every second.

There was one plan I had that lingered around longer than most.

Telling Poppy who her father really is.

I've been looking forward to it since the day she sliced my cheek open like a pack of deli meat. It was the reason I didn't crush every bone in her body; I was going to crush something even better—her heart.

There wasn't a doubt in my mind that Marcus Murphy would come looking for his daughter, which was when I'd tell her who her father really is.

But he never came.

He's crueler than I thought.

There's no liquor haze to dumb the cocktail of anger and guilt swirling in my veins. It's all-consuming, eating me up.

If I can't turn to the bottle, I'll have to turn to the man himself.

* * *

I see him arrive. A small, fat speck of a man rolling up outside the building in a beat-up Civic. A snarl quivers on my lips as I watch him spread his arms and legs, allowing my men to pat him down.

When he disappears into the building, the wait is on. I pace the carpet, up, down, up, down. Waiting to hear the elevator ding, for Eileen to buzz my phone and let me know that my visitor has arrived.

My eyes fall on the pliers in my top drawer. Depending on how this plays out, there's a high chance I'm going to be using them for their intended use, snapping fingers.

When Marcus Murphy emerges in the doorway of my office, my heart races with hatred. It's ingrained into every fiber of my being and has been since my early twenties. It takes every inch of self-restraint not to slam his goddamn head against my oak desk and chuck him out of my window in a body bag.

"Mr. Quinn," he says solemnly, lowering his eyes to the carpet and clutching his hat to his chest. His suit barely fits him; too long on the arms and legs, too tight around his bulging stomach. "When your office called, I came right away."

"You want a medal for timekeeping?" I stab in the direction of the chair opposite. "Sit."

He does as he's told.

"I haven't been in this office in years," he says quietly, scanning the room.

I want to claw his eyeballs out to stop him from looking. Instead, I decide to get right to the point; the quicker we get this over with, the quicker he'll be out of my sight.

"I have your daughter."

I pin him with an unwavering stare. Watching, waiting. His jaw clenches, unclenches. He blinks.

"And I hope that you're treating her well."

I rest my weight against my palms on my desk, casting a dark shadow over him. "She's a tight little fuck with a mouth I enjoy shoving my cock in. Perhaps you'll be interested to know, she calls me 'daddy' now."

Another blink, another muscle twitch. Then nothing. He matches my stare with those emerald eyes. The only thing he and his daughter have in common.

“I got what I deserve,” he says quietly, “I’m just thankful that you kept us both alive, sir.”

The rage washes over me like a tsunami, my fist thumps down on the desk. “Show your true colors, Murphy,” I snarl like a rabid dog, “My father might have bought this down-and-out act, but I never have.”

He pauses, biting his lip, before he asks, “Does she know?”

Marcus Goddamn Murphy. A walking betrayal.

His story reads like a twisted fairy tale. Once upon a time, Marcus Murphy stood shoulder to shoulder with my father. They were best friends, business partners, ruling the streets of Boston together. My father had the business ideas, Murphy had the iron fist that enforced them. We weren’t the Quinns, we were the Quinn-Murphys. The most feared mob family on the East Coast.

But Murphy was a greedy little cunt. The East Coast wasn’t enough for him, and he was sick of living in my father’s shadow.

I was just young, dumb, and twenty-one when it happened. When he called in a favor from the O’Sullivan family on the West Coast. He promised them if they helped him overthrow the Quinns, they’d work together to take over every piece of land between New York and Los Angeles.

But Murphy wasn’t a businessman, he was a brute. And when the O’Sullivan’s stormed the Quinn estate, shooting three cousins and two uncles and an aunt, he didn’t see the betrayal coming until they turned their guns on him too.

The O'Sullivan's learned the hard way that going up against the Quinns was a guaranteed death sentence. We found every O'Sullivan between California and Connecticut and ended their lives. All but one. Cedric O'Sullivan, the head of the family. He ran.

Murphy should have been dealt the same fate as all the other bastards, but my father refused to bring the gun to his head because Rosa Murphy was pregnant. She was best friends with my mom, and she pretty much became my mom's replacement when she died. A fiery Italian woman with the biggest heart I ever knew. She'd accompany the driver to pick us up from school. She taught me how to play chess. Hell, I told her when I had my first kiss behind the bleachers in sixth grade. My father couldn't leave Rosa Murphy pregnant and without a husband.

So, he decided on a lifetime of humiliation instead. The whole city would watch him fall from grace. A proud man like him, it was harder to move into the roughest neighborhood in town and become nothing more than the Quinn family's bitch. Demoted to corner boy, taking orders from the cousins he used to give orders to. One last final blow was when we caught Cedric O'Sullivan nine years later. Donnacha and I, we brought him to Murphy's house in the middle of the night and made him look him in the eyes while he slit his throat.

Murphy's fall from grace wasn't enough for me. And I hated that despite his betrayal, my father kept one promise, even after Rosa killed herself. As long as the Quinns ruled this city, Rosa's daughter, Poppy, would never find out what a cunt her father was.

And when his carelessness led to my father and brothers being blown up into smithereens, I'd had enough of the leniency. I had to deal him a fate

worse than death. Take his precious daughter that he wanted to protect from the truth so badly.

Only Murphy doesn't seem to see it like that.

"Why didn't you fight for her?" I growl, fist twitching towards the pliers. "We took everything from you and your daughter was the only thing you had left."

Murphy rolls my question around his head. Despite his tattered clothes and the stress of poverty etched into the deep lines on his face, the ghost of a mob boss is still inside him somewhere. I can feel it in his slow replies. In the way he lowers his tone, commanding that the room listens. He learned a lot from my father.

Eventually, he lets out a deep sigh and says, "I betrayed your family twice, Lorcan. Once on purpose, with the O'Sullivans, and then again by accident. If I had just checked that package—" he chokes on the memory. "I'll never forgive myself. You should have killed me a long time ago, but you didn't. I deserved any punishment you saw fit."

I drink him in. The dirt under his fingernails and the flapping sole of his shoe. Besides taking his daughter, after the funeral, I dealt him the same fate as the postwoman who delivered the package. Completely cut off. He was left with nothing but the crumbling condo and a burner phone in case I ever needed to get hold of him.

"Get out of my sight, Murphy," I snarl, nodding towards the glass door of my office. "The next time I see you it'll be to put a bullet between your eyes."

Murphy nods so low his forehead almost touches the carpet, before making a swift exit. He knows better than to be asked twice. If only his daughter would get the memo too.

Poppy Murphy, my fine, rare, China Doll. But as beautiful as she is, she was always Marcus Murphy's daughter. The blood that rises to her cheeks whenever she sees me is the same blood that runs through his veins.

Maybe it's the whiskey withdrawals, but I close my eyes and make a VOW.

I'll take better care of his daughter than he ever did.

Opening them again, they lock straight on the drink's cabinet.

"Fuck it," I mutter, slipping off my suit jacket and wrapping the fabric around my fist. I slam it into the glass window with an almighty crash and reach for an unopened bottle of *The Smugglers Club*.

Poppy

I'm somewhere between a dream and the nightmare that is my reality when I hear a scraping sound.

But tonight, I'm ready. My body is tense, my heart hammering in my mouth. The plan has been swirling around in my head for hours and all I need to do is stick to it.

The door creaks open, flooding the soft light of the hallway into the black abyss.

"Do you ever sleep?" I ask the shadow in the doorway.

"Never."

I fumble around for the lamp switch. "Don't," he says.

His looming silhouette comes closer, stepping into the streak of moonlight coming through the window. He's devastatingly handsome, as always, and a crumpled version of his usually immaculate self. Disheveled hair, loosened tie. My heart sinks at the bitter smell of liquor swirling between us.

I swallow the lump in my throat. *Stick to the plan.*

He stares down at me, no amount of darkness can hide the intensity in his eyes. "I haven't seen you in a while."

"Missed me?"

Is that a smile on his lips? "I think I'm becoming addicted to you."

His words snatch away my next breath.

“Is that a bad thing?”

He rubs a hand over his face, his shoulders sagging. “My addictions are never healthy.”

Sinking onto the edge of the bed, he reaches out and cups my face. His hand smells like cigars and leather, but his touch is tender.

I can hear my heartbeat thumping around my ears, in time with every burning stroke of his thumb across my cheek.

“What are you thinking about, China Doll?”

“That you only call me China Doll when you’re drunk,” I whisper back.

A noise rumbles in his chest and he pulls his hand away. “You’d drink too if you had as many demons as me.”

“You’re my only demon. One is enough.”

His laugh is contagious, and I can’t stop the smile tugging at my lips.

There’s a sick, twisted part of me that’s thankful when his finger brushes against the rim of my lips. “You’re so goddamn pretty when you smile, China Doll.”

Hot, thick tension swirls between the inch between our mouths. I can hear his heartbeat slamming against his chest; I can hear mine ringing in my ears.

This is it.

Without warning, he crushes his lips against mine. A strong hand cups the base of my head, pulling me deeper into the kiss. Locked between his rough palm and the intensity of his mouth, I feel myself melting. He’s relentless, claiming my tongue with his, pulling me onto his lap so that his bulge nestles perfectly between my mound.

A gasp escapes me as he moves his kisses down my neck with the same ferocity. He nips, sucks and moans into my throat, sending my eyes rolling back into my head. My body is begging him to take his kiss lower, past my collarbone. I need to feel those lips against my nipples.

Then, he pushes me back onto the bed and climbs on top of me, nudging my thighs apart with his knee. “You’re mine, China Doll,” he growls, leaning back on his heels to drink me in. I bask in the glow of his hungry stare as his eyes roll over every inch of my flesh. I slip the straps of my camisole off my shoulders, letting my breasts escape. I want him to look, want him to want me. *I want to make him happy.*

His hands run from my hips down to my thighs, and then back up the inside of them. My body is its own entity, arching up to meet his touch, my ankles wrapping around his back. “My keepsake. My plaything.”

The blade of his silk tie slides in between my breasts, and I wrap my fist around the fabric and pull him closer. It’s my turn to crush my lips against his. He gives in to my desperate mouth, before propping himself up on his arms to look down at me. “And I’m going to take what’s mine,” he says, tugging at his zipper.

My breath hitches in my throat and the small voice in the back of my head pipes up. *So, this is how it happens, it says. This is how you lose your virginity.*

It was never meant to be like this. I’m ashamed that since Lorcan kissed me, it’s the first time that Sam pops into my head. It was meant to be with him. In a safe, loving, relationship on a bed full of rose petals and a romantic Spotify playlist.

Instead, I’m using my innocence as a ticket to freedom.

Lorcan pushes the slick head of his cock against my pussy. I gasp, squeezing my eyes shut, bracing myself for the pain.

It doesn't come.

I open one eye and Lorcan's looking down at me. I can't read the expression on his face.

Regret? Anger?

Then, he snaps out of it and withdraws from my withering body. I watch, numb, as he gets off the bed and tucks himself away.

"Where are you going?" I croak.

"Not now," he mutters, snatching his jacket from the floor and flinging it over his shoulder.

"Lorcan—"

"Go to sleep, China Doll," he says with a sad softness in his voice.

And with that, there's the scrape of the key and the footsteps in the landing.

He's gone.

Leaving me in a fog of confusion and longing.

And underneath it all, I feel like begging him to come back.

Lorcan

I should be waking up with Poppy's juices glistening on my cock. Instead, I'm in my own bed with a bottle of *The Smugglers Club* under my arm and a banging headache.

Glancing at the Audemars Piguet on the bedside table, I groan. I got so much shit to do today, and I'm not in the mood to deal with Antoin's attitude if I don't get it done.

I leap out of bed and all but crawl to the shower. The hot steam melts away my sins, leaving room for the one question that bubbles in my brain.

Why didn't you fuck her?

I could have had exactly what I wanted. Poppy Murphy in my arms, under my body, her wet cunt begging me to slide my cock into her.

Then I saw it in her eyes. A flash of fear, right before she closed them. If I'd blinked, I would have missed it, but I couldn't take my eyes off her.

Something in my cold, dead heart is cracking and I don't fucking like it. Her body might have responded but her eyes didn't.

As I emerge from the steam of the en suite, my cell is blowing up. I stab the green button and put it on speaker. "Speak."

Antoin's voice is wary. "You awake?"

"Yeah, dumbass. Why?"

"Cause I saw the smashed cabinet in your office."

“Yeah. Call someone to get that fixed.”

He sighs a long sigh, one that warrants my hand around his fucking throat the next time I see him. “You sticking with the plan today?”

“Uh-huh,” I say, sliding on a shirt. “On my way to pick up protection payments now. And you?”

“I’ve got a meeting with the Peruvians,” he says, lowering his voice. “Specifically, Qari Chavez. We might have a new supplier by the end of the day.”

I grin at my reflection as I slick back my hair. “Fair play, Antoin. I’d like to be in that meeting.”

He sounds surprised when he says, “Really?”

“You don’t agree that the head of the Quinn family should be meeting with the new potential cocaine supplier for the whole of Boston?”

He laughs down the line. “Of course I fuckin’ do. Just surprised you’re up for it.”

My jaw hardens and my back straightens. Seeing Murphy yesterday lit a fire under my ass. My family isn’t going down and out like him. We will win this war and rise up stronger than ever, even if it means I have to swallow my pride and put down my gun.

“Rearrange it for the afternoon. I’ll call when I’m on the way to the office.”

I stroll over to the window as I’m fastening my cufflinks. Only glass, grass, and cobbled walls stand between me and Poppy Murphy. I wonder what she’s doing, and if I spooked her last night.

The desire to see her burns deep in my stomach. As I make my way into the lobby, I should go straight through the front door and into the waiting Bentley. Instead, my feet make a right, past the dining room and out a side

door. A few minutes later, I'm standing outside the locked bedroom door in the Museum.

My key brushes against the lock, then I pause. Instead, I knock. Might as well try and get her on my side right from the jump.

Poppy's soft voice floats under the door crack. "Come in."

Her eyes widen when she sees me, the half-eaten croissant hovering mid-air.

"Good, you're up and dressed," I say, trying to keep my tone even and brisk. "We're going out."

I stride over and take the croissant from her hand and take a big bite. Her wide eyes narrow into disgust. "That's gross."

"We were swapping spit last night," I challenge her, "and now you care that I took a bite of your croissant?"

I love how quick she is to blush. From her plump lips to her rosy cheeks and doe-like eyes, her beautiful face is an open book, every emotion that crosses her heart is mirrored on her expression. "Where are we going?"

"To finish what we started last week."

Poppy thinks for a moment, before a scowl darkens her pretty features. "Oh, hell no."

"Hell yes, Miss Murphy." When she stalks back to the window and turns her scowl towards the garden and beyond, I soften my approach. "No deaths this time. I promise."

Nothing.

"Hey," I murmur, closing the gap between us and touching her arm. Goosebumps ripple up her soft skin as a reaction to my fingertips. "I could really use your help. You have a great eye for bullshit. And like I said, I promise it'll be a lot less gruesome this time."

She lets out something of a grunt. “And if I say no?”

“Not an option.”

A pause. “Fine. Only, try not to point a gun at me this time.”

With another huff, she pushes past me and into the bathroom, slamming the door shut behind her.

I sink down on the bed, running my hands over the fine Egyptian sheets. One of her long, copper hairs tangles around my thumb and forefinger. As I scan the rest of the room, I see my reflection in the mirror and my expression catches me off guard. It’s deranged. My lips are stretched wide across my cheeks, my eyes small and squinty.

I’m smiling.

I rearrange my features and throw in my signature scowl for good measure before Poppy emerges from the bathroom, bringing a fresh wave of vanilla and bubblegum with her.

God, how I want to ruin her.

Instead, I keep my mouth shut and my scowl fixed as we walk through the museum and to the waiting car at the front of the estate. Although making a conscious effort not to look at her, I can feel every inch of her presence, hear every footstep and breath as she tries to keep pace next to me. So, I feel it when she slows down to a halt.

“Uh, are we going to war?”

The hairs on the back of my neck stand to attention. *How the fuck does she know?* I glance up and follow her gaze, then breathe a sigh of relief.

The bulletproof cladding of the Rezvani Tank X glistens in the sun. Two Range Rovers flank the front and back of it, and a cluster of my men, all-black uniforms, rifles, and earpieces all intact, surround the fleet. “We amped up security a little,” I say briskly, snaking an arm around her waist to

push her towards the Rezvani. One of my men opens the passenger door for her. “Don’t worry your pretty little head about it.”

That pretty little head faces away from me for the whole journey into downtown. Her ankles crossed, her fingers locked in her lap, and her pale shoulders peeking out from under her hair.

For the first time, I wonder what’s going on in that pretty little head. *What are you thinking about, China Doll?*

My mouth opens but closes as quickly. She’s probably thinking about the life she’s left behind. Maybe even her pussy of a boyfriend.

Silence is safer.

Thirty minutes later we’re outside Ruby Blue’s Gentleman’s Club. Inside is dark and seedy, cigar smoke swirling between the sapphire booths and stripper poles. Poppy uses the hem of her skirt to wipe down a bar stool, before sitting down and staring into space until my meeting with O’Donnel is done. He’s a fellow Irishman who’s owned this joint longer than I’ve been alive. He shakes my hand with the largest grin I’ve ever seen from him — probably something to do with the fact his main competitor, Mickey, is now chilling six feet under.

Then we cross the street to Goldmine bookies, where the soured liquor sticks to the floor and regular gamblers prop up the fruit machines. Poppy folds her arms across her chest and stands in the corner, making eye contact only with the white light strip across the ceiling. When one of the punters draws his eyes away from *The Racing Post* and to Poppy for longer than half a second, my hand instinctively curls around the grip of my gun. But then I remember my promise to her, and I breathe out my anger in a deep grumble.

“I feel like I need a shower followed by a long bible session,” Poppy moans as we step out of *Movers and Shakers* nightclub into the midday sun.

“I’ll join you.”

She raises an eyebrow and says, “You? Bible session? You’d go up in flames.”

I guide her across the busy road, stopping cars with nothing but a glare. “Then I’ll settle just for the shower.”

“Do you really have investments in every business in town?”

“Only the ones making money.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t think I can deal with going into another strip joint.”

“Good thing I’m not taking you to one then.”

I’ve saved the best till last.

We step down a side street that opens up to Copley Square. I stop outside a glass window with *Gatsby’s Brasserie* hanging in copper letters above it. I rap, tap, tap on the glass, before turning to Poppy.

“This is Quinn Capital’s latest investment. And probably the only establishment that I’d be caught dead in in daylight.”

I flash her a grin as the door opens, and Ricardo appears.

“Mr. Quinn?” he queries, smoothing down the breast of his purple velvet suit and giving the silk pocket square a quick plump-up. “And to what do I owe this pleasure?”

I push Poppy inside and follow her in, taking Ricardo to the side. “I was in the neighborhood—”

A squeal interrupts us, and we both turn to the source. Poppy is sliding into a velvet green booth, cupping the lamp at the center of the table. “Is this real?” she gasps, her big doe-eyes glancing up at Ricardo.

He's startled. He glances at me, twirls the curl of his mustache and blinks. "Y-yes. Authenticated at Christie's."

I'm fascinated by how my china doll has come alive. She's opened up like a stubborn flower that had previously refused to bloom. I ignore Ricardo and turn all of my attention to her. Watching how her big emerald eyes shine with excitement, how her delicate fingers roll over the stained glass patterns.

I break away from Ricardo and slide onto the bench opposite her. "The Tiffany Wisteria table lamp," I say, not taking my eyes off her. "Made in 1901."

Poppy breaks her gaze away from the antique long enough to ask me, "but what's it doing here?"

"I bought it from a collector in England. He... owed me a favor."

"So, this is your restaurant?"

I follow her eye line as it sweeps around the restaurant. The scent of fresh paint still lingers in the air, but there's nothing else new about this joint. Tiffany lamps take pride of place in the center of every booth, and art deco lamps sourced from Paris hang above them.

I don't supply drugs to *Gatsby's Brassiere*, I supply fine things. I've filled the dining hall with the most exclusive antiques from the Roaring Twenties, and I fill the kitchen with the finest, rarest, and often most illegal ingredients in the world. Diners can come here to step back in time, all while eating delicacies like Queen Conch salads and swan steaks.

I met Ricardo while dining at his flamboyant restaurant in Buenos Aires, and over Havana cigars and 1926 *Macallan* whiskey, the idea of *Gatsby's* was born.

I brush her off by saying, “It’s an investment,” and then turn back to Ricardo. “Let’s talk.”

He glances towards Poppy. “In front of the lady?”

I turn back to her. “The office is on the second door to the left. It’s packed floor-to-ceiling with antiques that we haven’t put out yet.” She nods, a semblance of a smile on her face, and trots off out of the dining hall.

Ricardo is quick to slide into her place. “I have heard about the troubles,” he says, with a tone so low you wouldn’t know the restaurant was closed.

I cut him off with a hand. “Forget about it. We don’t use a third party to source the ingredients, we go direct.”

A sly grin spreads across his withered face and he pulls out a crumpled piece of paper from his breast pocket. “Then, perhaps we could talk about next week’s menu?”

Twenty minutes later, I have a list of illegal ingredients burning in my back pocket and collect Poppy from the office.

We slide into the back of the armored car. “All done,” I say, scrolling through my phone contacts to find the only fisherman insane enough to bring his boat out to the Norwegian Sea in the harsh winter months. “I need to go to the office. The driver will take you back to the estate.”

When I hear nothing in response, I drag my attention from my cell. “I’m talking to you.”

She tears away from gazing out the window and faces me, brows knitted. “Can I ask you a question?”

“I suppose.”

“The restaurant gives you ten percent of its earnings at the end of every quarter.”

“And how do you know that?”

“You left me in the office and I’m nosy,” she says with a deadpan stare. “Anyway, they give you ten percent of their earnings, netting you an average of a million dollars a quarter. Four million dollars a year. However, you have a clause in the contract that says you’ll cover the costs of all ingredients, which is currently eating up half of your profit.”

“I sent you into the office to look at antiques, not to pour over accounts,” I growl.

“If you bought Ricardo out, you’d make what you do in a quarter in under a month.”

She sits back with a satisfied smile lingering on her lips.

I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t stunned. It’s enough of a surprise to push away my annoyance. Just like she came alive at the sight of a million-dollar Tiffany lamp, she comes alive wrapping her lips around numbers. “Not just a pretty face, Miss Murphy,” I murmur.

The pale space below the hem of her skirt is calling my name. I run my fingertips from her knee up to the inside of her thigh, pushing back the silky fabric.

She tries to stay still, holding my gaze, even though the way her stomach tenses betrays her. “I’m studying—was, studying, at Stanford Business School, *Mr. Quinn*,” she retorts. “So no, I’m not just a pretty face. And *please*,” she says, gritting her teeth. “I’m not Miss Murphy. My last name is Valentina.”

I ignore the words coming out of her mouth.

My fingers brush against the lace of her panties, emitting a gasp from her and a shiver from my cock. Her pale cheeks flush and she glances towards the driver. I know she wants to tell me to stop, to squeal and bat my

hand away, but she's trying to hang onto her pride. To hold her ground. I trail my fingers a little higher knowing that I've hit her most sensitive spot when she buckles back in the seat. The tick of her jaw, the way she scrunches her button nose. She wants it, but she hates how much she wants it.

I pull away and look out the window.

"You'll come to the office with me and look over the numbers for the rest of my businesses."

Her voice is still strained, "Pardon?"

"I don't repeat myself."

"Once again, not a question, And it sounds like you're trying to get me to work for free, Mr. Quinn."

There goes that shiver in my cock again. I've always hated being called Mr. Quinn. It was my father's name, and it's a reminder that he's not here anymore. But coming from her velvet mouth makes me rock hard.

I turn to pin her with my stare. "Oh, I'll pay you all right." Then I slide on my sunglasses and go back to scrolling through my cell, unable to think about anything but fucking her over my desk.

Poppy

It's a blur of black-clad guards, marble floors, and glass walls, then we're in a sprawling office overlooking the whole of downtown Boston.

Sensory overload. I haven't seen, touched, or felt this much since Lorcan Quinn drugged me and tossed me in his Museum.

I take careful steps around the office, drinking in the sleek black desk, and the smashed window of a drink's cabinet, all while Lorcan darkens the doorway, staring at me.

“What happened?”

“I got thirsty.”

Footsteps coming from down the hall make me flinch. I'm not on solid ground here; the bedroom in the museum has become somewhat comfortable, in a sick and twisted way. The familiarity of every antique, floorboard creak, and cabinet has given me a false sense of security. It's instinctive to have my wits about me in foreign territory.

Lorcan's cousin appears by his side, staring at me. Antoin.

“What is she doing here?” he says, boring those amber eyes into my face. I lower my gaze, knowing that it's not a question he wants me to answer. Just off the brief encounter I had with him before, I took an instant disliking to him. He's cold. Unsettlingly so, and there's no denying the tension that lingers in the space between him and Lorcan.

Lorcan's words are laced with a challenge. "Looking over the books. Problem?"

"No women allowed," Antoin growls.

"No women we know are at Stanford studying business," he shoots back.

When Antoin visibly recoils, a sense of satisfaction washes over me. In my new twisted reality, I like how quickly Lorcan jumps to my defense. Protects me.

"Well, the Peruvian's are in the boardroom. We are all waiting for you," Antoin says, pinning me with one last glare before stalking back down the hall.

Lorcan turns his attention back to me. "Eileen will be in shortly with everything you need." Then he's gone.

I sink into the plush leather seat behind the desk. I'm daydreaming about what it'd feel like to have this much power for less than a few seconds before an older woman stomps through the door, a sour expression on her face and a stack of files in her hands. "All the accounts for the last four years," she says, casting a wary eye over my thin T-shirt and summer skirt, before stomping out the same way she came.

Rude bitch.

But I'm not brave enough to mutter it, even under my breath, in case there are cameras.

Turning my attention to the stack in front of me, my heart soars for the first time in weeks. Genuine excitement for something to do, numbers to crunch, and data to pour over. And I'm not stuck between the four walls of the Museum!

Time passes in a blur of yellow and green highlighters and tapping numbers into the calculator I found in the top drawer of the desk. It feels so good to use my brain, instead of mindlessly gawking out of the museum window, or flicking through the same four books I've read a million times.

I'm so lost in the accounts that when Lorcan knocks against the door frame, I jump. He's staring down at me in amusement, hands in his pockets. "Having fun?" He strides to the drink cabinet and pours himself a whiskey.

I can't help but grin. I *am* having fun. This is what I love to do, it's what I'm *good* at. But I blink the blurriness from my eyes and rearrange my features. Lorcan Quinn isn't going to get the satisfaction of knowing that I'm enjoying myself.

"I'm enjoying the fact that your accounts are an absolute shit show, yes."

His amused smile hardens into a scowl. "Meaning?"

"Come here."

Our eyes lock, his narrowing. Yeah, I never thought I'd be beckoning the Devil to come closer either, but here we are. Suddenly, the penny drops and I realize why he's regarding me with such suspicion. I tug open the top drawer of his desk and pull out the pliers. "Here," I snap, letting them clatter on the desk. "I wouldn't even know how to use them."

Without saying a word, he rounds the desk and hovers over my shoulder, filling my nostrils with his manly oak scent and filling my stomach with butterflies.

I swallow the lump in my throat and zone in on the papers in front of me. "Look," I say, running my finger over the names highlighted in green. "These are the guys that haven't paid you for three months or more. You know that, right?"

When I glance up for an answer, I'm thrown off at how close he is, so I turn back to the paper, heat rising in my cheeks. "And, uh—" I tap the names highlighted in yellow. "You collect ten percent from these guys, and they've been paying just fine. But all of their profits have increased by over one-hundred-and-thirty percent in the last three years. Yet you are only still taking ten percent based on their old earnings."

"Meaning?" Lorcan repeats, his voice low and gruff in my ear.

I decide to put it bluntly. "Meaning you're being ripped off."

He slams his palms against the desk and the sudden noise makes me shriek.

"Sorry," he growls, stalking towards the floor-to-ceiling window.

I watch his broad outline against the sunset, the golden rays skipping over the roofs of the city and illuminating his large silhouette. The king of Boston, looking down at all that he owns. All that his family has taken by force.

I should be reveling in the fact that he's getting ripped off. So I don't know why a pang of sadness streaks across my heart.

Before I can question myself, I join him at the window.

After a few moments, he speaks. "My brother controlled the finances."

"The one who—"

"Yes."

"And now it's all up to you."

"Numbers aren't exactly my forte."

Out of the corner of my eye, I take in the hard lines of his face. His ticking jaw. Maybe it's the forgiving glow of the sun setting. Maybe I'm delirious from being let out of the Museum. But I don't see the Devil, I see a broken man.

“So, what is your forte?” I all but whisper.

“Breaking kneecaps.”

I snort. The feeling of pity is gone as quickly as it came.

After a few beats, he says, “And ruining my father’s reputation.”

He lifts the tumbler to his lips, closing his eyes as he takes a large gulp.

I don’t know how I think I am, taking it from his hands and setting it on the desk behind us. And I don’t know what’s got into him, letting me do it.

“I’m sure you haven’t ruined his reputation,” I say softly.

His Adam’s apple bobs. “When they were alive, all I did was spend the family’s money on pointless antiques and hookers and vacations. Now they are gone, I’m still hemorrhaging money, only in a different way.”

My voice is firmer this time. “If you don’t like the cards dealt to you, then change them.”

He turns to study me with an overwhelming intensity. Like he’s seeing me for the first time. “I dealt your cards for you. You ran away to the other side of the country but it didn’t change your fate.”

Bitterness washes over me.

When he closes the gap between us and crushes his lips against mine, it happens so fast that I almost choke on my own breath.

My bitterness becomes bittersweet. I melt. I melt into his soft lips with their sweet whiskey taste and melt into the hard lines of his body. My hand curls around the lapel of his collar, pulling him even closer—needing him closer. That voice in my head, the screaming voice that constantly scolds my body for feeling reacting to his touch, is strangely silent. Or maybe I can’t hear it over the thumping of my heart against my chest or the ringing in my ears.

The passion floods through my body, electrifying every nerve under my skin.

I don't even hate how I need him, how I crave more of his lips and the touch of his rough hands tangled into my hair.

When he pulls away, I'm dizzy, high off the sudden dopamine hit.

He lets me stagger backward, and I rub my finger over the burning trail his lips left on mine. I catch my breath, looking up at my captor from under my lashes.

His chest rises and falls, and his blistering gaze scorches every inch of my skin. It's a more intense version of the way he looked at me the other night, right before he decided not to claim my innocence. A tangle of confusion and anger and sadness.

The tension rises, hot and heavy and suffocating between us.

If I don't break it, I'll drown. "I—"

"I have more meetings," he says, dragging his eyes from me and wiping the taste of me from the corner of his mouth. "My driver will take you back to the estate with a full security detail."

His shoulder brushes mine as he stalks to the door. "Lorcan—"

"Miss Murphy," he interrupts, stopping under the threshold. He regards me with dark eyes. The fury in them reminds me that he truly is the devil. "Don't."

"Don't?" I choke out, searching his face for any semblance of the man who just kissed me like I was the only woman on the planet.

He nods, curt and assertive. "*Don't*," he says again through gritted teeth.

Only one word, loaded with the heaviest threat of all.

Don't fall in love with me.

Lorcan

Between the sun setting and the sun rising, Poppy hasn't left my mind, not for even a second.

Not when I signed the contract with the Peruvians and toasted to the streets of Boston no longer being dry.

Not even when I sent Donnacha off with the emerald four-leaf clover to give to Igor Bratnov.

The Quinn family symbol of war.

I should be in the trenches preparing for the imminent battle. Instead, I'm acting like the king of the castle in my study, looking out to my princess's ivory tower.

I'm surprised when she comes into view, walking in step with Orna. I scowl and crack my knuckles, wondering what she's doing.

Orna disappears out of view and comes back with a bagful of laundry. I turn my attention back to Poppy. Because that's all I can see. Not her father. Not a token of revenge or a rare keepsake. Just Poppy.

The other thing that hasn't left my mind all night is the kiss.

Not just the feeling of her soft lips against mine and her soft, silky hair wrapped around my fist. But the feeling of my cold, dead heart cracking.

My mind is a goddamn mess and not just because of the two bottles of *The Smugglers Club* I've knocked back to numb the feeling.

She looks like an angel in that billowing white dress. Gesturing wildly as she talks to Orna, who's laughing at whatever she's saying. Then she dips into the laundry basket herself and pulls out a towel, folding it and placing it in the bag at her feet.

I should be out making calls and working with Antoin to secure the city in preparation for Igor Bratnov's attack, but I can't take my goddamn eyes off her.

A movement in the corner of the garden catches my attention. One of my men, Martin. He twitches again and it takes me a couple of seconds to realize he's tugging at the fabric around his dick. Then I follow his eye line and realize he's staring at the dress riding up Poppy's ass as she bends over to pick up a sheet from the laundry basket.

The rage is all-consuming. I don't think twice about storming out of my study, picking up the Glock from my desk as I go, and stalking out into the grounds.

A shot rings out, the bullet narrowly missing Martin's head. Instinctively, he reaches for his rifle as he ducks, before realizing that the bullet came from me. Even under his helmet, I can see the surprise on his face. I close the gap between us, a growl brewing deep in my chest. "If I ever see those fucking eyes even *glancing* at my girl again, then I'll gouge them out with a spoon."

His mouth opens and closes in a weird sort of quiver. But he knows better than to protest. "Now get out of my sight."

He does what I say in record time.

When I turn to face Poppy and Orna, they both have very different expressions. Poppy has a sheet clutched to her chest, eyes wide and slacked

jawed, whereas Orna is scowling her signature scowl, hands on her hips and lips pursed. “Are you trying to give us a heart attack?” she barks at me.

“I’ll give you more than a goddamn heart attack,” I snap back, joining them at the patio. I grab the sheet from Poppy’s quivering hands and toss it back in the basket. “Why is she out here doing your fucking job for you?”

Orna rolls her eyes. “Because otherwise, she’ll blow her brains out from the boredom of staring at your musty antiques twenty-four-seven.”

A laugh from the other side of me. I turn to see Poppy’s dazzling grin. I grit my teeth to keep my level of anger at its peak, but I can’t help how my heart softens and my blood melts from a boil to a simmer. “You think that’s funny?”

She lowers her lashes but is unable to hide her smile. “No.”

“That’s what I thought,” I grunt. “Now stop folding fucking sheets.”

She pouts. “And do what? Stare at those musty antiques?”

Now it’s Orna’s turn to laugh.

“I’ll lock you both in there if you aren’t careful.”

Poppy cups a hand to her forehead and looks up at me. “Sounds like a great idea. At least I’ll have some good company.” Then, she leans over and picks a bit of lint off my suit, flicking it into the wind.

I can’t concentrate on her sassy remarks or think of the right punishment to deal with them. My shoulder burns from her touch and my mind races with the ease at which she did it. Like I wasn’t her captor and she wasn’t my keepsake.

Like I wasn’t even the Devil at all.

I swallow the swell in my throat and turn away without another word.

This is a slippery slope, and I make a vow right then and there that I’m not going to fall down it.

My armor goes back up.

And my heart—my stupid fucking heart—needs to turn back to stone.

Poppy

I push the remaining stray peas around my plate, enjoying the sun beating down on my back.

“All done?” Orna asks, refilling my iced tea and picking up my plate.

“Uh-huh,” I say, leaning back and closing my eyes. “Who knew fish and chips could be so good?”

She grins. “I’ll pass the compliments on to my sister.”

I watch Orna amble towards the main house with the remnants of lunch balancing in her arms.

It’s nice out here. The soft breeze in my hair, the blades of grass between my toes. It sure beats being locked in the Museum.

But that contentment swirling in my stomach, it’s poisoned by the constant reminder that *this* is it. The grounds may be sprawling and Orna might be fun to talk to, but just because the Devil has given me an inch of freedom, it doesn’t mean that I’m *free*.

You’re still here against your will, Poppy, the niggling voice rattles around my head.

Don’t forget about your escape plan.

I squeeze my eyes shut and transport back to the rose garden a few days ago. When my heart felt as heavy as the iron bench I was sitting on and I decided on what I had to do.

Once I have no use for you, I will discard you.

Despite the sun, my blood runs cold. There's no denying that my body wants it. In fact, it *aches* for it every time I'm in the Devil's company. But I know, I just *know*, that I'm simply swept up in this new, warped reality. That when, *if*, I'm allowed back to my real life, I'll regret letting him take what belongs to me. He took everything else from me—my childhood, my freedom, my father. He can't have the last bit of me too.

Perhaps there's another way.

With newfound gusto or maybe just feeling high from all the sugar in the iced tea, I rise to my feet and stalk towards the house. I bump into Orna as I step into the corridor.

"You okay?" she says with a frown.

"I want to see him. Lorcan. Where is he?"

She glances down the hall to check we're alone then pulls me into the shadow of an alcove. "What are you planning, Poppy?" she asks wearily. "Look, what happened on the patio earlier. That wasn't Lorcan getting soft, that was Lorcan distracted. Please don't put yourself in reach of his wrath."

I gently slide my arm out of her grip and flash her a reassuring smile. "I don't want to rock the boat, Orna. I promise. I just want to speak to him."

She runs one last look over my face and lets out a dramatic sigh. "Your funeral. I'll show you to his study."

I'm led through the entrance hall and up a snaking twin staircase, then down corridor after corridor, until we come to a stop outside a solid oak door.

She stops, mid-knock, to give me one last chance. "You sure?"

"I'm sure."

Rap, tap, tap, then she scurries down the hallway, mouthing good luck over her shoulder.

“Enter,” comes a grunt from the other side.

My palm is sweaty as I twist the doorknob and creak open the door. Lorcan is sitting behind a desk, a stack of papers in front of him. His eyebrows shoot up when he sees me.

“What’s wrong?” he glowers.

“Nothing. May I come in?”

His eyes narrow but he nods, inviting me into the room. Feeling his burning stare following me, I run a finger over the wood. “This desk...” I murmur. I recognize it from the *Christie’s* archives magazine I used to study in the school library.

“Roosevelt’s.”

I can’t help but mutter “wow,” as I feel all the history it holds under my fingertips.

“What is it, Miss Murphy?”

There’s more than the grand desk separating us. It’s the ice-cold darkness in his eyes; the way he sits deathly still in his chair, fingertips clasped together in a prism. Pinning me with a glare that says he wishes I wasn’t here.

I wish I weren’t here either.

But I straighten up and match his gaze. “It’s *Valentina*. And I have something to ask you.”

“No.”

“You don’t even know what it is yet!”

Steam hisses from his nostrils. “Fine. What?”

“I want to help you.”

“And how, in the ever-loving fuck, can you help me, Miss Murphy?” he says, with something resembling a smirk.

“With your accounts. I’ll get them straight for you.”

He drags a hand through his hair, not caring when black curls fall in front of his forehead, then twists in his chair to stare out of the window. “Then I’ll change my question. Why, in the ever-loving fuck, would you want to help me?”

“Because I’m bored.” *And I might have a better chance of escaping from your office.* “I need something to stimulate my brain.”

“No.”

“*Please,*” I say in a desperate exhale. My shot at freedom is slipping through my fingers.

The sound of his fist slamming against the desk makes me jump. “I said, *no.*” he snarls, “I don’t need help with my accounts, little girl. And certainly not from you.”

Little girl. Heat rises to my cheeks, along with a flurry of anger. “You do,” I snap back, “they are an absolute shit show—if you keep hemorrhaging money at this rate, this time next year you won’t have a business—”

He rounds the table in two strides and cups his hands around my face. Not with the tenderness he did last night in his office. Nor with the passion he had before he flipped me over and spanked me in the Museum. No, his grip is vice-like, harsh. My eyes are trained on his lips as they curl into a cruel line. “You’re overstepping the mark, Miss Murphy. You need to remember your place. You’re nothing but a hole with a heartbeat, one that I’ll fuck whenever I please.”

His voice is low and scary, and I immediately pity any of his enemies who have had to hear that in a dark alley somewhere.

A knock on the door cuts through the tension. “Go away,” he snarls, eyes never leaving me.

Orna’s voice floats under the door crack. “It’s important.”

Lorcan’s jaw ticks and his lips purse, before he lets me go.

“Fuck you,” I rasp, the memory of his grip still burning my cheekbones, “I hate you, I hate you so goddamn much, Lorcan Quinn. Whoever you’re trying to protect yourself from,” I stab in the direction of the window with a trembling finger, towards the security lining the bushes, “Whoever is after you, I hope they win. I hope they find you and I hope they kill you. And I hope it’s a slow, painful death.”

Before he can respond, I turn on my heels and fling open the door, pushing past Orna and running down the hall.

I have no idea where I’m going. No idea what corridor will lead to a dead-end, and what will lead me further into the Devil’s lair.

“Poppy, wait!” Orna’s voice sounds a million miles away; I can barely hear her over the blood thumping around my ears. She catches up with me fast, wrapping her soft hands around my waist.

She whispers, “I could hear you screaming and I thought it best if I interrupted.”

Only now do I realize I’m sobbing. “I hate him. I really, really hate him.”

She guides me through the corridors and down the stairs, until the sun I was enjoying so much a few moments earlier is beating down on my back again. Only this time, it burns, the rays boring into my skin like a million angry lasers. “I just want to go to bed,” I mutter, wiping my blurry eyes.

Orna nods, saying nothing, but takes me back to the museum and lets me in. I'm numb as she helps me slide on my pajamas and tucks me into bed. "Are you going to be okay?" she asks, perching on the bottom of the mattress, concern clouding her big amber eyes.

No. No I'm not.

Did I really expect Lorcan Quinn to give me a little more freedom? No, not really. But I'm just tired. Tired of being held captive. Tired of living under the Devil's reign of terror.

It's never going to end.

Without another word, I roll over and close my eyes, burying my head between the gap in the pillows. "I'll let you sleep," she soothes, patting my leg, before I feel her weight leaving the bed.

But I don't sleep, not until the sun starts to set, anyway. Instead, I soak the pillows with my tears, letting the feather-down filling muffle my sobs. And only when I have nothing left in me, I give in to sleep.

Poppy

The scraping of the lock rips me from my bad dream.

“Great,” I grumble into the darkness.

From the frying pan into the fire; from a nightmare into another nightmare.

A sliver of light seeps into the crack, followed by footsteps so heavy that they could only belong to the Devil.

“Leave me alone, Lorcan,” I say, my throat dry and raspy. “If you’re not going to let me go, then leave me be. I’ll stay in this Museum every day for the rest of my life if it means never having to see you again.”

Silence fills the room. When it’s borderline suffocating, I peer out from under the cover and at the black mass looming over me. He’s so still that he could be a statue. “Lorcan?” I mutter, fear swelling in the pit of my stomach.

Finally, his gruff voice fills the black abyss between us. It’s strangled, like each word is fighting to leave his lips. “I hate seeing you cry.”

The bed dips as he sits. “I hate it so much that I want to douse myself in oil and set myself alight every time a tear rolls down your cheek.” When I don’t respond, he lets out a bitter laugh. “You know what I hate more than you crying? How much I care about you fucking crying.”

“You’re the sole reason why I cry, Lorcan,” I whisper into the darkness.

A hiss comes from his direction. “I hate you, Poppy Murphy. Do you know that?” There’s a pause, followed by a clinking sound and a gulp. He’s bought his liquid courage with him. “I’ve always hated you. At first, I hated you because I hated your father. I hated that I could look into your eyes and see Marcus Murphy staring back at me. Now, I hate you because of how you make me feel.”

The air I’m holding in my lungs is turning stale. I let it go along with a strangled question. “How do I make you feel?”

Another clink, another glug. “Like I want to rip my heart out of my chest and put a bullet in it myself. You confuse me.”

The darkness is my own liquid courage. It loosens my tongue and lets out something I’d never say in the cold light of day. The truth.

“You confuse me too,” I admit.

“How so?”

“I should hate you,” I choke out. “But I only hate you half the time.”

The weight on the bed shifts, and suddenly I can feel the warmth of his skin, smell the sweet whiskey on his breath. “And the other half?”

My heart is hammering so loud in my chest that it’s the only thing I can hear. “I want to kiss you.”

It slides out like butter on a hot day, floating between us in the dark.

The silence that follows is heavy and agonizing, stretching out into what feels like forever, until—

Lorcan crushes his lips against mine, capturing my mouth. The moment I taste him, desire floods my veins and I feel as drunk as him. As he slides a strong arm around my back, I find myself clawing at the top of his suit pants.

He freezes, and in the sliver of moonlight, our eyes lock. I know he's thinking exactly what I am. It's the first time I've willingly touched him. But I want him, *crave him*. In a way I can't understand, I need him to corrupt me.

And the consequences of that are so far away from my mind they might as well be on a different planet.

He grabs my hands from his stomach and lifts them to his chest. Under the sculpted muscles I feel the heavy beat of his heart. "This is what you do to me, China Doll," he rasps, "and this is why I fucking hate you."

I moan into his mouth and he crushes his chest against mine, pinning me to the bed. His lips only break away from me to pull off his shirt, and to slip the straps of my camisole off my shoulders, letting my breasts spill out.

I'm not terrified tonight. No, I'm aroused. Manically so; the lust rises and falls in my chest with my heavy breathing. "I want to fuck you," Lorcan's growl vibrates above me, "I want to fuck you and I want you to *want me to fuck you.*"

"Yes," I reply, delirious off his words.

"Say it."

"I want you to fuck me."

He widens the space between us for a moment, sliding off the rest of his suit. I prop myself up on my elbows to admire his carved-from-stone body. Even in the darkness, the outline of his massive cock makes me shudder with pleasure. It's hard and long and *fuck me that isn't going to fit inside of me!*

Lorcan catches my eye and grins a devilish grin, before looming back over me, thighs clamping either side of my hips. He dips low, running a sensual tongue over the curve of my breasts, down to my aching nipples.

When he sucks them, a ripple of unbearable pleasure runs through me. Then his hand snakes lower, parting my legs.

I freeze. “I—” I stammer, putting my palm against his chest.

He looks up, brows knitted.

“I don’t know how,” I whisper.

He kisses my nerves away, before flicking his tongue over my earlobe and whispering, “All you have to do is give yourself to me, China Doll. Now spread your legs.”

I obey without question, feeling my clit swelling in anticipation.

“Good girl.”

Lifting himself off me, he crawls down to the space between my thighs and nuzzles his face between it. I gasp at the contrast of his soft lips and his coarse beard, and buckle my hips up towards him. “You’re already so wet for me, Doll,” he murmurs into my mound, his words vibrating in the best way possible. “I’m going to make you come all over my face before I fuck you.”

A moan escapes me as he runs a hard tongue over my clit. I grip onto his shoulders, preparing myself as he slips a lone finger inside of me. It opens me up in a cocktail of pleasure and pain, and I can’t help but think—if this is how his finger feels, how am I going to deal with his cock?

“Lorcan,” I gasp, buckling under his tongue. He growls into my pussy, alternating between licking, sucking, and flicking my clit, along with the steady rhythm of his finger sliding in and out of me.

The tension in my lower stomach mounts to unbearable heights until I have no choice but to let go.

“Oh my god,” I squeal, throwing my head back and pushing down on his face. My orgasm is all-consuming, stimulating every nerve ending in my

body. As a second wave begins to wash over me, he removes his finger and uses both hands to pin my ass in place, lashing my clit with hard, desperate strokes.

After my second orgasm, I crumple onto the bed, panting like a dog in heat.

He sits back on his knees, a combination of a manic grin and my glistening juices on his lips. As he climbs back on top of me, pushing his nose against mine, he whispers, "I don't know how to be gentle about this."

My fingers dig into the muscles at the top of his back. "Then don't be."

The groan that escapes him is animalistic. Without another word, he parts my pussy lips with the tip of his cock, working into my untouched passage. He stops, just for a split second, to close his eyes and moan in pleasure. "You're so tight, China Doll."

It's a weird sensation that I've only ever felt with Lorcan. When he spanked me, when he clamped his hands around my face... a state of limbo between pain and pleasure.

It's my new happy place.

I cry out, and Lorcan's mouth against mine immediately absorbs it. He works his cock further into my hole, and with every thrust, I think it can't get any deeper, but it always does. Pleasure outweighs the pain tenfold. It cascades over me like a waterfall. Lorcan grips my hips and pulls himself even deeper into me. "Look at me," he murmurs, pinning me with his glowering eyes. "I want to watch you as I take what's mine."

His.

He can have me, all of me, if this is what being his entails. The lust claws up my throat, leaving my lips in a weird, gurgling noise. Lorcan matches it with a growl of his own, eyes never leaving mine. He picks up

the pace, thrusting into me, harder, faster, until his hot cum explodes inside of me, delivering a brand new sensation that drives me a different type of wild.

After a few moments, he leans back on his ankles, sliding himself out of me. My pussy suddenly feels empty and raw, the only trace of him left dribbling down my thigh. He breathes heavily, dragging his fingers through his hair.

Looking down at my throbbing pussy, he slides two fingers along the length of my lips, then holds them up to the moonlight. A mix of our pleasure and my blood glisten on his fingertips.

He pins me with a hard stare. “This means you’re mine, now, China Doll. You belong to me, in every sense of the word.”

I’ve just sold my soul to the Devil, and it feels better than I ever imagined it would.

Lorcan

I cradle Poppy in my arms, feeling her chest rise and fall in a hypnotic rhythm against my bicep.

I could stay here forever. Stroking the soft skin below her collarbone, breathing in the lingering bubblegum and vanilla scent tangled in her hair.

But I can't ignore the feeling crawling over me. It's one I've only ever felt once before: the day I got the phone call to say my father and brothers had been killed. I was on a yacht off the coast of Croatia, a rolled-up thousand Kuna bill in my hand, a white line on the table in front of me.

It was Antoin who broke the news. Antoin who let me know that my world was crashing down around me. As the chopper he sent lifted from the yacht's air pad and the Adriatic sea twinkled mockingly below me, I felt it. That feeling of not being in control. It feels like falling and you're unable to grab hold of something, anything, to stop you from plunging into the darkness.

That feeling never really went away. I can medicate it with liquor and hookers, long enough so I can function in my new role as Boss. But now, with Poppy's breath tickling my arm, with her fingertips gently brushing my thigh, it's rearing its ugly head, and I know no amount of whiskey will be able to numb it.

I am no longer in control of this situation. But I don't know if I'd even want to grab hold of anything to stop myself from falling.

The first rays of sun peeking through the window are a reminder that I can't stay here forever. I have a business to run. Men to lead. A war to fight.

I slide myself from under Poppy's soft curves and pull on my pants, trying to avoid the one floorboard that creaks.

As I slip on my jacket, I pause, taking a moment to drink in her soft outline, her parted mouth and flowing auburn hair splayed across the pillow. I plant a soft kiss on her cheek, then move my lips to her ear. "You're mine now, China Doll. Whatever happens, you truly belong to me."

Poppy

I wake up to an empty bed and the midday sun beating against the window.

Lorcan's gone, and the cloak of darkness has come to an end.

Jesus, he must have worn me out for me to sleep in so late.

I roll over and breathe in the scent he left on the pillow. The cocktail of expensive cologne and pheromones drift up my nostrils and swirl around my beating heart.

I lost my virginity.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I bury my head under the covers, drowning out the relentless sun so that I'm alone with nothing but my thoughts. *No, I didn't lose my virginity. I gave it away.*

To the Devil.

I wait for it to hit me. For the sinking feeling of regret to crush my chest.

It doesn't come.

Instead, the butterflies in the pit of my stomach come alive, like they've guzzled ten cans of Red Bull and four espressos this morning.

I feel... I don't know how I feel. Light? Euphoric? Confused.

Blissful.

Yeah, it doesn't make sense to me either.

There's a sharp rap, tap, tap, on my door, and when Orna walks through it, I slide back in the bed, making sure every inch of my body is covered, including my face.

"Hey, you," she says softly, and I hear the breakfast tray clank down on the dresser opposite. "Are you feeling better this morning?"

Oh, what a twisted reality I'm living in. Orna's concern reminds me that less than twelve hours earlier, I was sobbing as she guided me back to my gilded cage, screaming my hatred for the Devil himself. In the time that passed from her locking me in to bringing me breakfast, I've ridden the Devil's face, had his cock inside of me, and had multiple quivering orgasms at the mercy of his tongue.

And I'm scared my face will betray me.

Her voice is firmer when I don't emerge from the covers. "Poppy?"

"I'm fine," I say, begrudgingly emerging from my pit of shame. I brush away the messy strands of hair from my face, but still can't maintain eye contact with her. "I feel better today, thank you."

I look in her direction long enough to see her curls framing her face and the warm grin on her lips. "Thank god. If it's any consolation, I have good news."

Following the nod of her head, my gaze travels to the door. It's unlocked.

"Lorcan wants me to let you know he won't be around for a few weeks. It's... business." Her face breaks into a grimace for a split second, before returning to her warm smile. But my heart sinks.

I gave him what he wanted, and now he's bored of me.

That's a good thing, right? The voice of reason somewhere deep in my brain consoles me. *I did it. I gave him what he wanted. He'll let me go...*

“And there’s even better news,” she announces, extending her hand to me. “Come.”

“Uh…” my eyes travel to the puddle of silk on the floor. “I’m…”

Orna frowns then lets out a laugh, then dips down to pick up my pajamas. “Get hot in the night?”

I have a flashback to Lorcan on top of me, nothing between our bodies but sweat and steam. “Something like that,” I mumble.

She faces the wall as I wrestle with my pajamas under the covers, talking about how hot it is outside today, and about the laundry air-drying in seconds.

When I’m just about decent, she beckons me towards the door. “We’re going out?” I ask, suspicious. “Because I don’t even have a bra on.”

She laughs. “We’re going out of this room, not out of the Museum.”

Keeping my mouth shut, I follow her into the corridor, where she stops abruptly and turns to the door directly to the left of us. “After you,” she beams.

When I regard her with suspicion, which I’m quite right to do given the circumstances of me being in this museum in the first place, she wiggles her eyebrows in encouragement. With a grumble on my lips, I push open the door, revealing a large, open-plan room.

Filled to the brim with antiques.

I flash Orna an awkward grin. “Great, more antiques to stare at?”

What’s that expression again? Too much of a good thing, that’s it. I love antiques, but when you’re locked in a room with them for almost twenty-four hours a day, they seem to lose their magic.

“Yeah, but look—” she wades towards the heap, pulling off dust sheets with a newfound enthusiasm. Then she holds up a mantelpiece clock, not

dissimilar to how Rafiki holds up Simba in *The Lion King*, and a spring pops out and disappears into the pile. Next, she grabs a mirror, flashing it towards me so I can see the broken glass and my scruffy reflection. “I call this place the graveyard. Anything Lorcan’s broken in a fit of anger comes to die here.” She raises an eyebrow, flashing me a knowing smirk. “A lot of the stuff has been broken in transit too.” With force that makes the antique-lover in me shudder, she nudges a Venetian lamp resting against the wall with the toe of her sneaker. “He used to travel the world and collect things, you know? Before...” she trails off, biting her bottom lip.

Before his family was killed. Before he had to take on some real responsibility.

I clap my hands together and say, “Well, this is cool. Thanks for showing me.”

Orna picks up on my less-than-enthusiastic tone and lets out a little chortle. “I’m not finished yet!” As she pushes past me she catches my hand, pulling me out of the room and down the corridor. “Here,” she kicks open the last door to reveal an even larger room.

I step into the space and take a moment to drink it in. In the center sits a large worktable, the surface finished with grid lines and a built-in woodcutter. On the back wall, there’s a row of every tool imaginable—pliers, hacksaws, sanders—and on the left, there’s a floor-to-ceiling unit, full to the brim of paints, varnishes, and stains.

I struggle to find words. Instead, I slowly pace the room, touching every surface, every tool, to see if I’m dreaming.

“Lorcan had it set up a few hours ago,” Orna says, eyes sparkling as she follows me around the room. “He said you like to restore things, and well... there’s a lot to be restored around here.”

Yeah, like my heart breaking into a million pieces.

It can't handle such a nice gesture. In fact, it's the nicest thing anyone's ever done for me.

"I don't know what to say."

Concern creases her brow. "You don't like it?"

"No, I love it," I mutter, sucking in my breath. "I'm just... overwhelmed."

She beams back at me. "It's nice to see you like this. So happy, I mean. Oh—" I turn just as she's fishing something from the pocket of her apron.

I recognize the thick cream envelope and the intricate wax seal immediately. She passes it to me and I grumble, "The last time I received one of these, it contained the worst news of my life."

But Orna falls back, letting me scan through the letter, my heart slamming against my chest.

Miss Murphy,

I won't be around for a while. Business.

Perhaps you can make yourself useful by doing some restoration.

Lorcan.

P.S. Don't even think about hiding any of the tools. I'll be conducting a very thorough frisk search when I next see you.

A ripple of pleasure tears through my body at the thought of Lorcan's hands all over my body.

“Jesus, you look like you’ve won the lottery.”

Glancing up at Orna’s amused smirk, I realize I’m grinning like a Cheshire cat.

I laugh and shake my head, folding the letter along its crease. Before I can stuff it into the breast pocket of my nightshirt, she swipes it out of my hand.

“No!” I shriek.

“Let’s see what Lorc has to say then,” she says, darting around the room faster than I can catch her.

Her eyes scan the page and she slows to a stop. My heart drops when I realize why.

I’ll be conducting a very thorough frisk search.

It’s obvious that there’s something going on between us. I feel myself cringing, my cheeks flushing even redder than they were last night. Taking in her darkened eyes and sudden scowl, I say, “I can explain—”

“Miss Murphy,” she says slowly, rolling each syllable around in her tongue. Her lips curl upwards. Clearly, my name doesn’t taste that nice.

“Yeah, it’s my father’s name,” I say steadily, watching her.

The atmosphere in the workshop goes from light to dark in a matter of seconds. Orna’s back stiffens, and her eyes drop to her sneakers. “I didn’t realize…”

But she doesn’t finish her sentence. Instead, she hands me the letter and turns to leave the room. “Enjoy the workshop, Miss Murphy,” she says with a strangled tone.

Confused, I follow her out to the corridor and down the stairs. “Orna!” I call after her. “What’s wrong? What’s—”

The slamming of the front door cuts me off, leaving me with nothing but the sound of silence.

Lorcan

War is exhausting.

It's been over a week since I stepped foot on the Quinn estate. Since I slept in my own bed. Ate at my own table.

Since I saw my China Doll.

She doesn't hear me enter the Museum, nor does she hear me take the stairs, two at a time.

I lean my aching body against the door frame of the workshop, drinking in the view. She's hunched over the woodworking table, cloth in hand and tongue poking out from the corner of her mouth as she stains a mahogany frame.

My lungs fill with the air I've been desperate to breathe all week. It's filled with paint fumes and dust, but it smells like a bunch of goddamn roses compared to the network of tunnels underneath the city, where I've been torturing every Bratnov and anyone even remotely connected to their network that I can get my hands on. I used to relish my time down there; the tangy iron smell of an enemy's blood, the piercing screams dulled by the heavy concrete walls.

But it's different now. I couldn't wait to get out of there and into the sun, to see my Poppy.

When I've had enough of looking and not touching, I stroll into the room and pull out Poppy's earphones. She shrieks at my touch, twisting around and pointing her weapon at me.

I laugh. It feels good to laugh after spending all week barking orders at my men and growling at my enemies. "A paintbrush?" I drawl, nodding to the magnetic tool strip against the wall. "You have more torture devices than I do, and you choose a paintbrush?"

Once the shock melts from her pretty little features, they dissolve into a grin. It's sheepish, but I'll take it. "Now I know why you left me this," she produces the iPod shuffle from the top pocket of her overalls, "so you can sneak up on me without warning."

My lips twitch in amusement; I'm unable to take my eyes off her.

Or my hands.

"Come here," I murmur, hooking my hands around her denim straps and pulling her to my body. It's almost impossible to stifle the groan when I burrow my face in the top of her head. She melts into my body, and I'm pleasantly surprised when she wraps her arms around me too. She leans back, just enough to tilt her chin up to me.

"Thank you," she whispers.

"For the iPod shuffle?" I tease. "It's probably one of the oldest antiques in here."

She tosses her head back and laughs hard enough for her hair to cascade down her back and brush my forearms. Then she nods to the workstation. "For this. I've barely left this room all week."

I stroke her satin cheek. "Well, it's not like you have anywhere else to go."

With a pathetic slap to my chest and a dramatic roll of her eyes, she twists out of my grasp and picks up the frame on the table, like a preschooler showing his mom what he drew in class. “This is lovely.”

“Georgian,” I say, taking it from her grasp and inspecting the intricate carving of the frame. “Early 18th Century. I picked it up at an auction in the English countryside. Belonged to George II himself. Used to hang in my dining hall.”

She nods, impressed, before tilting her head to me. “The glass was smashed.”

“I put a fist through it.”

“Why?”

“My scallops were cold.”

Her emerald eyes study me, not able to tell if I’m joking or not. I am, by the way. Kind of. I did indeed punch through the mirror, but not because of fucking scallops. But because dinner was over thirty minutes late.

“Remind me to never cook for you.”

The lightheartedness in her tone makes one of the millions of scars on my heart heal. I’ve seen more terror this week than most see in a lifetime. I’m glad I don’t have to see it in her eyes too.

It allows me to pretend I don’t put the fear of God into her, even if just for today.

I rest my palms on the table for a few moments, doing nothing but watching her work. She dips the fine paintbrush in the stain, before dragging it across the curved ridges with mesmerizing precision. Despite me looming over her, she’s so still.

Studying Poppy work is almost hypnotic. Soothing. But it’s not long before my attention is taken away from her hardworking hands to the

neckline of her cotton T-shirt underneath her overalls. Every time she leans closer to the table she reveals more milky skin, more of the curve of her cleavage.

It's not long, not long at all, until my primal urges take over.

I reach out to grab her wrist, twisting her into me once more. We both ignore the paintbrush clattering to the floor. "I forgot something," I murmur into the curve of her ear, enjoying how the goosebumps rise to the surface of her skin under my lips.

She gasps. "And what was that?"

I run my hands up the back of her thighs, and when I reach the curve of her ass, I hitch her onto the edge of the work surface. "To frisk search you on arrival. I have to make sure you're not concealing any tools."

"I'm innocent," she chokes out, eyes wild, the hint of a smile turning up her lips.

"Innocent?" I raise an eyebrow and lift her hand to my cheek. "This scar says otherwise." Then, I dip my head into the crook between her neck and shoulder, nipping along the length of her throat.

She tastes so sweet I want to take a fucking bite out of her. I love how her throat vibrates under my lips, how her pulse throbs faster and faster when I start unbuttoning her overalls.

"I'm not smuggling anything, I swear," she says, the fire burning in her eyes. She lifts her hips up, helping me slide her overalls off. They fall into a pool of denim on the dusty floor.

"I'm going to strip search you and check every cavity myself to make sure."

With that, I crush my mouth against hers, my lips hungry for the taste of her tongue and my hands greedy for the touch of her smooth, naked ass. I

rip off her bra and panties like a lion readying its prey.

“Get on your hands and knees,” I growl, lightly spanking her soft ass cheek. When her breath hitches in her throat, I lower my tone, a broad sweep of my fist sending paint pots and tools flying across the room. But I gently place the frame she’s working on onto the floor. “I don’t ask twice, China Doll. Hands and knees. *Now.*”

She does what she’s told this time, flipping over on the table. “Present yourself to me.”

My sweet, innocent Poppy hesitates .”Uh—”

If I weren’t so goddamn horny, I’d laugh. “Spread yourself, baby. Show me your pussy.”

Her hands reach around, her red fingernails pulling her pussy mound apart. I can’t stifle my moan this time; no red-blooded male could. As she pulls apart her milky flesh, her pink pussy lips reveal themselves like a blooming flower. Already, her hole is glistening with anticipation. “Good girl,” I moan. When her knees buckle at my tone, I lean over her, pushing the bulge in my suit pants against her wetness, and lower myself to her ear. “You like being a good girl for me, don’t you, baby?”

“Yes,” she breathes. I love how her skin flusters, the cocktail of excitement and embarrassment turning her pale skin a beautiful shade of red.

“I can’t hear you,” I say sharply, sinking my teeth into her exposed neck.

“Y-yes,” she stammers, louder this time.

Ugh, she’s so fucking hot.

I turn my attention back to her parted lips, lowering myself to my knees to get up close and personal with her sex. “You’re wet for me already,

baby,” I murmur, transfixed by the glistening hole. I circle it with my finger, causing a loud moan from Poppy, and then wipe the trickle of excitement running down the inner thigh.

When I lift my finger to my lips, it’s like crack. One taste is never enough.

I plunge my face into her pussy, thrusting my tongue into her barely used hole. Knowing that I’m the only man in the world that’s ever put my cock in this tight little ring is driving me wild. I slide the point of my tongue down through the silky, puffy flesh of her lips, then hover, teasing her, just above her swollen clit.

Something between a moan and gurgle escapes her lips, and she pushes her ass against my tongue. Her forwardness earns her a light spank on her ass. “Stay still. You know I won’t ask you twice.”

Her thighs quiver, her muffled pleas floating through them like music to my ears. It doesn’t take long until my self-control disappears into a puff of smoke, and I wrap my lips around her clit and suck. Hard.

Now I let her knees buckle and let her ass push into my face. I let her grind her sex against me as I suck, nibble and bite her clit, stopping only to travel the small distance to her hole and fuck her with my tongue.

“Please,” she gasps.

I tear my mouth away from my latest obsession long enough to ask, “Please what?”

“Please fuck me,” she all but sobs.

Her words melt away the last fraction of resolve I have left. Fueled by nothing short of animalistic desire, I free my dick from the constraints of my zipper and slide it into her tight cunt. Remembering she’s only done this once before, I just about manage to stop myself from plowing into her.

Instead, I grit my teeth and slide into her slowly, letting out a throaty moan when she gasps; and again, when her pussy conforms to my cock like a custom-made glove. “This pussy is mine,” I growl, palming her ass. “Whose pussy is this?”

There’s no hesitation this time. Her words come from deep in her chest, laced with lust and longing. “Yours,” she chokes, curling her fist against the table as I pump into her. “It’s yours, Lorcan. I belong to you.”

I belong to you.

The breathless words tumbling from her lips are too much for my cock to handle. I wind my fist in her hair, making her arch her back and expose her beautiful tits to me, and pull her back against my chest. Hot, thick ropes explode from me, filling up her tight cunt. “Good girl,” I whisper in her ear as the orgasm washes over me, “you good fucking girl.”

She’s still panting and withering against me, frictionless from our glistening skin. “Lean back on your heels,” I demand.

She does so carefully, my cock sliding out of her wetness. I dip my hand between her thighs and catch my cum as it falls out her pussy. Nibbling and sucking on her earlobe, I reach over her, holding her back against my chest. Then I spread my juices over her swollen pussy, using it like lube.

My not-so-innocent China Doll leans all of her weight against my chest, her breasts bouncing as she grinds against my palm. One hand massaging her pussy, I use the other to roll her stiffened nipples between my thumb and forefinger, pinching and pulling harder and harder to the tune of her moans.

When she comes, it’s hard and hypnotic. She buckles against my palm, filling it with fresh juices, every fiber of her body quivering against my chest.

I hold her there until her breathing slows, and her eyes open again, a small, bashful smile lingering on her lips.

I spin her round to face me, pulling her legs around my waist. “My little China Doll,” I murmur, planting the most gentle kiss on the tip of her nose. Her eyes are glazed over, still riding the high of her orgasm. Then, she buries herself into my arms, her heart beating out of her chest and against mine.

War seems a million miles away when she’s in my arms.

Poppy

I'm like a horse with blinders. I wake up every morning, and if I stare at the day ahead, I can pretend that all of the problems looming in my peripheral vision don't exist.

Almost.

Orna hasn't visited me in three weeks. Not since the day she read the letter and scurried out of the museum faster than a freight train. Her sister, Callie has been coming in her place, bringing me three meals a day without a word nor a smile. My heart is heavy with losing the only person that I had considered to be a "friend" in my new twisted reality. Her sudden disappearance also opened up a handful of new questions about who the hell my father really is.

My days bleed into each other, the only thing that changes is the antique I'm working on and the mood Lorcan's in. I wake up, shower, stuff a croissant in my mouth and travel the twenty feet to my workshop. I plug in the iPod Shuffle Lorcan gave me, listen to the same twenty tracks on repeat as I paint, stain, sand, or polish. Then I stop for lunch, before working until my back aches and I'm dizzy from fumes.

Then there's the long stretch of darkness between dinner and Lorcan's visit. The silence. It's the time when the blinkers come off, and the

problems and the unanswered questions eat away at my brain and crush down on my chest.

I want to know who my father is. Who he *really* is. Because with every reaction I get from people at this estate—first Lorcan, then Cillian, now Orna—it's getting harder and harder to believe that he was nothing but an overgrown corner boy.

Lorcan comes after midnight, every night. And every night, the question burns on the tip of my tongue. It melts away the second his hands find my body.

We've moved into a new reality. One that exists only in my bed and only under the cloak of darkness. When the key scrapes in the lock, the anticipation brews in the pit of my stomach; I never know what Lorcan is going to slide under my covers that night.

Some nights, he's in a playful mood. He'll run his hands, lips, and tongue over every inch of my goose-bumped flesh—every inch except for the spot between my thighs. He'll nibble at my neck, suck on my swollen tits, and only when I'm delirious with desire, only when I'm clawing at the pillows and begging him to fuck me, does he give me what I crave.

Other nights, he doesn't say anything at all. The scent of liquor lingers on his ragged breath, the dirt clinging to his suit. Those nights, he fucks me rough. Parting my thighs with a forceful knee and taking what's his, without a single word leaving his lips. I've come to accept that I love those nights as much as I love the ones where he brings me to my own orgasm. There's something disgustingly satisfying about being used as a fuck toy. As his escape to whatever horrors are happening in his day.

The only constant is that he never stays.

Lorcan

“Let’s play a game.”

Viktor Bratnov starts to hyperventilate the moment the words leave my lips.

I stare down at the puddle caused by the leaky pipe in the ceiling. Drip, drip, dripping on the concrete. I always give my captives a little breather after I spout something vague. That little stretch of silence gives their imagination time to go wild. Because sometimes, fantasy can be even worse than reality.

Those sometimes are never with me.

A heavy sigh comes from my lungs, then I stand up and close the distance between me and my toolbox. I don’t need to look at Viktor to know his eyes are following me around the damp, dark room like a hawk. Because watching is all that he can do, considering I’ve tied him to one of the stone pillars that keep the Quinn Ventures building standing.

I bide my time, running my fingers over each tool, plucking some from the box and holding them up to the dim glow from the small lamp in the corner.

When I hold up the pliers, a very satisfying shriek escapes him.

“Pliers it is,” I drawl.

“No,” he gargles, choking on the puddle of blood swamping the back of his throat. Then he barks something in Russian.

“I haven’t got that far on *Duolingo*, I’m afraid,” I muse, polishing the blade of my pliers with the rag I took out of his mouth a few moments earlier. “I’ll explain the rules of the game, although even a lobotomized loaf like you will get the gist pretty quickly.”

More gargling, more writhing his back against the curve of the pillar.

Ah, the soundtrack of the Tunnels. A complex network of large, cavernous rooms underneath the city, where skyscrapers lay their foundations and the council has their sewage system. My grandfather made a deal with the mayor at the time, and the Quinn’s were given the sole key to the network. Buried well below the streets of the city and surrounded in meters-thick concrete, it’s the perfect place to conduct the more...*violent* side of the business.

The Tunnels have been losing their charm lately. Perhaps because I’m down here fourteen hours a day at the moment, either extracting information from anyone remotely connected to the Bratnovs, or using them as a punching bag.

It’s getting tiresome. The perils of war, I suppose.

But there’s nothing boring about having Viktor Bratnov, Igor Bratnov’s youngest son, in my captivity. No, the excitement brews below the surface of my skin, and I have to breathe slow and steady to stop my hands trembling with the excitement.

This is it.

War is coming to an end.

“The game is called Give or Take. I *give* you the chance to answer a question truthfully, and if you don’t, I *take* something from you.” I snip the

pliers for emphasis.

My routine is so well practiced that it feels like I've been running a one-man play on Broadway for years. I close the gap between us and crouch down, ready for Act Two.

"It doesn't have to be like this, Viktor," I mutter in his bloodied ear. I hope my face shows the concern I'm trying to convey, instead of just looking constipated. "So, I'll give you one freebie question, okay? A test run. Nod if you understand."

Under the mop of damp blond hair, he gives me a small dip of his head. The satisfaction I feel is almost overwhelming. Viktor and I aren't so different, you know. We were both born with a surname that gave us total power, without ever having to do anything to earn it. When our families still had their pacts, we'd cross paths a few times a year. I'd see his yacht on the Med in the summers, hear his rugged laugh on the other side of the wall in Panama's most esteemed whorehouse.

The only difference between us now is that I have no choice but to step up to the plate. "First question," I growl. "Where is your father hiding?"

Viktor gurgles, stretching his lips to reveal the gummy gap where I knocked out three of his teeth a few hours earlier. He closes his swollen eyes, stiffens his back, and then stares at me with the composure of a man that has trained for moments like this his whole life. His lips curl backward and then he spits just left of my Gucci loafer. "Fuck yourself," he hisses. Without giving it a second thought, I slam his head back against the concrete pillar. There's a sharp intake of breath and then a sickening crack before his head rolls around his neck.

I slap his bloodied cheek and mutter, "For fucks sake."

"He's out cold."

I turn to see Antoin at the doorway, sleeves of his shirt rolled up and hands in his suit pockets. “No shit, Sherlock,” I grumble back.

“Maybe we should send in the medic. We really need him alive. He’s the only direct link to Bratnov we have right now.”

My gaze locks on Antoin’s. “No medic,” I snarl, stalking past him and out into the dimly lit corridor. “He’ll be fine in a bit.”

Donnacha appears in the doorway. He snaps off a pair of bloody rubber gloves and chucks them on the floor. “I got somethin’ to say.”

Antoin drags his eyes from Viktor’s slumped body and nods to the makeshift office at the end of the hall. Once inside, I click the door shut and sit on an upturned bucket. My body is heavy with too much torturing and not enough whiskey.

“I’ll make this quick,” Donnacha says, wiping his brow with the hem of his T-shirt. “I’ve got Bratnov’s accountant’s son next door. I think we need outside help.”

My jaw sets but he raises his hand. “Trust me, Lorc. You know I hate admitting defeat as much as you do.”

I lean against the cold concrete and pin him with a hard stare. “You have ten seconds to convince me that this is a good idea.”

“Igor Bratnov has disappeared off the face of the goddamn earth. He’s plotting, Lorc.”

“No shit.”

“But we have no idea *what* he’s plotting.” He thrusts a bloodied thumb towards the wall, the one that separates us and an unconscious Viktor. “You know that fucker ain’t talking. Those Russian’s have loyalty made from steel. They have a hive mentality—Igor will bury his son six feet under if it’s for the greater good.”

“Your ten seconds are up.”

“Lorcan,” Donnacha says, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “Please.” My lips harden into a thin line; he takes it as his cue to continue with his stupid fucking plan. “Our men are dropping like flies. We’ve lost three cousins today alone.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, grinding my molars together. Right now, I don’t even want to know who. One I play poker with every Thursday? One that taught me how to skim stones on our family holidays to Martha’s Vineyard?

“We might win this war, Lorcan, but we’ll have no men left to show for it,” he says, lowering his tone into something resembling pity. “We need allies. New ones. There’s a fuck ton of families across the country that want nothing more than to see Bratnov hung, drawn, and quartered. It’s what your father would do.”

It’s what your father would do.

Fuck, I wish to every god in the fucking sky right now that my father was still alive. He’d know exactly what to do. I squeeze my eyes shut, imagine him standing in the corner of the office, like he always used to do. He’d watch us talk from the shadows, let us conjure up ideas and plans, before stepping out into the light and laying down the law.

His plans were always calm, calculated and well thought out. The second they left his lips, they were always the obvious way. Any far-fetched plan my brothers and I would bounce between the walls suddenly sounded ridiculous.

What would Donal Quinn do?

I turn to my other cousin. He’s leaning against the wall, not having said a word. “I want the East Coast, Antoin,” I say slowly and steadily, lifting

my eyes to his. His jaw ticks. “I want to dominate every square mile and I won’t compromise on that.”

“Lorcan—”

“Silence,” I growl. “We’ll form an alliance, but not with any of the families on the East Coast, or with any that have business interest here either.”

Antoin strokes the stubble around his jaw and says, “I don’t think we should work with any other family.”

“I’ve got contacts, cuz,” Donnacha snaps, pinning me with a dark stare. “Loyal ones. Know at least two families that hate the Bratnov’s as much as we do. The Mexicans in South Texas and the Regazzis on the West Coast.”

My mouth curls into a sneer. “I’d rather drag my balls over hot coals than work with the Italians.”

“They’re not the same, man. Your father had a good relationship with Alessandro.”

I think back to the funeral, visualizing Alessandro Regazzi’s amongst the mourners. “He’s always publicly condemned the Delfino *famiglia* for what they’ve done.”

The idea rolls around my tired brain and I find myself nodding. It’s rare for two families of the same nationality to go against each other. Even if they run different operations, there’s usually a relationship there, or at the very least, an unspoken understanding, that they won’t fuck with each other or their territory.

I’ve only ever heard of it twice. Once with us against the West Coast Irish, led by Marcus Fucking Murphy, and now with the Italian’s.

“Get them here. I want a face-to-face meeting at *Gatsby’s*, Saturday night.”

Antoin raises an eyebrow and says, “That’s in two days.”

“We can’t wait,” I bite back. “In case you haven’t noticed, we’re in the middle of a fucking war. Get them there, or don’t.” I add with a threatening undertone, “Your funeral if it’s the latter.”

He bites his tongue, swallowing the violent retort that I can see is bubbling in his throat. “I’ll sort it.”

I scrub at the bags under my eyes. My limbs are heavy. Thinking about it, I can’t remember the last time I slept.

“Go home and get some rest, Lorcan,” Donnacha says, clapping my shoulder.

“Nah, I gotta—”

“I’ll take care of Viktor,” Antoin interrupts. He offers me a cruel smile. “What weapon should I start with?”

I rise from the upturned bucket and thump his shoulder on the way out. “The sander,” I grumble. “I want his skin sanded off, layer by layer, until he’s about to pass out again from the pain.”

Donnacha lets out a low whistle as I head to the exit. “I’d love to spend thirty minutes inside that fucked-up mind of yours, Lorc.”

I grimace to myself.

You wouldn’t survive ten seconds.

Lorcan

Poppy must have heard me enter the code to the museum this time because she's waiting at the top of the stairs to greet me with a grin. "I was beginning to think you were a vampire."

"How so?" I grunt, taking the stairs two at a time, suddenly desperate to close the gap between us.

"Because I can't remember the last time I saw you in the daylight."

A chuckle gets stuck in my throat, and I favor pushing my lips to the top of her head and breathing in her warm scent over coming back with a sarcastic retort.

When I have my hit of Eau de Poppy, I look over her head into the workroom. There are mirrors and grandfather clocks and vases neatly piled into the corner, looking as new and bright as the day they were made. "Jesus, China Doll. You work too much. I'm going to have to start breaking more things to give you something to do."

She picks at the dried paint on her denim overalls and raises an eyebrow. "Work too much? I could say the same about you. Whatever work is for you at the moment, anyway."

Ignoring her last remark, I glance at my watch. "Speaking of work, I can't stay." There's no denying the disappointment in her eyes. I know she

was hoping for a repeat last time, when I fucked her over her workstation. “I gotta catch some sleep, then I’m back in the office.”

She cocks her head to the side and bites her bottom lip. “Okay.”

I lift her chin up, sensing there are a few more words she wants to let out of that pretty, plump mouth. “Say it.”

My cock tingles as she challenges me with a stare. “You could sleep in my bed.”

The deep, rumbling sound in my chest is a whole different devil trying to get out. “But that wouldn’t result in much sleeping, would it?”

“I guess not.”

The disappointment radiates off her. I tug at her wrist, closing the foot or so between us. “Come here,” I growl, cupping my hands around her cheeks and lifting her lips to mine. I kiss her slowly, passionately, releasing all of the tension built up in my chest over the last twenty-four hours. Only when she presses her hips against mine, creating irresistible friction, do I pull away. “I didn’t come here so you can make me rock hard.”

“Oh?” She says, feigning innocence. “I thought it was a given?”

“It is. But today my boner comes with a message. I’m taking you to dinner on Saturday night. At Gatsby’s.”

Her grin is hypnotic. “Really? And it’ll be open?”

“Sorry to piss on your parade, but I should warn you that it’s a business dinner. There’ll be potential... business partners there, and I’ll need you on my arm to impress them.”

She clenches her jaw and lowers her gaze. “Right.”

A smirk tugs at my lips, and I search her expression with fascination. “You were hoping for a date.” It’s not a question.

“No,” she retorts, but the rush of blood to her cheeks betrays her sharp tone.

I cup her jaw, running my thumb over her satin-like skin. “Poppy, do you want to go on a date with me?”

She huffs, flustered. “No, I—”

“I won’t ask you again.”

Through her thick eyelashes, she says, “It’d be nice.”

“Then I’ll take you on a date,” I reply with a smirk. “Once this is all over. Okay?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know what ‘this’ is, and when it’ll be over, but okay.”

I pull her in for one last, lingering kiss, getting my fill, before stalking back down the stairs and out of the Museum.

As I cross the gardens to the manor, my liquor cabinet calling my name through the open window of my study, I can’t deny the pang of guilt that stabs somewhere between my lungs and rib cage.

Poppy Murphy is the perfect arm candy for this meeting. Not just because I want to show off my prized keepsake, but because it’s a sign of power.

The Mexicans and the Italians, they’ll know exactly who Marcus Murphy is and what he did.

And when they see his daughter on my arm, there won’t be a doubt in their mind that the Quinn family always rises to the top.

Poppy

“Knock, knock,” a voice chortles through the bedroom door. Whoever it belongs to doesn’t actually knock.

I slide off the bed, sticking my thumb between the pages to mark my place. “Uh, come in?”

The door bursts open to reveal a beautiful blonde woman. She brings in the scent of late summer and Chanel perfume, along with a rack of expensive-looking clothes. “Hey girl!” she chimes, whipping her impossibly long extensions around her shoulders. “You must be Poppy.” Her slender hand appears under my nose. As she dangles it in front of me, she scans the room. “Jesus. A bit creepy in here, isn’t it?”

Yeah. I think I’ll need to make use of my makeshift bookmark for this.

I awkwardly take hold of it before she snatches it back. “I’m J.K.” She pops her gum and her false lashes flutter as she sweeps her gaze from my messy bun down to my paint-covered sneakers. “I’m getting Cinderella going to the ball vibes. Right?” Only when she snaps around, do I notice Orna hovering in the door frame. My heart surges as we lock eyes. She flashes me a meek, apologetic grin. I don’t know whether it’s because she let this Barbie hurricane into the museum to assault my ears so unexpectedly, or because she’s been MIA for nearly a month.

J.K. doesn't wait for an answer. Instead, she grabs the rack of clothes and tugs it across the floorboards, wobbling in her red-bottom heels. "Okay, so, fashion show..." she chirps, snapping her fingers to a beat only she can hear. "Here's what we'll do. You'll go try everything on, give us a twirl, then we'll decide on the dress that makes you look the cutest. Goddit?"

My mouth opens long enough for a weird, strangled noise to escape before it closes again. "Okay, so," she purrs, "shall we start with the Lanvin? Or De La Renta? Who's your favorite designer? I'm pretty sure I —"

"Hey, J.K.?" Orna's loud voice cuts through this random woman's ramblings. There's a firmness to her tone that I really appreciate right now. "Let's do it a different way. You leave the rack here, we'll send back whatever we don't choose. Okay?"

J.K.'s gum almost drops out of her mouth. "Uh, but where's the fun in that?"

"Oh, believe me, it's there somewhere."

We lock eyes and I stifle a laugh, suddenly interested in the beadwork closest to me. Anything to avoid J.K.'s hard stare. "Okay," she huffs through the silence, "I get the picture. Call me if you need any help, I guess. Or don't. It's whatever."

Orna steps to the side so J.K. can make her dramatic exit, her draped cardigan and endless hair flowing behind her. She follows her down to the lobby, lets her out, then appears in the doorway once more.

The room fills with an awkward silence that makes me wish J.K.'s loud mouth was dominating the space again.

"Sorry about her," Orna eventually mutters, playing with a chip on the wooden frame. "She used to dress all the Quinn girls for any ball or gala

we'd attend. I haven't seen her in years. Just the mention of her name gives me PTSD."

Instead of easing into conversation, I pin her with my stare. She meets it and sighs. "Okay, I'm sorry about me too."

"I thought we were friends," I say bitterly. "But I guess not."

Her eyebrows shoot up under her curls. "We were—are. It's just..." she trails off and bites her lips, offering me a pathetic shrug instead of the explanation I deserve.

"It's just what? My last name?" I snap. "Please, Orna, tell me. What is it about my last name that is so horrifying, that you fled out of this building like a bat out of hell and didn't return for a month?"

"I'm sorry, Poppy. It was a shock. I had no idea that you were Marcus Murphy's daughter."

"And so what if I am?" I bark back, unable to hide my anger anymore. "He was only a low-ranking lackey, right? One that made a stupid mistake that led to your family being killed. Why am I being punished like this?"

She shakes her head. "Poppy...your father was anything but a low-ranking lackey. He was a pure evil bastard."

My heart rate accelerates, thumping so loudly, I can hear it in my ears.

Pure evil?

The man formerly known as my father, Marcus Murphy. I always knew he was a bad man, but he wasn't powerful enough, brave enough—hell, *smart* enough, to warrant that title.

Orna shakes her head, staring somewhere about my head. "You never knew, did you? You were never meant to know. Donal made sure of that."

I drop the Chanel gown I'm holding; it sinks to the floor, forming a puddle of tulle and lace. "Tell me," I choke out, unable to take my eyes off

her, “*please.*”

She chews the inside of her lip, the color draining from her face. “I’ve already said too much.”

“Orna—”

“Stop,” she hisses with a venom that doesn’t match her usual open features and sunny smile. “Please. Like I said, Lorcan’s father swore that you’d never find out who he really was. I can’t, *won’t*, be the one that betrays him.”

She rises to her feet, unsteady and flustered. “Now,” she says, turning her attention to the rack of clothes. “You’ll accept my apology for ghosting, and we’ll draw a line under the sand. I’ll help you get ready for this dinner—I’ll even bring up a bottle of champagne, if you like—and then we’ll gossip and bitch and catch up on everything we’ve missed over the last month. I understand if you don’t want to accept that apology, Poppy. Tell me to leave and I will. Either way, once Lorcan has told you the truth, then I’ll be happy to answer any questions that you have.” She turns to face me, eyes watery. “Please don’t make my life harder than it already is.”

I swallow her words, feeling numb.

“Champagne would be nice.”

The next two hours are nowhere as awkward as I thought it’d be. It’s easy to slip back into conversation with Orna, and after a few glasses of *Moët* and a couple of ice-breaker anecdotes on Orna’s behalf, it feels like we’re back to normal with each other.

Well, as normal as my new normal is.

“I think the silver Oscar de la Renta,” she says as I stand in the middle of the dressing room. Her face beams back at me from several different mirrors.

“And I think this champagne has gone straight to my head.”

She lets out a little laugh and lunges over to grab the half-empty flute from my hand. “Jesus, I better get you some water, Lorcan will kill me if he realizes I’ve got you sloshed.”

A warm feeling floods the pit of my stomach. It’s sudden and unexpected and I’m struggling to wade through the champagne fog to find its source.

Lorcan.

His name burns the back of my throat and makes my heart skip a beat. I’m excited to spend some time with him outside of the Museum. Outside of my bed.

I bite my lip and turn my attention back to my reflection. “Is it too much?”

“You look like a Greek goddess. Lorcan will love it. And I can tell by your cheesy grin that you love it too.”

I do. It’s fashioned almost like a toga, with a sweeping single shoulder and a cutaway bodice. It cascades to the floor like a silk waterfall, a dramatic side slit the only relief.

“I bought you those strappy Gucci stilettos with the silver buckle—they’ll pair perfectly,” Orna gushes, taking a step closer to me, stroking the hair falling messily around my shoulders. “We can leave your hair loose in these gorgeous natural waves you have. Add a big braid running through it.”

We lock eyes in the mirror and I feel a tinge of sadness for her. “Did you enjoy going to galas?”

She offers a small smile. “Of course. At least once a month one of the families we had alliances with would throw these elaborate balls all along

the East Coast. We'd spend the entire week leading up to it getting our gowns tailored and our hair done."

"And now?"

"And now, we don't get invited to those balls anymore," she says quietly, fussing with the skirt of my dress.

"How come?"

Orna shrugs, still not meeting my eye. "These other families loved Lorcan's father. But Lorcan... not so much." As I open my mouth to probe further, she links my arm and tugs me towards the vanity. "Enough with the family politics, already. Let's get you ready."

I like having Orna back, even if I still have a million questions, so I keep my mouth closed. After another glass of champagne and thirty minutes later, my hair and makeup are done, and Orna steps back, satisfied. Like an artist admiring their finished painting.

"You look amazing, Poppy. I wish I could stay to see Lorcan's reaction. But I don't really want to see the prick right now." She holds up her hand before I can ask why. "Again, family politics." With another tweak of my hair and an extra spritz of perfume, she leaves the museum with a cheery wave and some parting advice. "You'll probably be put on the wives and girlfriends table. Drink enough to put up with their vapid gossiping, just don't drink enough that you become the center of their gossip."

Listening to Orna galloping down the stairs, reality kicks in. I have no idea what I'm getting myself into, or how to act. I'm a prisoner. A debt owed. How do I introduce myself? Will Lorcan even *let* me introduce myself?

"Damn."

Lorcan's deep voice from the doorway brings me out of my thoughts with a jolt. I didn't even hear him come in. "Jesus," I mutter, clutching my hand to my chest. "You scared me."

"Nothing new."

When I whip round to face him, my sarcastic retort is snatched from my lungs.

Lorcan Quinn looks devilishly handsome. The slim cut of his tuxedo clings to every bulge on his body like second skin. It's made from luxurious-looking silk that has my fingers twitching to touch it. The midnight blue color is interrupted only by a floral bow tie, made up of vibrant colors that pop against his crisp white shirt.

My eyes drag up to his angular face, in time to see his lips twitch with amusement. "I know," he drawls. "I scrub up well too."

Before I can respond, he pulls me into his strong arms and spins me around quickly, until my exposed back is against his chest. "Look at us," he murmurs in my ear as we both stare at our reflection in the mirrors. "We look perfect together."

The lust escapes my body in one ragged sigh. His fingers burn against my bare shoulder as he sweeps my hair from it, before planting a soft, sensual kiss on my collar.

I swallow the desire in my throat and study our reflection. We *do* look good together. Despite being almost six foot in heels, I fit neatly between his shoulder blades. His olive skin and jet black hair are a stark contrast against my pale complexion and copper locks. Ice and fire. Night and day.

Neither can exist with the other.

Lorcan's voice vibrates against my throat. "What's wrong, China Doll?" Only then do I realize my eyes are shut.

When I open them, I'm staring directly at his eyes in the mirror. They burn amber with all the secrets he won't let pass through his lips.

Loosened by the five glasses of champagne, the question slips from my tongue before I can stop it. "Who was my father, Lorcan?"

His face instantly darkens and his fingers slip from my waist. "What has Orna said to you?"

"Nothing. That's the problem."

When his eyes flash with anger and he widens the gap between us, I feel desperation clawing at my throat. "Please, tell me. I know he did more than just hand over the parcel. I know he was more than a lackey—"

"Enough," he growls, turning away from me. I see his back muscles clench through the tight fabric of his suit, his hands curling into fists.

Another burning question comes to mind. One I've wanted to know the answer to since I was nine years old.

Despite my trembling lips, I say softly, "Then at least tell me why you were in his study that night. All those years ago. The night I saw him slit that man's throat."

Every muscle and bone in Lorcan's body stiffens. It feels like an eternity until he says, "You saw me."

Not a question. And I don't offer an answer.

When he finally turns to face me, there's an expression I can't read contorting his face. "We don't have time for this," he says coolly, pinning me with a glare. "The car's outside."

He reaches for my arm but I take a step backward to avoid his grip. A freshly brewed cocktail of defiance takes hold of me. "I'm not going."

Lorcan's nostrils flare. "Don't start."

“No, Lorcan,” I croak, folding my arms across my chest. “All you’ve ever done is take from me. You took my freedom. My life. My *virginity*. Give me something back.”

There are small things about Lorcan I’ve noticed since spending more time with him. One of them is the vein in his temple that throbs when he’s angry. Right now it’s pulsating a million beats a minute. His jaw clenches, completing his death stare. “I’ll ask you once, Miss Murphy. Pull yourself together and let’s go.” He takes a step towards me. Recently, my body opens up to him when he comes close, but now, it retracts, cowering from his looming silhouette. “If I have to ask twice, then we’ll still attend the dinner. But instead of being on my arm, you’ll be on your back. Providing evening entertainment for every gentleman in the restaurant. Is that understood?”

I hate how calm his voice is. How easily that vicious threat can slip through his pearly white teeth and kiss-me lips.

When I don’t reply, he slowly turns to the door. “Behave yourself, China Doll.”

With my heart in my Gucci stilettos, I remember my place.

I may be on his arm tonight, but to him, I belong in his museum as nothing more than a keepsake. He’ll take me out, show all his friends, then lock me back in my cabinet.

Lorcan

Regret.

It's an unfamiliar feeling. Especially when it's not accompanied by a hangover.

But I'm stone-cold sober, feeling every crack in the iron-cladding around my heart. All because I didn't give little Poppy Fucking Murphy what she wanted. I try not to glance at her, her long limbs curled up in the furthest corner of the Rolls. Her copper hair falling down her back as she turns to stare at the streets of Boston passing us by.

It was easier when I hated her guts.

I squeeze my eyes shut, forcing my brain to think forward, not sideways. This is a big night for the Quinns, and I have to navigate it with the precision of my father. I have to stay sharp and composed. Which is why I haven't loaded up with half a bottle of *The Smugglers Club* and why the Glock in my breast pocket still has the safety catch on. I can't afford to start an all-out war in the middle of *Gatsby's* because of a snide remark or a filthy look, especially not when I'm already mid-battle with the Bratnovs.

But there's no way I'd leave my weapon, or my men at home. There's too much I have to make sure of. Like whether the Regazzis really have distanced themselves from the Delfinos. Or why the fuck the Mexicans would have an interest in forming an alliance.

My cell screen flashes with a curt message from Antoin. He's already there. When I look up, I realize we're pulling up outside *Gatsby's* ourselves.

The joint looks impressive at night. A new *Gatsby's* sign hangs outside the doorway, made up of thousands of white light bulbs. The soft glow from floodlights sprawls up the brick walls on either side, and there's even a red carpet hugging the three steps leading up to the door. *Yeah, maybe I should have mentioned to Ricardo that this was going to be a more...private event.*

One of my men, clad in a suit, opens the door for Poppy, before rounding the Rolls to open mine. I step out and cast an eye over him, taking in his radio earpiece. Then I slam the back of my hand against his chest. It lands with a hard thud against a bulletproof vest.

"Are you all equipped in this way?" I ask out of the side of my mouth, scanning the guards lining the exterior of the restaurant, and those inside the lobby manning the body scanners.

"Yes, sir."

I nod and close the gap between me and Poppy, snaking a strong hand around her waist. Then, I lean down to meet her ear. "Do me a favor and try to act like you don't hate my guts tonight."

She replies acidly, "I'm not Meryl fucking Streep."

Under my forearm, I feel her muscles unclench slightly as we step into the restaurant, side-stepping the body scanners, obviously. A glance at her face tells me she's in just as much awe as she was when I first took her here, if not more. I steal a moment to watch her, taking in the green velvet booths lining the walls and the white-gloved pianist on the grand piano at the back. All the other seating has been removed, leaving a long table in the middle of the room.

The lights from the Venetian chandeliers above our head refract their soft glow over her face, as she raises it to the ceiling to drink it all in.

I have the sudden urge to call the whole fucking meeting off and kick everyone out. Everyone except Poppy. I'd walk her through every antique and ornament in the whole joint, letting her touch and feel and smell its history while I tell her the story of my travels and how I acquired it.

Antoin's glowering eyes from the bar bring me back to earth with a thump.

No distractions.

I lock eyes with my cousin, before making a sweeping glance around the company he's keeping. All of their eyes are on me too.

Using a firm yet gentle touch, I spin Poppy around and pull her close, before crushing my lips against hers. It takes only a beat before she's kissing me back, melting into my body in that goddamn sexy way that she does. Before I pull away, I brush my lips against her ear, trying to pretend like her sudden heavy breathing isn't bringing my dick to life. "Remember, I'll loan you out to each and every one of those men if you don't behave yourself tonight."

I stifle a groan as her hand finds its way to my beard. It's soft and delicate and I want nothing more than to have it wrapped around my cock. "No need to loan me out," she snarls in a tone that doesn't match the touch of her hand or the intensity behind her kiss. "I'll take the bald one."

I pull away to wipe the smear of lipstick off her chin and to flash her a cold smile. Her eyes have enough humor to let me know she's kidding. Nodding towards the gaggle of tarts around one of the booths in the back of the room, I say. "Go make friends. I'll see you at dinner."

Hesitant, she turns towards the wives and girlfriends of the men I'm hoping to get on our side and totters over in her ridiculously high heels. My attention goes back to the men by the bar. I straighten up, tighten my cufflinks and draw a deep breath. My plan worked straight away.

"Quite the lady you have there," a balding Italian says with a smirk.

I pin him with a hard stare. "She's Marcus Murphy's daughter." He lets out a low whistle, impressed.

"Gentlemen," I say without a hint of a smile as I penetrate their circle. "Shall we?"

Nods all around. I lead the way into a back room, one I had Ricardo set up especially. "Very nice," one of the men purrs in an Italian accent, taking in the floor-to-ceiling mahogany bookshelves and the Art Deco wall lamps casting their soft glow over the quilted wallpaper and gem-tone rugs. "Very Prohibition era."

I won't entertain small talk. Not until I know who I'm entertaining entirely. I gesture to the table set up in the middle of the room. "Please, sit."

It's circular, no bigger than a poker table. Exactly what I asked Ricardo for. The shape makes it seem like there's no head of the table; the size is small enough for me to look into each one of these fuckers eyes as they talk and assess if they are telling the truth or not. And each deep-seated armchair around it will lure the men into a false sense of comfort.

A server waltzes through with a tray of drinks, then turns to me and asks what I'd like.

Antoin's eyes challenge me.

"Water," I say after a beat.

Once everyone has settled into their armchair, drink in hand, a silence falls over the table and all eyes settle on me.

But I don't speak, not just yet. Instead, I take in each of the four men, one by one. To my immediate left is Alessandro Regazzi, the head of the Regazzi family and the one that asked me about Poppy. A plump man in an expensive suit with gold on every finger. To his left is his second-in-command, his son, Angelo. He has his father's dark hair and gray eyes. They are punctuated with the cruelty that comes with being born into a violent world.

To my left sits Rodrigo Mondez. Tattoos crawl up from underneath his shirt collar, up his neck and onto his face. A network of symbols and artwork that makes as much sense to me as hieroglyphics. His face is weather worn and hardened with years of doing business in the harsh desert that stretches around El Paso, Texas. While Regazzi's son shares similar traits as his father, there's little that connects Miguel Mondez to his. Sharp cheekbones, hazel eyes, and the only visible marking is the single tear that sits below his left eye. There's a stillness about him that piques my interest. Out of all the men in the room, he's the one I'd keep an eye on the most.

Antoin is sitting next to him, directly opposite me, making it easier to signal to each other.

Suddenly, Alessandro cuts through the silence by clearing his throat. His voice is tinged with a thick Italian accent. "Mr. Quinn," he says, twisting his large body to give me all of his attention. "I'd like to clear the air before we start." When I don't reply, he takes this as his cue to continue. "The Regazzi's cut all ties with the Delfino's over thirty years ago." He pins me with his dark eyes; they will me to believe him. "We were in no way involved with their attack on your family. After your grandfather loaned my father over a million dollars to settle a debt that we had with the Turkish,

we have always respected the Quinns. In no way do we condone the actions of the Delfinos nor do we support them in any way.”

Without saying a word, I look at Antoin. His head moves a fraction. *Believe him.*

The server arrives with my water, and I’m slow to take a sip. When I place it back on the table, I say. “And what would you gain from forming an alliance against the Bratnovs?”

Alessandro’s eyebrows twitch at my directness. But I see no point in beating around the bush here. He glances at his son, before turning back to me. “The Vargas cartel supplied our cocaine for decades. One night, the shipments stopped.” His beefy fist curls around his scotch on the rocks and his Panerai watch glistens as he brings it to his lips. “I contacted Santiago Vargas directly. Radio silence. Eventually, I sent Angelo to Medellin to get to the root of the issue.” He lowers his glass to reveal the snarl on his lips. When he doesn’t continue, my eyes flick to his son. He’s staring me dead in the face, his jaw ticking.

In a low voice, Angelo says, “The meeting didn’t go so well.” He twists to the left, revealing the ugly scar running from his forehead down to his chin. I never noticed it in the main dining hall.

Alessandro seems to have got his voice back. “They’d made a deal with Bratnov in exchange for one of his daughters. The monopoly on their supply, across the whole United States and Mexico.”

I lean back and drag my knuckle over my jaw. So, that’s why Antoin couldn’t strike a deal. Fuck. For a brief moment, I think it might not have been such a bad treaty between us and the Bratnov’s after all. Seems like we was the only other family that were allowed to run Vargas’s coke on our turf.

I flick the thought out of my brain like a buzzing gnat and turn my attention to Rodrigo Mondez. “And you?” I ask coldly. “What interest does a Mexican cartel have in taking down the Bratnovs from over two thousand miles away?”

Rodrigo’s fist slams against the table, punctuating the end of my sentence. It’s instinctive to reach for my gun, but a quick flick of the head from Antoin grounds me. Miguel puts a hand on his father’s shoulder and squeezes, then mutters something in Spanish in his ear. Rodrigo nods. “Excuse me,” he mutters, but leaps from the table before I excuse him.

Miguel turns to me. His tone is emotionless and his face is hard.

“His son, Maxim Bratnov, raped my sister.”

His words settle like dust on the table between us. To my right, the Italians shuffle uncomfortably. Opposite me, Antoin doesn’t move a muscle.

I pin Miguel with a long stare.

“Then we’ll take down the Bratnovs together.”

Poppy

“Who does your hair?”

I look up from my Gin Fizz and lock eyes with the blonde woman who’s given me nothing but daggers for the last hour and a half. And when she hasn’t been giving me daggers, she’s been interrupting all the other women’s conversations and whispering in the ear of the brunette next to her, before they both burst into sniggers. It doesn’t take a degree to realize who’s Queen Bitch in this group here.

“Huh?”

She sips on her Chardonnay, then, as if she’s realized I’m stupid, raises her tone and slows her words. “Who. Does. Your. Hair?”

Some of the other women around the table tear away from their conversations to watch the exchange. With a new audience, I force myself not to scowl. Instead, I plaster a sickly sweet smile on my lips and cock my head. “Emilo.”

She frowns. “Who?”

I raise my eyebrows in surprise, then bite my lip. “You don’t know Emilo?” Then, I drag a concerned expression over her own poker-straight extensions. They stop in a blunt line just above the waist of her Versace dress. “I thought everyone on the East Coast knew Emilio. It makes sense, I guess.”

She rests her chin on her hand and leans across the table, studying me. “What makes sense?”

I shrug. “He doesn’t offer appointments to just... *anybody*,” I say with a wince. “Sorry.”

A ripple of laughs rolls around the table, and Queen Bitch gives me one last lingering glare before turning her attention to the brunette’s ear once more. The woman next to me laughed the hardest.

She’s by far the most beautiful around the table of wives and girlfriends. Her long black hair isn’t a weave or chemically straightened, and she’s wearing only a lick of mascara and smear of lip gloss on her caramel face. When my eyes travel a little lower, I realize she’s wearing skinny black jeans and an off the shoulder top. If it wasn’t for the sea of ballgowns around me, I’d feel incredibly overdressed next to her.

When I turn to flash her a small smile, she reaches out her hand. “Sorry, I don’t think we’ve met. I’m Nova.”

“Poppy,” I say, taking her small hand in mine.

“Ignore her,” she says out the side of her mouth, jabbing a thumb towards Queen Bitch. “She’s salty that you’re with Lorcan Quinn. She’s had her eye on him since forever.”

I glance back towards Queen Bitch, a new wave of hatred washing over me, one that the rationale in my brain can’t control. Then, I think back to the possessive kiss he planted on my lips as we entered *Gatsby’s*, and the jealousy fades into satisfaction. “Makes sense,” I mutter.

Nova nods at my glass, which has nothing but a few melting ice cubes hanging out in the bottom of it. “You’ve been nursing that drink for an hour. Wanna head to the bar?”

A wiggle of her eyebrows adds a second part to her question. *And get the fuck away from these women?*

I nod, ignoring the stares from the other women as we leave the table and head to the bar. As soon as we're away from them, Nova lets out a sigh of relief. "Honest to god," she says, signaling to the bartender, "I'd rather pluck each of my toenails off completely sober than listen to another conversation about how they managed to skip the Birkin bag waiting list this season. Whatever beer you have on tap and a Gin Fizz," she says to the bartender, then she turns back to me. "Unless you want something stronger?" she says with that eye wiggle again.

My eyes flick towards the door Lorcan disappeared through almost two hours ago. "Uh, I better not," I laugh. "Let's make that gin extra strong though."

While the bartender busies himself with the bottle of Bombay Sapphire Club, Nova rests against the bar and turns to me. "So, you're new to this world."

"How can you tell?"

"Because you haven't once asked how Sasha's newborn is, or how Vittoria's getting on with her new gardener. You know, the usual small talk."

"I have no idea who any of those women are," I admit.

She flashes me a dazzling grin. "You're lucky."

"You're clearly not new to this world, so how come you're here?"

"I'm not a wife or girlfriend, if that's what you're asking. My father and brother are in there," she jabs a thumb towards the mysterious back room, "talking to your man. So, if you hear gunshots anytime soon, duck and run for cover."

The glint in her eyes tells me she's joking, but I still wince. Then, she nods in the direction of the wives and girlfriends table. "The bitchy blond is Vittoria. She's the third wife of Alessandro Regazzi. However, she'd leave him in a heartbeat for Lorcan Quinn, even though that'd cause world war three." I give her a blank stare, which makes her laugh. "Jesus, you're really not from this world, are you? Alessandro's the big, beefy Italian in there with your man. Rules the West Coast. My family, the Mondezes, we're based down in Texas."

I thank the bartender when he brings over our drinks, but want to rescind that thanks immediately once I take a sip. "Jesus, he really took 'extra strong' to heart." I stab at an ice cube with my straw, then decide to try my luck. "What's this meeting about, then?"

She raises a perfectly groomed eyebrow at me, accompanied by a smirk. "I don't think I want to know how you fell into this world, Poppy."

I grit my teeth. "Yeah, I don't think you do, either."

She rests her elbows against the bar, arching her back. I wish I was as comfortable as her, instead the fabric of this gown is itching my back, and my feet are starting to ache, even though I've been standing for a total of five minutes. "It's all business, baby. I try to stay out of it. Long story short, they are trying to form an alliance to take down the Bratnovs."

Well, this is the most information I've gotten out of anyone the entire time I've been at the Museum. "Bratnovs?"

"The Russians who rule New York. Used to supply all the drugs to Boston too. Had a treaty with your man's family, I think. Something's gone wrong somewhere, and now they are in the midst of a full-blown war."

My blood runs cold. That explains the extra security and Lorcan disappearing for days at a time. "I don't think I like the sound of that."

“Welcome to mafia royalty, baby,” she says with a chuckle, as laid back as can be. “So,” she continues, taking a swig of her beer. “Lorcan Quinn. I’ve never met him in person but I’ve heard he’s... quite the firecracker.”

“What do you mean by that?”

She turns her hand into a gun, squeezes an eye shut and pretends to shoot. “I’ve heard he’s trigger happy. Brutally so. Brawn first, brains second.”

I grit my teeth, feeling suddenly protective over him. “Actually, Lorcan’s really smart,” I snap back before I can stop myself. “I think he’s still grieving the death of his father and brother.”

Only when this revelation leaves my lips do I realize that’s probably the case. It’s something I’ve never thought about before. The drinking... the sudden outburst of anger.

A pang of sadness stabs my chest.

Nova cocks her head. “Sorry, baby. Was only making convo.”

“No,” I flash her a smile, not wanting to lose my new-found friend because I’ve caught a case of Stockholm Syndrome. “You’re totally right. I just think he’s a little misunderstood.”

She offers a small nod, suddenly turning serious. “Aren’t we all.” Another swig of her beer, then she says, “I wish they’d hurry up, I’m starving.”

My tummy rumbles right on cue. “Same.”

I glance at the door to the backroom again, and Nova’s words ring out in my ears. *If you hear gunshots, duck and run.* A sickly feeling settles in my stomach. I know she was joking... but what if she’s right?

It’ll be the perfect chance to escape.

Somehow, that thought disappears into a puff of smoke a few moments later when the door opens and Lorcan darkens the doorway. Relief, no matter how unwanted, floods through me. We lock eyes, and I find myself smiling at him.

His face still hard, he steps out of the doorway and into the suddenly deathly silent room. Gazing at all of the faces staring expectantly at him, he turns his attention back to me, pinning me with that hypnotic gaze.

“Let’s eat.”

Poppy

Lorcan moves against the tide of sequins and bow ties heading to the large dinner table in the center of the room until he's looming over me at the bar. With a slow turn of his head, he pins Nova with a stare. "Miss Mondez."

She nods and replies with the same politeness. "Mr. Quinn." Then she flashes me a cheeky grin, downs her beer, and follows the crowd.

Lorcan turns all of his attention to me. "You made friends."

I use the straw in my too-strong drink to swirl the lime around the glass. "Friend. Singular. All the other women here are one step above being lobotomized."

A chuckle rumbles deep in his chest. "Which is exactly why I don't host these parties anymore."

"Yes, Orna's disappointed about that." I can feel someone's gaze boring into the side of my cheek, and when I turn round, I see Queen Bitch glaring at me. I say sourly, "The ratty blonde over there is probably disappointed about it too."

His eyebrows knit in confusion as he follows my eye line. "Vittoria Regazzi? Nothing but a Don chaser."

"A what?"

"It's what we call chicks who want to be married to the mafia so bad. Has no allegiance to any family, just wants to be married to a Don."

Alessandro Regazzi has fallen for her charms, apparently. So, you might have put up with her occasionally.” I raise an eyebrow, and he chucks me under the chin. “I’ve just made a treaty with the Regazzi family, as well as the Rodrigo Mondez. Your new friend’s father.”

The wedge of lime loses my interest and I match his gaze. *Is he really keeping me in the loop?* I wonder what could have brought on this sudden change of heart, but I don’t question it. “Will that mean less security around the grounds?”

His jaw ticks. “Not quite yet.” He glances over his shoulder, before pulling me towards him by my waist. “Look, I’m sorry about earlier,” he murmurs, studying my lips. “I’d never really make you fuck every dick in this joint.”

It’s a combination of shock that Lorcan Quinn actually has the word *sorry* somewhere in his vocabulary and his crude choice of words that makes me burst out laughing. He scowls in response. “I might not let anyone fuck you,” he growls, “but it doesn’t mean I won’t fuck you in front of them.”

Heat quickly spreads between my legs, stopping me mid-chuckle. “In that case, apology accepted.”

“Good,” he responds without a trace of a smile. Then he takes my hand in his and guides me towards the table.

Dinner is... surprisingly entertaining. Lorcan takes charge at the head of the table, a place card with my name in swirling calligraphy to the right of his. Before we sit down, he stoops to mutter something in the ear of who I now know to be Rodrigo Mondez. In response, Nova replaces a scowling Vittoria at the seat next to me, much to my relief.

We eat scallops and caviar while Rodrigo Mondez makes polite small talk, then when he slips into a hushed, intense conversation with Lorcan, I become the subject of Alessandro Regazzi's interrogations, all while he stares at my chest and his sugar baby wife shoots daggers at me from his side.

Lorcan never takes his hand off my knee the entire meal. Stabbing at his Dover Sole and fondant potatoes with only his fork. Occasionally he'll run his thumb over my thigh, like a gentle reminder that he's there. Maybe it's the champagne served between courses or the backdrop of the upbeat brass band, but I'm feeling all warm and fuzzy. I like watching Lorcan in conversation. The way his Adam's apple bobs and the muscle in his jaw clenches as he regales an anecdote. How when he listens to someone talk, he studies them in intensity, never taking his eyes off them, nodding and laughing in all the right places. I know how it feels to have Lorcan Quinn treat you like you're the center of his world.

Regazzi finally loses interest in my boobs and I fall into easy conversation with Nova. She swigs her beer and plays with the beaded bracelets on her wrist as she tells me about getting into MIT to study architecture, and how she teaches self-defense classes to women on the weekend.

After dessert—a decadent Tarte Tatin—Lorcan squeezes my knee and flashes me a small wink. Then he rises to his feet and taps a knife against his glass. A cloak of silence falls over the table. With total command of the room, he says, “Ladies and gentlemen, if you'd please join me in the courtyard for an after-dinner *digestif*.”

Murmuring and movement ensue, and Lorcan reaches his hand down to help me to my feet. He plants a small kiss on my nose, and all of the hatred

I felt for him a few hours earlier in the dressing room seems like it belongs in a different dimension.

“You guys are disgustingly cute, it’s going to bring my dinner back up,” Nova tuts, brushing past us and grabbing two flutes of champagne from the tray of a passing server.

Lorcan eyes me for a reaction, an amused smirk dancing on my lips. He’s satisfied when my cheeks flush red. Then, he leans over me and murmurs, “She wouldn’t think we were cute if she saw how hard I spank you, and how much you like it.”

The heat in my face burns and bubbles under my foundation. “Lorcan!”

He chuckles and I feel it rumble under his tux. “Let me show you the courtyard, China Doll.”

The guests part like the Red Sea as Lorcan tugs me towards the back of the restaurant, through a large door that I’ve never paid much attention to before.

Stepping out into the fresh air makes me realize how tipsy I am. Lorcan steadies me with a strong arm around my waist. “Easy there.” I lean into the comfort of his chest and drink in the courtyard. An open-air, circular space with gravel floor and softly glowing fairy lights draped around the perimeter. Standing tables line the perimeter too, and the guests are starting to crowd around them with cocktails and chatter.

“It’s beautiful,” I say, nestling into the crook of his chest. I close my eyes for a brief moment when he rests his chin on my head, drawing his arms tight around me.

“You’re beautiful,” he murmurs into my hair.

I melt.

We stay like this for a few moments, watching the brass band set up in the center of the courtyard. Their red and white striped suits and bow ties make me feel like I've truly stepped back in time. When the trumpets and the double bass kick in, Lorcan drums his fingers against my waist in time to the beat.

I'm feeling one step down from euphoric. "Dance with me," I suddenly say over the tempo of the saxophones and crane my head up to face him.

Lorcan frowns. "What do you always say? Something about asking instead of telling?"

It's my turn to frown, but it's not one that reaches my mood. "Oh, yes. I should probably lead by example. *Please*, Mr. Quinn, will you dance with me?"

He doesn't get a chance to reply before I'm dragging him into the center of the courtyard, closer to the band. It triggers a ripple of other guests moving closer too. Wives tug their husbands onto the gravel, unsteady on their stilettos, their clutch bags tucked under their armpits.

As we move in time with the beat, it's not lost on me that I'm dancing with the Devil. Only, it doesn't feel like it. The man rocking me in his strong arms, occasionally leaning down to mutter something in my ear, the man that twirls me around like a ballerina then catches me before I stumble, dizzy from the liquor and the lights. He's not the man that held a fake funeral to seal my fate all those years ago. He's not the man that drugged me and dragged me from my life on the West Coast. The man that crawled into my bed unsteady on his feet from a full day of drowning in whiskey.

That man wouldn't dance with me.

At first, I don't feel it. The first raindrop that lands on the tip of my nose. It's Lorcan that brushes it off before it reaches my cupid's bow, then

turns to the sky with his palm upwards. “It’s raining.”

I follow his gaze, taking in the looming clouds that have appeared out of nowhere.

Two thoughts pass through my foggy brain at once.

The first—

Summer is ending. Which means I’ve been at the museum through a whole semester and almost all of summer break.

School will start again soon.

The second?

I don’t want this night to end.

You would have thought it was raining bullets the way Lorcan springs into action, slipping off his suit jacket and holding it over my head. He pulls me in the direction of the other guests, who are all making a slow jog to find shelter back in the dining hall. The music peters down, as each musician realizes, one by one, that the weather might ruin their instrument. I find myself digging my heels in and pushing a hand against Lorcan’s chest.

He glances down at me, confused. “You’ll be soaked...”

“I don’t care,” I say breathlessly, the euphoria surging over me.

Lorcan studies me for a beat, then with a glint in his eye, turns to the band. “Keep playing.”

On command, the music starts up again. Somewhere far away, I can hear the cheers and claps from the guests, but I can’t concentrate on anything apart from Lorcan’s hands on my body and the smell of fresh water in the air. I laugh until my throat hurts, we dance until my feet ache, and when a song ends and Lorcan’s lips meet mine with an intensity that steals my breath away, I feel... *free*.

“Poppy,” Lorcan moans into my mouth, wrapping his jacket over my soaked shoulders. I can feel the wet strands of his hair against my own forehead; I can taste the after-dinner mint on his tongue. “I need to take you home now. I can’t wait another second to fuck you.”

My knees buckle under the assertiveness of his words.

Dragging me by my hand like a man on a mission, he pulls me into the dining room, shaking hands and kissing cheeks as we pass. Without the backdrop of rain and jazz, I’m suddenly aware that I must look like a drowned rat in a designer dress, dripping like a mop onto the mosaic tiles.

I’m also aware that I don’t care one bit.

“Poppy!” I follow the sound of my name and see Nova making a beeline for me, a scrap of paper in her hand. She stops and glances between me and Lorcan, who’s distracted by whatever Nova’s older brother, Miguel, is saying to him. She wiggles her eyebrows and grins. “You’re wetter than a mermaid’s vagina.”

Laughing, I say, “I haven’t heard that one before.”

“Here,” she snatches my purse from under my arm, unclips it and slips the paper inside. “Call me, if you ever take a break from boning Lorcan Quinn.”

I glance up at Lorcan with a sudden weight on my chest. For a brief moment under the stars and the rain clouds, I felt free. But Nova giving me her number reminds me I’m anything but.

“Will do,” I say with a forced smile. *If I ever escape.*

Her hug is unexpected, and when she throws her arms around me, I almost stumble. “I’ll get a phone to you,” she whispers in my ear. “Promise.”

Her smile is a little sadder when she pulls away and disappears into the crowd, and I'm left feeling dazed.

How does she know I don't have one?

Then I remember what she said to me at the bar earlier. *I don't think I want to know how you fell into this world.*

Of course. Nova Rodriguez is cartel royalty. She knows how these men operate. And despite the kissing and the hand-holding and the dancing in the rain, she can tell I'm not in Lorcan Quinn's life willingly.

I look up at my captor, watching as he runs a hand through his soaking hair and grins at whatever Miguel is saying.

She can tell that a man like Lorcan Quinn wouldn't see me as his equal. Only ever a possession, never an equal.

But when Lorcan turns to me and pins me with his smoldering stare, the lump in my throat disappears and the heat spreads to my pussy. With only that one look, Lorcan does what he always does.

Makes me forget and forgive.

We can't keep our hands off each other in the privacy of the Rolls Royce. Under the twinkling star ceiling, Lorcan's lips burn the damp skin between my chin and collarbone, kissing, nibbling, and sucking until the goosebumps and the ragged breathing are too much for me to bear. He's as surprised as I am when I gather up the fabric of my dress and slide on top of him. "Mm, my little China Doll can't wait until we get home." He growls, grabbing my ass and pushing me down onto the bulge in his suit pants.

The truth slips from my lips, breathless and desperate. "No," I say firmly, framing his beard with my hands. "I can't."

The grumble that comes from deep in Lorcan's chest is animalistic. As wolf-like as his eyes. With one hand, he lifts my ass up enough to slide off

my panties—wet from more than just the rainfall. I desperately tug at his zipper; I don't need to be prepped or relaxed with a tongue or well-intentioned fingers, I'm desperate to feel his cock slide inside me.

His dick throbs in my hand, warm, hard and tempting. I can't resist running my thumb over his glistening bell-end and lifting it to my mouth to taste his longing for me. "Fuck, China Doll," he groans, throwing his head back to reveal the thick trunk of his neck. When he looks back at me, the fire in his eyes is deadly. "Put me inside of you, *now*." Needing to hear him call me good girl, I move only enough to slide his cock into the wet folds of my slit, over my clit and into my aching hole. We groan in unison as I lower myself onto his shaft, my pussy clenching around it. He doesn't wait for me to ride his dick. Instead, he grips my ass cheeks and lifts me up and down, up and down, slamming me down harder and harder with every thrust. "Take it like a good girl," he demands, in that low and rough voice that sets every nerve ending in my body on fire.

With every thrust, I'm taking more of his cock, rocking myself against the fabric of his suit, my hands desperately clawing around his neck. When my body starts to tremble, Lorcan lifts me off of him pushing me towards the roof of the car.

"What the—"

"I want to taste you," he growls, sliding down so that when he pulls me back down, I land on his face. "I need to taste your sweet cum, China Doll."

The cocktail of his words mixed with the feeling of his hungry lips and rough beard is all it takes to send me over the edge. A powerful orgasm washes over me, and Lorcan is there to steady my trembling thighs and suck all the juice from me as I cum in his mouth. With my head crushed against the ceiling, I can hear the rain hammering on the roof. As I come

down from my high, Lorcan slows the tempo of his tongue, dipping into my tender hole and up towards my raw clit in light, sensual strokes. He shifts my weight so that he can hold me with just one hand, while the other returns to his cock. His lips and tongue get greedier with every pump of his fist, and I can feel another wave of ecstasy on the horizon.

This is so fucking hot.

I groan into the roof, my lips pressed against the velvety fabric, my thighs wrapped around his strong jaw. He moans into my clit at the same time as I come again, and only then does he let me slide back down into his lap. Face to face again, he lifts his hand to my mouth. “This is what you do to me, China Doll,” he whispers. Never breaking eye contact, I part my lips and lick his fingers, sucking up every last drop of his sweet, sticky cum. I enjoy how the vein in his temple throbs. How his eyes burn with a new wave of lust. How his eyes never leave me. Possessive and wild.

I wipe my juice from his chin then crush my lips against his. His heart hammers through his wet shirt against me, meeting mine in ferocity and speed. We stay like that, me straddling him with my head in the crook of his neck, and his thumb running circles on the small of my back, until the driver slows to meet the gates of the estate.

Lorcan wraps his hand around my throat and lifts my head up to look at him. “Stay with me tonight.”

I don’t bother telling him that it’s not a question. Instead, I nod, and when the driver opens the passenger door, I let him carry me through the house and up to a room I’ve never been in before.

He lowers me onto a soft bed and disappears through an adjoining door. Mustering just enough energy to prop myself onto my elbows, I drink in the room. Lorcan Quinn’s bedroom. Not the Devil’s lair I expected. No black

walls and burning furnace of hell. Instead, there's a rich mahogany bar snaking around one corner, and in the other, a tan leather armchair and a side table with a Statesmen globe. Other antiques punctuate the space in between, but I'm too high on the events of the evening to bother exploring them.

When I hear taps running, I pull myself off the bed and follow Lorcan into the bathroom. He's perched on the edge of a freestanding, roll-top bath. We lock eyes and he pats the rim. "Get in."

I'm getting used to doing what Lorcan Quinn says, not what he asks. I turn around and sweep my hair to the side, letting him tug the zipper down the length of my back. The dress is soaking as he peels it off of me, and it lands on the onyx tiles with a sludgy thud. I'd hate to think how much it costs if it's ruined, so I don't think. Instead, I revel in Lorcan's hypnotized gaze as I slide into the warm bathwater. "Will you join me?"

"In a minute," he murmurs, his gaze sliding down to my breasts. My nipples instantly stiffen, breaking the surface of the water. "For now, I'd like to enjoy the view."

Laughing, I reach for the sponge balancing on the rim of the bath, but Lorcan gets there first. He dunks it in the water and begins sliding it up my calf, up to my thigh.

I study him as much as he's studying me. Wondering what makes him so much more hypnotic than usual tonight.

"You didn't drink."

Lorcan turns his attention away from the mound at the top of my thigh to meet my gaze. "Mmm?"

"Tonight. You didn't drink."

"No, I didn't."

My voice is small, timid. “Why?”

After a moment, a tight smile forms on his lips. “Dancing with you was a memory I didn’t want to drown out.”

I know that’s not the truth, but I’m in too much of a state of bliss to break it with a line of questioning.

Instead, I cock my head and say, “I like it when you don’t drink.”

His body stiffens and he doesn’t reply.

Just when I think I’ve soured the evening, he looks at me from under his thick lashes. “Let’s get you to bed, China Doll.”

He wraps me in a fluffy white towel and picks me up. “I could get used to being carried everywhere,” I say, enjoying the rumble of his chest against my cheek when he laughs.

When he drops me on the bed, I reach up and cup his face, stroking the thick hair of his beard. The air swirls hot and heavy between us.

“Say it, China Doll,” he all but whispers, trailing a light finger over my collarbone. “I can tell you’re thinking something.”

He’s right. The words are burning the back of my throat, desperate to be let loose. Three words. And if I allow them to escape, they’ll be the most insane three words I’ve ever uttered.

So, I settle for a different way to phrase it. “I...don’t hate you.”

It slips out of my mouth in a champagne-fueled jumble. As soon as it reaches Lorcan’s ears and his biceps tense, I know I’ve said the wrong thing.

He breathes in. Out. In again. Then his eyes turn dark.

“Hate me, China Doll,” he eventually says. His voice is ice-cold, a stark contrast to the warm hands that were just on my body. “It’s a hell of a lot easier that way.”

I'm stupefied on the bed as he brushes his lips against my forehead. Then, he stands up, strides across the room, and closes the bedroom door with a quiet click.

Lorcan

Taking Poppy was my first mistake.

Falling for her was the second.

The consequences of being an irrational hot-headed prick claws at my throat and it's stopping me from breathing. I couldn't breathe when I left her splayed out on my bed, her copper hair framing her angelic face like a halo. I couldn't even breathe as I put the distance between us and stalked to my office. Only when I reached the bottle on my desk, rip off the cap and let the bitter, brown liquid slide down my throat do I feel like I've found the oxygen tank, just before my lips go blue and my brain goes numb.

Falling for my treasured keepsake wasn't part of the plan. And it certainly won't help me win the war against the Bratnovs. She's a distraction. A beautiful distraction that I don't need.

Clutching the bottle like it's a newborn, I stride to the window and stare out at the ever-growing storm.

For the first time since I held her limp, drugged body in my arms at *Le Papillon* restaurant, I consider letting her go.

It's nothing more than a fleeting thought.

More whiskey in. It burns the back of my throat, sears my chest and flows through my veins. Bringing me back to life.

A manic laugh escapes my lips. It's strangled and strange and gets snatched away by a sudden howl of wind.

Poppy is my China Doll.

Mine.

My rare and most treasured keepsake.

The only difference between her and the rest of the pieces I own is that she has the capability to love me back.

Let her go?

Over my cold, dead body.

Poppy

“Hate me.”

It’s been seven days since those two poisonous words slid from Lorcan’s lips. Seven days since I’ve seen or heard from him.

Numb, I stared at the cavernous ceiling of his bedroom until the rain died down and the sun shone through the curtains. Waiting for him to return, but he never did. The timid knock on the door belonged to Orna, and when she peeked her head into the room, her sheepish smile and offer to let me back into the museum made me feel like a fool.

There’s been a large shift at the Quinn estate in the last seven days too. The grounds feel eerily quiet, even though the security detail has doubled. Now, I can’t glance out of the window without seeing bulletproof vests and rifles and balaclavas. Hell, there’s even one of them permanently stationed outside the museum now. I have to wiggle past him with an apologetic smile every time Orna lets me out to go for a walk around the grounds.

Speaking of Orna, she’s stressed to the next level. From the workroom window, I always see her and her sisters running up and down the hallways of the main buildings. Platters and drink trays in hands. It’s like they are always entertaining.

And Lorcan? I’ve only laid eyes on him once. Three days ago, I passed the back of the manor on my walk. When I glanced in one of the windows,

Lorcan was in what looked to be a drawing room or a library, along with a handful of men I didn't recognize. Even with the thick sheet of glass between us, I could feel the tension swirling around the room. He looked up, locked eyes with me and shook his head.

Go.

I scurried along the path, my heart beating in my mouth.

Today, the crisp air creeps through the window of my workroom, a welcome relief from the paint fumes I've been basking in all morning. The sky is a gloomy shade of gray, and the leaves on the trees outside are showing hints of orange and browns. I'm thankful when Orna comes an hour later to let me out.

I tug on a cashmere sweater and a beanie hat for good measure to walk the gardens. No matter how big and how sprawling the grounds are, I've settled into a daily routine, creating a well-beaten track for myself. Orna and I chatter lightheartedly for a few moments before she hears my stomach rumble and darts into the main house to make lunch.

Then, I walk the route. I trot around the perimeters first, starting from the entrance of the museum and finish at the gates that section off the grounds from the front of the estate. Then, I move onto the paths. The narrow, snaking lanes that lead to small pockets of the gardens, gardens within gardens, and of course, the rose garden itself. That's where I usually end up. Basking in the solitude of there being no cameras or microphones or security men twisting their heads to watch me pass by.

As my boots crunch against the wet grass and the earthy smell drifts up my nose, a sudden wave of nostalgia hits me.

It smells like the first day of school. I squeeze my eyes shut and drink in the memories. The shiny feeling of brand new textbooks, their spines yet to

be cracked. The wave of motivation that brews in your stomach—the one that lasts until the end of the first week until you’re back to your usual lazy ways. I can feel the promises I tell myself.

I'll keep my notes tidy. I'll attend every lecture without fail. I won't drink on a school night.

The sadness hits my gut like a soccer ball.

There’s always been a tiny piece of me that clung onto the hope I wouldn’t be here come September. That missing one semester at the end of my second year wouldn’t mess up my studies too much. That come the beginning of my third year of college, this whole kidnapping thing would be nothing more than a crazy anecdote that spread around campus like wildfire. *Hey, did you hear about the business student that got kidnapped by the head of the Irish mafia? Yeah, he kept her in a museum full of other shiny things, apparently.*

But as I watch a leaf fall lazily from the branch of an ash tree, my heart plummets into my Birkenstock boots.

I’m still here. And what’s worse, is that I’ve enjoyed being here as much as I’ve hated it.

Suddenly, I feel foolish that I haven’t been planning my escape. Only a few weeks ago, I was sitting on the bench in the rose garden, driven by a desperate desire to find my way out of here by any means possible.

Then the Devil got in the way.

I’m wallowing in my own misery, doing the same loop around the front of the garden like a mad dog on a leash, when I hear something.

It’s faint but certain.

“Meet me at the rose garden.”

I startle, looking up from the hem of my sweater, and locking eyes with one of the henchmen standing in front of the towering hedges that block the outside world. Just from the three inches of space peering out from under his helmet and above the mask over his face, I realize it's Cillian.

Those haunting gray eyes boring into me are unmistakable.

I'm numb, but luckily my body's autopilot function is working today, and my feet take me down the narrow path to the rose garden.

It's deathly silent in here; bordering on creepy. The rust is starting to set on the wrought iron benches, the rose petals are browning on the bushes, with many fallen into the damp earth to create a colorful sludge. My heart is beating in my mouth when I hear the gate creak open, and Cillian appears at the mouth of the path.

It's the first time I've seen him in uniform. He looks much older under the weight of the armor. The bulletproof vest pads him out, and the black mask wrapped around his mouth and jaw gives him a creepy anonymity.

Breaking the heavy silence, I reach out to the nearest wilting rose bush and say, "You haven't been gardening."

A snort comes from under his mask. "Yeah, no shit. What are you still doing here, Murphy?" I'm taken aback by how ice-cold his voice is. He glances back at the gate then takes a few steps towards it. "These assholes talk, I can't be seen in here with you."

"I—"

He holds up a gloved hand to cut me off. "What's your plan?" When I don't reply, he curls the same hand into a fist. "I told you to have one."

My voice trembles when I say, "I haven't been able to. I can't—"

"You need to get out of here."

"By when?"

“Yesterday.”

I take a long drag of the fall air, hoping its freshness will stop me from feeling so dizzy.

“There’s a war coming, isn’t there?” I think back to what Nova told me at the dinner last week.

Another snort. “Coming? Get your head out your ass, Murphy. The war is here, and it’s about to end. It don’t matter if you’re on the right side or the wrong side. These men don’t care about little girls like you. Get your head out of your ass and don’t get caught in the crossfire.”

There’s a lump in my throat too big to swallow. Lorcan wouldn’t let anything happen to me. I’m his precious China Doll... right?

Hate me. It’s a hell of a lot easier that way.

My voice is meek, pathetic. “Why are you trying to help me?”

Cillian shakes his head and softens his tone—just a fraction, but it’s noticeable. “You’re innocent. Like I used to be.”

And with, he turns on his boots and stomps out of the garden.

Leaving me with nothing but weak knees and no escape plan.

Lorcan

The end is coming.

Sinking into the deep seat of my Herman Miller, I drag my fingers over my jaw. Both are bruised and aching, like every other muscle and joint in my body.

I lean my head against the chair's headrest, taking the weight off my shoulders. When I close my eyes, Poppy's face appears. Emerald eyes sparkling like precious gems, copper hair glistening like precious metal.

The end is coming, I know that. What I don't know is what comes after the end.

I have to plan accordingly.

My fingers twitch towards my drink. Only it's not there, because I've been sober for seven days. My entire whiskey cabinet is cleaned out to help me avoid any temptation. I have to stay sharp and lucid and *sensible* to see our plan through.

Our new alliance has been a blessing. The Regazzis have doubled our men on the ground, and Rodriguez's son, Miguel, has been like a bloodhound with a tear tattoo. With his nose to the ground, he did in three days what the Quinns couldn't do in a month—hunt down Igor's whereabouts. Turns out, he's been moving from town to town. Airbnb rentals, YMCA's, and even camping in the wilderness. The great King Igor

Bratnov has been living like a pauper, snaking his way closer to Quinn territory.

If I wasn't so fired up, I'd be chilled to my core. He hasn't sent his men to do his dirty work, he's doing it himself. Bratnov means business, just like I do.

Miguel's men have followed him right to our city. Now the Russian bastard is on our doorstep, on our turf. It's only a matter of time until the final showdown.

And I need a plan for after the fact.

I steal one more glance back at the Museum. The view of it from my study is the very reason I've barely stepped foot in here all week. Too much temptation to break the goddamn window, shimmy down the fucking drainpipe and cross the grounds to see her. To get into her bed and breathe in her vanilla and bubblegum scent and feel her soft curves against mine.

To fuck the reality of war away.

No lights and no signs of movement tonight. I swallow the desire and ignore my twitching hands and head out of my study. I take the stairs to the lobby then another set of stairs that lead to the lower level. Passing the fleet of cars in the garage and the laundry room, I stop outside a door at the of the hall.

One sharp knock and the door opens. Orna's face immediately contorts into a scowl. "Is the estate on fire?"

"Can you smell smoke?"

"No. But it must be an emergency if the great Lorcan Quinn is making an appearance in the peasant chambers."

My ribs hurt when I laugh, but not because anything Orna says is remotely funny. I push past my cousin and stride into her quarters. I stand in

the middle of the living room area, with its soft cream walls and overstuffed corner sofa. It's impossible to resist the pull of the million cushions lining it, and I sink into it without thinking twice.

"What do you want, Lorcan," Orna groans, "I'm off duty and I'm tired."

"Remember when your mom lived here?" I muse, "She painted the walls the color of Pepto Bismol."

This gets a huff from her. "Yeah. You know it took me twelve layers of paint to get rid of it?"

"*You?* 'Cause if I remember correctly, I'm the one who gave up a week's vacation in Cancun to paint over that shit show. I get PTSD every time I have heartburn."

"All right, well I chose the paint color, at least."

I glance at the cream walls. "Yeah. Difficult choice."

"And kept you company the entire week," she protests, sinking onto the other side of the sofa.

"Yeah, being tortured by every ABBA album on repeat was really entertaining."

She rolls her eyes at me, but her face softens. I throw a cushion at her head and get right to my first question. "Why have you had a face like a slapped ass every day for the last month, then?"

She's quicker than I gave her credit for, grabbing it before it knocks the messy bun off her head. "It doesn't matter why. I'm over it now."

"Tell me."

She flashes me a signature Orna scowl, before deciding it's easier to tell me after all. "You never told me Poppy was Marcus Murphy's daughter."

"She's not," I snap back fast. Too fast. "She's just Poppy."

“Yes, but she’s still the daughter of the man who killed my mom,” she snaps back.

When she hurls the cushion at my head with surprising force, I throw my shoulder back in the nick of time. It crashes into the lamp on the side table and sends it flying to the floor.

Neither of us flinch. This is the chaos we grew up in.

“I get it,” I say quietly.

And I do. After the betrayal, my father took everything from Marcus Murphy. His estate, fleet of cars, staff. But it was all materialistic bullshit. He didn’t take anything that actually mattered, like his family. But Murphy took that from us. Orna’s mom was caught in the crossfire in the kitchen, right before O’Sullivan turned his gun on Murphy himself.

Orna’s mom had a big hand in raising me after my own mom died. She had that maternal instinct for me, which is why she pushed me behind the breakfast bar and took the bullet herself.

So, when I took Poppy, all I wanted was for Marcus to feel a fraction of the pain that my family felt.

He didn’t.

“Poppy didn’t kill your mom, Orna. She didn’t betray our family. In fact, she hates her father as much as we do.”

Orna nods slowly, swallowing my words. Eventually, she says. “I know. I spent a lot of time trying to hate her, but it’s hard.”

A loud sigh escapes my lips, and I run my hand through my hair. “You’re telling me.”

Feeling the weight of my words, Orna regards me with fresh suspicion. “If you don’t hate her, then why don’t you let her go?” We lock eyes, and

I'm silent long enough for the penny to drop. A grin spreads across her face. "Jesus Christ, Lorcan. I never thought I'd see the day."

"You don't know what you're talking about—"

"I do," she chimes in, "you like her. And not just in the way *I* like her. You built her a whole-ass workshop, for Christ's sake. You bring her along to your business outings and even that treaty dinner you had with the Cartel and the Italians. And the whole time, you can't take your eyes off her. Like a man possessed."

Her laser-like glare follows me around the room as I stretch my legs and begin to pace. Fuck, I'm turning into Antoin. When she speaks again, her voice is softer. "You've been through a lot and you've forgotten what it's like to be human. I'll give you a clue—humans have hearts, and yours is starting to thaw."

I clamp my molars together and ignore the stabbing pain in my chest. I'm getting good at that. "I'm not here for a discounted therapy session."

"Discounted? I didn't know you were going to pay me at all."

I'm getting good at ignoring Orna's sarcasm too.

Time to get serious.

"Remember the chalet on Martha's Vineyard?"

"The one we'd go to every Easter as kids?"

"I've opened it up again."

"Really?" she clutches her hands to her chest in delight, eyes brimming with nostalgia. "God, I love that place."

But I'm not interested in taking a trip down memory lane. "If anything happens to me, take Poppy there."

This brings her right back into the present. Uncurling her legs, she jumps up and closes the gap between her. Then she jabs her skinny finger

into my chest. “Nothing’s going to happen to you,” she hisses. “Jesus, Lorcan. I know you think you’re not worthy of standing in the shoes of your father, but you *are*. You will win this. There’s not a goddamn doubt in my mind.”

Suddenly, I see Orna for who she really is for the first time in a decade. Not only my housekeeper or annoying cousin that gives too much lip. But more of a younger sister.

A friend.

Stalking towards the door, I say, “get some sleep.”

“Lorcan?”

I twist my head around and see her wringing her hands.

“How soon will it happen?”

“Remember the pistol I gave you on your sixteenth birthday?”

“How can I forget? You hid it in a Louis Vuitton box and I thought I was getting the purse I’d had my eye on.”

A smile tugs at my lips. “You still have it?”

“Somewhere.”

“Keep it loaded. And keep it on you at all times.”

I won’t let what happened to her mom happen to her too.

Lorcan

The call comes just after midnight.

I sleep out of necessity now. Pass out long enough to think straight in the morning, not long enough where I'll miss anything. I also sleep with my burner phone in my fist, my combat boots on my feet, and an AK-47 by my side.

When the burner buzzes, I leap to my feet and strap up. "Speak," I bark into the cell, yanking the bulletproof vest over my head and stalking towards the door.

"Intruder on the premises," Donnacha's stone-cold voice snaps back. "We've brought him into the drawing-room for interrogation."

I stab the end call button without another word and pace it downstairs. My men are crowded in the lobby, standing to attention, and give me a curt nod as I pass. Antoin falls into step with me as I round the corner towards the drawing-room. "Is it Bratnov?" I growl.

"I know as much as you do," he croaks back. A glance down at his wrinkled suit and scruffy beard tells me definitely weren't pulling a night shift.

But Donnacha is as alert as ever, standing outside the drawing-room door, eyes glowering. He puts his hand out to stop me from bursting into the room, gun cocked. "Not a Bratnov," he growls. "Some kid. He was

screaming outside the gates. Thought it was best to bring him in and interrogate.”

I’m confused, but I nod and push past him. “Wait here,” I bark at Antoin.

Perched on the edge of my oxblood leather tufted sofa is a scrawny-looking kid with brown hair and bewildered eyes. They grow wider when I step out of the shadow. “Who the fuck are you?” I grunt.

“S-Sam,” he stammers, tearing his fearful gaze away from me long enough to glance between the two men that have their heavy hands on his shoulder. “I’m s-sorry. I think I’m in the wrong place. I didn’t mean to—to interrupt.”

I make a quick assessment. He’s rich. In a polo-playing, vacation at the Hampton’s kind of way. Threat level: close to fucking zero.

“Leave.”

The idiot tries to rise to his feet, but my men push him back down. “Not you,” I growl at him.

The room vacates, leaving me and this quivering kid to occupy it. “You with the Bratnovs?” I snarl.

His eyebrows shoot up in surprise. “Who?”

“Then I’ll give you five seconds to explain why you’re trespassing on my property. Then I’ll give you two seconds to explain why I shouldn’t put a bullet in your head for waking me up.”

His mouth opens and shuts again.

“Four.”

“W-wait,” he stammers, holding his hands up. “I’m looking for Poppy. Poppy Valentina. I-I heard she might be here...”

It's instinctive to pop the safety catch of my '47 and point it between his eyes. "How do you know Poppy?"

The squeal that escapes his lips is pathetic. I should shoot him for that alone. "Please don't shoot," he squeaks.

"Better answer my fucking question then."

"I'm her boyfriend."

He earns himself a hard blow to the temple with the receiver of my rifle. The gurgling sound he emits isn't satisfying enough for me.

Sam. I knew his name rang a bell. This is the scrawny prick that was calling her in *Le Papillon*. He's the reason she said I'd never get away with taking her.

I'd say he's got some balls turning up here, but by his dazed expression I know he's a fish out of water. He had no idea what lay on the other side of the gates.

Important things first. "How did you know she was here?"

His speech is slower. Concussion will do that to you. "W-when she didn't turn up for her birthday—"

Another slam to the side of his head. This time, he brings his hands up to protect himself, and I hear his wrist snap as the butt of my rifle cracks against it. "Please," he screams, "No more."

"Better cut to the chase then."

"The restaurant," he yells, clutching his hand and rocking back and forth. "The restaurant told me."

I make a mental note to burn it to the ground when this war blows over. Speaking of war, I don't have time for this shit. "It's your lucky day. I have more important things to worry about than some jilted lover. If you're quick, I won't shoot you in the back of the head on your way out."

But the fucker doesn't move. He even has the audacity to shake his head. "I'm not leaving until I see her."

"You really have a death wish, huh?"

"N-No. I really don't want to die. Like, *really*. But I can't leave her here, in this..." he gazes around the mahogany oak cladding and dust-covered books. "Mansion. I need answers. I need to know she's okay."

God, it'd be fucking easy to shoot this little cunt. Satisfying, even. I'd wrap him up in this Persian rug and bury him in the garden.

But I don't have the time to deal with a hysterical Poppy if she finds out that the fresh patch of soil she sees on her daily walk has her boyfriend—*ex-boyfriend*—underneath it. Also, I don't know who else knows that this kid is here. We don't need the inconvenience. Not at the best of times, and especially not during a war with the Bratnovs.

"Stay here," I say through gritted teeth, stomping back out into the hall.

Donnacha greets me with an amused smirk. Antoin, on the other hand, is glaring at me with an expression that says. *I told you that bitch was trouble.*

"False alarm," I bark down the corridor. "Go back to your stations." Then, I turn to Donnacha. "Get Poppy from the museum and tell her she has a visitor."

Poppy

I know something's wrong by the hammering on the bedroom door. Orna's knocks are polite and followed by a cheery greeting. Lorcan slides through the darkness without an invitation. Not that he visits anymore, anyway.

"Poppy Murphy?" A gruff voice barks through the panels. "Get dressed. You have a visitor."

"Uh, who?"

No reply. Dazed and with my heart hammering against my chest, I stumble into the dressing room and tug on a pair of jeans and a sweater. The bedroom door is never locked anymore, now that I have access to the other rooms in the house, so I peer around it and into the darkness.

A pair of piercing yellow eyes stare back at me, but they don't belong to Lorcan. "Come with me."

The man is tall and wearing all black. His hair is shaved close to his head and it shows off his sharp cheekbones. I recognize him, not only because he must be related to Lorcan, but because I've seen him in the gardens barking at the henchmen.

"Where are we going?"

Yeah, this man has no interest in making conversation.

He's fast, crossing the garden towards the main house in long, non-sense strides, and I'm out of breath trying to keep up. I follow,

wordlessly, through the side door and down a corridor I've never been to.

Lorcan's at the end of it. Arm's crossed and eyes dark.

Emotion rises in my throat. It feels like I haven't seen him in weeks.
"What's going on?"

As I get closer, I notice his ticking jaw. I also notice the massive fucking gun he's holding. Fear creeps through my body.

"You have a visitor," he grunts. He lifts the rifle from his side and cracks the barrel against the door. "And you also have ten minutes."

"Who is it?" I all but whisper.

He's furious. I can see it in the pulsing temple and his flaring nostrils. He's furious at *me*.

"Ten minutes," he says, setting his gaze somewhere above my head. "And don't do anything stupid. I'll be right outside."

My heart is hammering against my chest as I push the door and step into the unknown.

Sam.

I blink. Once, twice. Nope, not dreaming.

He's pacing the carpet, walking from one bookcase to another, nursing a bloodied temple. "Oh my god," I say. Before my knees buckle underneath me, he closes the gap between us and tugs me up by under my armpits.

"Poppy," he gasps, pulling me into a hug. "Oh my god, Poppy."

I melt into the familiarity of his arms. The light, crisp scent of soap and laundry detergent that clings to his skin reminds me of more than just him. It's a portal to my old life. My *normal* life.

Eventually, he pushes me away and holds me at arm's length, studying my face with those big, blue eyes. "I've been looking for you all summer, Poppy. What the hell happened?"

“I-you’re *bleeding*, Sam,” I choke.

He drags the sleeve of his hoodie over his forehead, smearing the blood into his hair. “It doesn’t hurt,” he lies, but the glance over my shoulder towards the door betrays him.

My legs are shaking, and Sam follows me to the sofa. “I-I don’t have long,” I stammer, still dazed. “How did you find me?”

Another glance to the door. Another wipe across his bleeding temple. “Jesus, it feels so long ago now. On your birthday. As soon as I got that text from you, where you asked if I sent the car. I knew something was wrong. I was calling and calling you, standing outside your dorm, but you never replied. At first, I thought maybe Nellie had dragged you out for a few cocktails and you’d forgotten to tell me or something...” he shakes his head, wincing when it hurts. “But I knew that wasn’t like you. I was sick with worry when I came back to your dorm the next day, and Nellie said she hadn’t seen you. That she thought I was taking you to that fancy restaurant downtown and then to a hotel.” With a large gulp, he meets my eyes. “She said you thought we were going to... you know. Is that why you left, Pop? ‘Cause I’d never force you to do anything you didn’t want to—”

“No,” I hiss, the heat rising to my cheeks. My god. The innocent Poppy cowering at the thought of losing her virginity to *Sam*... hell, I wouldn’t recognize that girl if she was staring at me in the mirror.

“Okay,” he settles back on the sofa a little, basking in the false sense of security. A glance towards the closed door reminds me I know better.

“Anyway, it was *Le Papillon*. I headed straight down there, you know, to retrace your steps. Things just got weirder. None of the servers or chefs would talk to me, not even when I showed them a photo and asked if they’d seen you last night. In fact, I only knew for sure that you were there when a

girl from our economics class said she saw you going in there. Said you were super-dressed up, like you were going on a date.” His brows knit together, and now it’s his turn to look at the door. “It was with him, wasn’t it?”

With a deep sigh, I let my hair out from its messy bun and massage my scalp. *As if that’ll help make any sense of how Sam has managed to wade himself into this nightmare.*

“So then what?” I say through gritted teeth. Curiosity, more than anything, is what is fueling my need to know how he found me.

“Well, we were at the end of the semester. Somehow, Nellie managed to convince me that you’d probably gone back to Boston early...” he ruffles his bloodied hand through his hair, eyes darkening when he mentions my friend’s name. “Well, now I realize she thought you were cheating on me. She was covering your tracks, like a good friend would,” he says bitterly. “Only when you didn’t come back after the semester, I started to get really worried.”

“And Nellie?” I choke out. “What did she think when I didn’t return?”

Sam’s jaw sets. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him angry. “At first, she was worried sick.”

“At first?”

“Until we went to the police to report you missing.”

All of the hairs on the back of my neck stand to attention. My eyes dart to the door. *Is Lorcan listening? Did he hear that?*

“The police are looking for me?!”

Sam says acidly, “No. A week later they called us back in. Wanted to interview us separately. They told me you’d skipped town, but you were perfectly safe. Wouldn’t tell me why, or where the hell you’d gone. But they

reassured me, you were fine. They had *evidence*, apparently, that you left on your own accord. Evidence they couldn't share with me, of course."

"So, Nellie thought I was fine too?"

"No. They told her something different."

"What?"

His voice is cold. "God knows. But when she came out, she wouldn't even look me in the eye. When I pushed her, she eventually screamed at me to drop it."

I'm so confused, I don't even know where to begin. "But what did they tell her?" I press. "And why?"

"I don't know but she hasn't spoken a word to me since. Throws me dirty looks across the lecture hall and that's about it."

I sit for a moment, numb. So much to take in. So early in the morning. It doesn't take me long to figure out why Stanford police would lie to Sam. Money makes the world go round, and Lorcan has enough of it to silence anyone he wants. Sam's next words confirm this.

"So, then I went *back* to the restaurant. Offered cash. Lots of it. Turns out he—" he jabs his thumb towards the door "—offered a hell of a lot more. I dipped into my trust fund to come up with enough to bribe one of the servers. She said she served you that night."

I think back to the petrified blonde that brought out the birthday cake. It feels like a million years ago.

"She gave me a name," he continues. "Quinn. Said she overheard you call him that during your conversation. And my father..." he rolls his wrist dismissively, in the way rich people do when they are about to play down their wealth. "He knows a *guy*. Ex-FBI, all that jazz. Asked him if he knew of any 'Quinns' that might have a tendency to be a crazy-psycho-stalker

type. Father said his face went as white as a sheet the second he uttered the name.” Sam leans towards closer, eyes wide. Why do I get the feeling that he’s enjoying telling this story? He’s regaling it like an anecdote he’d tell at the country club in twenty years after a few rounds of golf with his ex-banker chums. “He also said it’d be best to just... *leave it.*” His hands are clammy when they wrap around mine. Vice-like. “But Pops, I couldn’t leave you here.” Then, he lowers his voice. “What does he want with you?”

Watching his bottom lip quiver and his eyes dart towards the door, a sinking feeling settles in my stomach like a layer of dust.

There are two types of men in this world. Anchors and storms.

Sam’s an anchor. The type of guy that gets their hair cut every six weeks without fail. The ones that pay their taxes on time and have quirky hobbies like rollerblading and painting model battleships in their basement.

Then... there are storms. Lorcan’s of the world.

It seems like I’m the type of girl that enjoys being swept away.

I realize I haven’t replied when Sam squeezes my knuckles in his palms. “I’ll get you out of here,” he says in breathless whispers. “My father knows people. Not only that FBI guy but like, *bad* people. And he’s got money. Tons of it. I promise, Poppy, I’ll get you out of here baby—”

I can’t bear to hear his insufferable whispers anymore, the pathetic tone is making my skin crawl. I stand up and cross the room, putting some much-needed distance between us. Nibbling on the cuff of my sweater, my mind races with a plan. I want him gone. He’s no use to me. He’s not part of my escape plan and I know if he outstays his welcome Lorcan won’t think twice about killing him.

What the hell is happening to me?

I’ve been corrupted, ruined by evil. Irreparably so.

“I haven’t been kidnapped, Sam.”

He snorts. “Yeah, because you’re living with a friggin’ mafia kingpin for the fun of it.”

“Actually, I am.”

I challenge his uncertain glare. “Are you...”

“Yes,” I finish what I know he never will. “I’m so sorry, Sam. I didn’t mean for all of this to happen. I was going to tell you eventually, when the time was right. But Lorcan and I... we’re together. Happily so. I haven’t been kidnapped. I haven’t been tortured or anything of the sort. I’m happy here.”

My words are like a stun gun, pinning Sam to the sofa. Eventually, he says, “Not possible.” He mutters it more to himself than to me. “It’s not possible. How would you know a crime lord all the way in Boston—”

“I’ve known him for years,” I interject. God, I hate how easily the lies slip off my tongue now. “I’m from Boston, remember? He—Lorcan—is a friend of the family.”

“The only family you have is your father and you hate him.”

Jesus, I’m not very good at this. “Yeah, I have some distant cousins—look, that’s not the point. I’m sorry, Sam. I’m with someone else and I’m happy.”

He’s not convinced, shaking his head like a constant swinging pendulum. “So, you’re not coming back to school?”

“No.”

“Bullshit.” I wince because this is the first time in two years I’ve ever heard him swear. “You worked your butt off to get into Stanford. You wouldn’t just give it up. You wouldn’t give up on us, either. We were going to get married, have *babies*, Pop—”

There's a growl from the other side of the door. It makes us both jump. Tangled up in my web of lies, I forgot, only for a moment, the Devil was outside.

I need to wrap this up. I need to get him out of here, even if it breaks his heart into a million pieces.

"Sam," I say firmly, speaking slowly and clearly like you would a child. "Listen to me. I am not in love with you anymore. I'm not sure I ever was. Why do you think I never wanted to join you at your parents' ranch during the holidays? Why I never *slept* with you? Because I was in love with somebody else."

"No. You were in love with me," he murmurs.

"I was *comfortable* with you." I hate how the weight of my words visibly crush him. I also hate how some of them are true.

Sam's body shakes, his head still pissing out blood, and my heart breaks in two. Of course, I care for him. Not just because he was my *boyfriend*, but because he represents everything about the life I was taken from. Part of me wants to shrink down, small enough to fit into the pocket of his hoodie and let him take me back to my old life.

Ridiculous, I know.

"I think you should leave."

He whispers, "You're a bitch. Did you know that, Poppy Valentina? A cold-hearted bitch."

The door flies open before I can even think of a reply, and Lorcan darkens the doorway. "Times up," he growls, glaring at Sam like he wants to twist his head off with his bare hands. His sudden presence brings Sam back to the reality of the situation. "My men will see you out."

Two men in uniform file in and clamp their hands around Sam's arms. "Fuck you," he screams, twisting his head back to look at me. "You lying bitch. You little filthy whore. Well, guess what, Poppy? I fucked Chelsea from our Investing 101 class because your frigid ass wouldn't put out—"

I'm so shocked at Sam's reaction that I can't do anything but gape, open-mouthed as he hurls insults and revelations at me. *Chelsea? Chelsea fucking Young with the lip piercing and combat boots?*

A growl from my left snaps me back to reality, and I slam a hand on Lorcan's chest, just before he lunges towards Sam. "Stop," I hiss, unable to keep the desperation out of my voice. "Don't make it worse than it already is."

His heart hammers against my hand, and I keep it there until Sam and the men dragging him round the corner, and his screams slowly fade.

Silence. I say into the darkness of the corridor, "Is he going to be okay?"

"I won't harm a hair on his pretty little head," Lorcan snarls back. "But if he ever touches ground in Boston again, I'll put a bullet between his eyes and bury him under the vegetable patch. I told you, you don't have a boyfriend anymore."

I grind my molars together. It does nothing to stop the sudden anger bubbling up my stomach. "You have no right to act jealous all of a sudden," I hiss, spinning to face him. "You can't be possessive with me when it suits you, then leave me in limbo for weeks at a time."

We lock eyes and the heat swirls between us. He looks tired. Dark circles line his under eyes and his beard is unruly. The last time we were this close, he ripped my heart in two by telling me to hate him.

Because it's easier.

I wish it was.

There's a moment when I think he's going to kiss me. When his tired eyes dip to the curve of my lips. But they come back up and pin me with a hard stare. "I do what I want. You should know that by now."

There's a lump in my throat. I hate how I'm more moved by his nastiness than I was by having to break Sam's heart, only to have him tell me he cheated on me anyways.

"Yeah, you do," I croak. "You did exactly what you wanted with me. You took my virginity, had your fun with my body. Then you discarded me, like you said you would. But instead of killing me—or god forbid, even letting me go—you decided to leave me in your precious museum to collect dust, just like all your other keepsakes."

And with that, I turn on my heels and stalk down the corridor, holding back the sob brewing in my throat. "So find someone who will let me back in my cabinet. I'll go back to being your good China Doll."

Lorcan

She hates me again.

Good. I'm on comfortable ground, being the villain.

Staring down the corridor into the black abyss, I clench my fists and steady my breathing. *Let her go.*

A low whistle from behind me. My hand twitches towards the AK then I realize I'd know that noise anywhere. It's a signature of Donnacha's. When I turn, he's leaning against the wall, hands in the pockets of his combat pants. "Her prince tried to rescue her from your ivory tower, Lorc. And you ain't gonna pop a bullet in his ass? You must be whipped."

I grunt in response, stalking away from him. "I'm going back to bed."

"Sweet dreams, Mother Gothel."

"Fuck off."

I get halfway to the lobby when I stop. The rage is flowing through me thick and fast. I know I'm not sleeping this side of sunrise. I'm not angry at her. I'm pissed at the bastard who thought he could turn up at *my* estate and scream blue-fucking-murder in the hope I'll hand over Poppy. I'm angry at the fact he called her baby. Had the nerve to stand on my turf and tell her he thought they were going to get married and have children.

And I'm fucking *furios* that he told her he fucked someone else.

The irony that she's been fucking me this whole time isn't lost on me, it's just irrelevant.

Poppy thinks I don't care. I wish. The problem is that I care too fucking much.

A gruff laugh echoes down the hallway. Donnacha hasn't moved a muscle, studying me with a glint in his eyes. You'd never know we were in the middle of a fucking war with how laid-back that bastard is.

"Yeah, that's what I thought." He takes his time pushing himself off the wall and reaching for his burner phone. "My men are already tracking him. You'll catch up with them if you hurry."

After a beat, I give him a curt nod. Then, I pop the bullets out of my rifle chamber and let them bounce off the floor. "Just in case I'm tempted to use them," I snarl.

Donnacha shakes his head, still chuckling to himself.

"You're going soft, Lorc."

Lorcan

We call it the Observatory. A grand name for nothing but a small room separated from one of our largest torture chambers by a plywood wall. Running through the middle of it is one-way glass. From the Observatory, I have a front-row seat to whoever we're interrogating. I can look at them, but when they look at me, all they see is their own defeat in their bloodied faces.

I'm on edge, pacing the length of the one-way mirror, like I've seen Antoin do a million times. To pass the time, I massage my swollen knuckles. Today, the swelling isn't from any one-on-one interrogation with a Bratnov ally. But rather a visit to the Boston *Four Seasons* hotel in the early hours, where I landed my fist on Poppy's ex-boyfriend's face, one hit for every time he called her a slut, bitch, or whore. Then another round for good measure.

Getting your hands on any hotel key card in the city is pretty easy when they all pay you for protection.

God, fucking Poppy. Every time I blink I see her crying face behind my eyelids. I hate that she hates me. It's seeping into my consciousness and makes me feel sick in a way I can't articulate. Even if I *was* one of those pussies that spoke about his feelings. I'm hoping the feeling will go away if I knock Maxim around enough.

Yes, I finally have my hands on Igor's eldest son. His second-in-command, the closest person to Igor himself.

I can hear a noise. Boots. Heavy ones, scraping against the concrete floor. It sends a ripple of excitement down my spine because it's a noise that I know all too well. When the door to the main chamber flies open, I'm instantly satisfied.

Maxim Bratnov's body is limp, which is why his heels are dragging along the floor. He's held up by Donnacha and Pat. When they throw him into the chair in the middle of the room, Donnacha looks towards the window and throws me a wink.

I press the intercom. "How long?"

Pat leans over and presses two fingers against Bratnov's neck. After a few beats, he says, "Two minutes."

Donnacha rolls up his sleeves and growls, "Need more time? 'Cause I can make that happen?"

"Nah. Cool it."

I rub my hands together like a greedy king waiting on the jewels. I've been waiting a long fucking time to put a fist through Maxim's face. I can do twenty more minutes, I'm sure. Leaning my palms against the glass, I study him. *What an ugly fucker.*

His face is scarred from a lifetime of conflict, and his long, greasy ponytail hangs low at the base of his neck. All the Bratnov's I've ever met have this hairstyle. And one of the first things I'm going to do when he wakes up is chop it off and make him eat it.

"What are you grinning at?"

Antoin's voice comes from the doorway.

“The thought of all the sweet, sweet things I’m going to do to this prick.”

“Yeah, about that.”

I turn to face my second-in-command. Sharp suit, shiny shoes too much fucking aftershave. He’s looking real out of place among the flaking walls and stench of old blood. Me, on the other hand, I’m dressed to get down and dirty in old Levi’s and a sweater.

“Don’t bother, Antoin,” I growl, heading to the prep bar. It’s what I like to call the small table against the wall in the Observatory. It has a lockbox for my watch, keys, and wallet. My toolbox sits next to it with a box of rubber gloves. “I’m going in.”

His voice is strained. “At least hear me out.”

My silence permits him to keep talking. “I know you want to bash the fucker’s head in. Trust me, I do too. But we *really* need Maxim alive. He’s the only person that will one-hundred-percent know where his father is.”

“Give me a pair of tweezers and fifteen seconds. I’ll get it out of him.”

“You know Viktor Bratnov didn’t wake up.”

“Who?”

Antoin’s sharp intake of breath irritates me. But I’m saving my energy for Maxim.

“Bratnov’s youngest son. You bashed his head against the pillar you’d tied him to and he never woke up. We can’t risk you doing that to Maxim. He’s too valuable.”

“Are you saying I have no self-control?” I retort icily, snapping on a pair of gloves.

“I’m saying your temper is too short and your trigger finger is too fast.”

My eyes travel back through the glass and I let out a loud sigh. I hate that Antoin has a good point. I know I'll go in there and the second he spits at me I'll put a bullet through his head. And besides, my head is only half in the game.

Damn it, China Doll.

"Go home. I got this, I promise."

"Fine," I grumble, snapping off my gloves as fast as I put them on and slip my Audemars back on my wrist. "Keep me updated."

Without waiting for confirmation, I push past him and stalk down the dimly lit corridors in the direction of daylight.

I know exactly where I'm headed. 'Cause Poppy is a bright fucking flame, and I'm nothing but a pathetic moth that can't stay away.

Poppy

What's the expression, again?

Something about doing the same thing and expecting different results.
Something about insanity.

I need to stop doing the same thing: dreaming of escape and then letting all thoughts of it dissolve away the second Lorcan's nice to me. Because the second he shows his true colors again, I'm back to square one. Dreaming of escape.

I'm curled up on the window seat, pressing my head against the glass and listening to the rain. Despite the rhythmic pitter-patter, not even the greatest storm of all time would drown out Cillian's words. *You need to get out of here.*

Yeah, no shit, Sherlock. Now if only I could teleport myself out of this Museum, past the hundred or so armed guards and over the fifty-foot hedge, that'd be great. I stare out at the towering hedge walls of the garden and rack my brain. Maybe I could ask Cillian to leave me out a ladder, conveniently propped up against the bush. Maybe he could also leave a ladder on the other side too. So, you know, I don't break my legs or anything.

I slam my head against the glass in frustration, a little too hard.

This is *useless*.

My head is still throbbing when there's a knock on the door. "Come in," I sigh, still staring out the window.

When the door creaks open and the chirpy conversation doesn't immediately start, I know it's not Orna.

"Ask me a question."

I glance over long enough to scowl at Lorcan. "Go away."

He steps into the room, eyes trained on me. "I won't offer you the opportunity again."

"Okay. Why are you such an asshole?" I mumble into the glass, closing my eyes again.

"A few reasons. Mainly because everyone's always bowed down to me upon hearing my last name and that's given me an ego the size of Africa. I've never been told no. I've never had any real responsibility, and there's more money in my bank account than the GDP of Malta."

I turn to him so fast that my neck cricks. His face is stone-cold serious. He takes another step towards and says, "I've always been an asshole but when my father and brothers were killed, I became a bitter asshole. A mix of grief and the weight of the organization's future on my shoulders, I suppose."

My mouth falls open. "W-wait," I stammer, swinging my legs around. "I didn't think you were serious. That was a practice question."

Lorcan narrows his eyes but they never leave me. He takes three, silent strides and perches on the end of the window seat. "Fine. I'll grant you another."

"And you'll answer it truthfully?" I whisper back.

His face is stern when he speaks. "I've already proven I will."

My mind races with a million questions. I struggle to fish for the most important one. Eventually, I say, “Okay. Who was my father?” He rubs the bridge of his nose and sighs. “You said you’d answer truthfully,” I press.

A heavy silence swirls between us, softened only by the rain. He looks different today, and for once it’s not because he’s drunk. It’s because he’s in casual jeans, running sneakers and a soft cream sweater I just want to bury my face in.

Eventually, he turns to stare out the window, showing the sharp lines of his jaw in a side-profile. He focuses on a spot far away and speaks. “A long time ago, your father was my father’s right-hand man, business partner, and best friend. A second father to me and my brothers. He had it all—both of them did. They collected protection payments from everyone in this city and no other family on the East Coast would dare put a toe on their territory without being invited. But it all changed for Murphy. Fuck knows why, I guess one day he woke up and decided that the power wasn’t enough for him anymore. He went behind my father’s back and formed an alliance with the O’Sullivans, the Irish family on the West Coast. His idea was that they’d team up, Cedric O’Sullivan on the West Coast and Murphy on the East, and they’d work their way in-land and take over every city and state in between.” He pauses to swallow and rake his fingers through his hair. I notice his knuckles are swollen but I don’t dare speak. I don’t think the hand around my throat would let me, anyway. He continues. “We never suspected a thing. Even when Murphy turned up at our gates with twelve of O’Sullivan’s men, we thought he was bringing them in for a business meeting.” He laughs bitterly at the memory. “No. They were here to overthrow us and make it as known as possible.” When he chews on his cheek and shakes his head, I want to throw my arms around him and take

the memory away. Almost. Instead, I sit and stare, open-mouthed, waiting for what happened next. “Six dead, including Cathy.”

“Cathy?” I choke out.

“Orna’s mom.”

His words snatch my breath away. “Then what happened?” I all but whisper.

“Turns out, the O’Sullivan’s wanted power over the East Coast, but they had no intention of bringing Murphy in on their plan. They turned his gun on him in the final hour. We shot them all dead, apart from Cedric. He got away.

My head is throbbing and not just from when I slammed it against the window minutes earlier. There’s so much to take in... I knew my father wasn’t who he said he was, but *a ruthless mob boss*? No. He was the exact opposite. His tatty clothes, quivering demeanor. Now that I’ve experienced what life is like on the top rung of the ladder, there’s no doubt in my mind that he belonged firmly on the bottom.

Out of all my burning questions, one forms on my lips. “Why didn’t your father kill Marcus? He betrayed you.”

Now, he drags his eyes back to mine. They are misty with memories, ones he’s probably used to repressed with whiskey. “Because he’s a better man than me. Instead of killing him, he stripped everything from him. Money, cars, mansions. Why? Because he didn’t want your mother to grow up without the father of her child.”

“You knew my mom?” I whisper.

After a moment’s silence, he leans over and strokes my cheek. A small part of my heart melts under his thumb. “You look just like her,” he

murmurs, studying me with suffocating intensity. “You know that? The same fire-red hair, pale skin.”

I squeeze my eyes shut and lean into his palm. “Did my mom know?”

“About your father planning a coup? No. She was pregnant with you at the time. She divorced him straight away and my father made sure she was taken care of.”

I shake my head, feeling the tears brimming. When one escapes, Lorcan brushes it away. “But she died. She killed herself.”

“I know. I’m sorry, China Doll,” he murmurs, sadness swelling in his eyes. “She couldn’t handle the stress. Everything was ripped away from her in an instant. Everyone in the city knew what her husband had done, and she couldn’t live with it. When she... passed, my father made a vow that you’d never find out and suffer the same embarrassment. He lived with the guilt of what happened to your mom until the day he died.”

We lock eyes. “But you told me.”

He grinds his molars, nostrils flaring. “I was meant to leave you alone. But when I found out it was Murphy’s stupidity that let the package bomb enter the warehouse, I couldn’t leave you alone. My father took everything from him except you. There was nothing left to hurt him with, except *you*. Death would have been too kind for everything he’s done to my family. I wanted him to feel the same pain I’d felt every fucking day since his failed coup.”

I pull away from his warm palm and he doesn’t stop me. “Only it didn’t hurt him” I’m sobbing now. Hard, ugly sobs that rattle my rib cage. “It didn’t hurt him at all. He doesn’t care.”

In one quick movement, Lorcan lunges forward and pulls me into his arms. I don’t have the energy to resist. And even if I did I don’t think I

would. His chest feels warm and safe, his tree-trunk arms swallowing me up as I cry against his beating heart. His lips brush against my hair as he says, “It doesn’t matter, China Doll. I care.”

“But why?” I mumble into the cashmere fabric of his sweater.

His body stiffens against my chest. “You only had one question,” he says stiffly. “Don’t push your luck.”

“No. I have one more.”

A heavy sigh presses against me. “Go on.”

“Cedric. Whatever happened to him? Is he still on the run?”

“You know what happened to him.”

I twist around, meeting his gaze with a frown. “Why would I?”

Lorcan eyes me, unsure. “You saw your father slit his throat in his study.”

Numb, I fall back against him, overwhelmed with information. The biggest mystery of my childhood answered in half a second.

He lets me stay in his arms a little longer, falling into the rhythm of rubbing my back and leaving gentle kisses on the top of my head. “I almost forgot,” he says eventually, shifting me in his arms to retrieve something from his pocket. “I have something for you.”

I look up through bleary eyes to see a small cell phone in his hand. It’s a flip phone that’s probably older than me, with a small screen and definitely no 4G network.

“You got me a phone?” I say in disbelief.

“I can’t say it’s out of the goodness of my own heart,” he replies softly, flipping it open and powering it on. “Mondez’s daughter took a liking to you, and it seems like she has daddy wrapped around her little finger. He

said our deal was off unless I gave you a way to reach his precious daughter.”

I'll get a phone to you, promise.

Despite everything, I have to bite back a laugh at the ridiculousness of it all. I only met Nova for that one night, but I can definitely imagine her throwing a tantrum until she gets what she wants.

“I’m trusting you, Poppy,” he says, eyes darkening. “I know you won’t call your... *ex-boyfriend*—”

I cringe at the thought of that asshole. “Hell no.”

“And I trust that you won’t call anyone else you shouldn’t, either.”

“I won’t, I promise,” I whisper, curling my hands around the phone. It feels like the most precious artifact in this entire room.

Lorcan plants a small kiss on my nose, “Good girl,” he says with a sultry tone that makes me forget all of my life’s problems. The kiss on the nose turns into a bite on my neck, and his hand snakes from my back to my chest...

And then his cell buzzes.

“Fuck’s sake,” he growls, pulling out a small black phone that’s almost identical to mine. “Speak.”

The second whoever is on the line begins to talk, his body tenses and he pushes me off of his lap.

“I’ll be right there.”

When I look up at him, his face is strangled and pale. “What’s wrong?” I say, panic rising in my throat.

“Stay here,” he says sternly.

“Lorcan!” I shout desperately, but he’s already halfway across the room. He stops, turns back and pulls me in for a rough kiss. It’s desperate and raw

and makes me want to rip his fucking clothes off. Then, he clamps his hands over my cheeks and tilts my face up to his. “If anything happens to me, China Doll. Go with Orna. You can trust her.”

One last lingering kiss, even hungrier than the one before, before he tears away from me and stalks down the stairs. He leaves me in the silence of the Museum, his name still tumbling from my lips and echoing off the walls.

Lorcan

“I’m so sorry for your loss.”

Alessandro Regazzi’s words hit me like a ton of bricks as I walk into the Tunnel’s office. He’s leaning against my desk, beefy hands clasped in his lap and face somber.

I clench my fist. “Tell me.”

He stretches out his pause in the way only the don of an Italian mafia crime family has the right to. “The Mondez kid pinned Bratnov’s last whereabouts to an allotment outside Maine. Your men had it surrounded, and just before they closed in—” he stretches out his hand, wiggling his fat fingers, “—*boom*.”

“Boom?” I growl, heart slamming against my chest. Jesus fucking Christ, if this asshole wasn’t helping us out, and if I could afford to have another war on my hands, I’d have my hands around his fucking throat and choke the information out of him.

“An explosion,” a voice cuts in from behind me. Angelo leaning against the doorframe. He looks shattered, his suit wrinkled and his face dark. He runs a hand through his hair and says. “Somehow, they knew an attack was coming. It was a nail bomb — someone threw it out the window towards your men.”

I grind my molars together. “How many men?”

“Twenty-four,” he says softly. “Three more in I.C.U. but expected to recover.”

“Fuck,” I roar, scanning the room for an outlet for my rage. The wall will have to do—I slam my fist into it, breaking through the plaster like it’s tissue paper.

The Regazzis watch on in silence.

Think like your father, a voice tells me through the blinding red mist. *What would Donal Quinn do?*

I smooth back a stray hair and adjust my watch. “And Donnacha?”

After a beat, Angelo says, “Alive.”

“Burnt, from what I’ve heard. But he’s refusing hospital treatment and already coordinating with our men for the next attack,” Alessandro adds. “Quite the champion.”

Yeah. Not like Donnacha to let a couple of third-degree burns hold him back.

“We’ve got this, Lorcan,” Angelo says steadily, pinning me with a serious glare. “Between all three families, it’s a numbers game. We have double the men coming from California tonight. Mondez has a jet-full of men coming too.” He steps into the room and puts a hand on my shoulder. Lowering his voice, he says, “It’s a casualty of war.”

Blood pounds against my ears.

We are not the same.

My men aren’t initiated into the Quinn family. Unlike the Italians or the Cartel, they don’t have to do some crazy initiation to prove their loyalty. They are born into it. I’m related to every single one of our henchmen by blood. I couldn’t protect them, now their blood is on my hands.

Heavy footsteps are coming down the hall, and a few moments later Antoin appears. Blazer off, shirt sleeves rolled up and top button undone. He's covered in blood and sweat. "Gentlemen, can we have the room, please?" he says, locking eyes with me.

Angelo clamps his hand on my shoulder and he and his father leave.

"Maxim won't talk."

I shake my head, a bitter laugh rising up my throat. "Then let me at him. I'll tap out every fucking tooth with a chisel and then we'll see if he wants to stay mute."

He crosses into the room and grabs a towel from the stack in the corner. As he wipes the shit from his face, he says, "He doesn't have any teeth left. Listen," He crouches down on a box and looks up at me with a serious face. "I did get something out of him, though."

"What?"

"Their price."

I watch him as he leans his forearms on his lap and stares at the floor.

"Spit it out," I growl.

Without taking his eyes off the damp concrete, he says, "There's one thing that will make this all go away, Lorc. They only want *one* thing. If they get it, they'll retreat from Boston entirely. Never step foot on our turf again and they won't even block any trade coming through the New York area. No more deaths—" His body convulses as he bites down on his knuckle, "We can stop this, Lorcan. Jesus fucking Christ, more than twenty of our men were killed today. That's a quarter of our family. We know this is only the beginning too. We might win the war, but at what cost? Losing all our men in the battle?"

Unease creeps up my neck. "What does he want, Antoin?"

Only now does he meet my eyes with a challenging stare. “They want Poppy Murphy.”

Poppy

“The owner of a brothel in St. Petersburg gave me that because I was such a good customer.”

I jump out of my skin, smearing red paint across the doll’s lips and up to her cheek. “Jesus Christ,” I yelp, turning around to see Lorcan standing in the doorway of the workroom. “Okay, two things. First, how can you be so large and so quiet? It defies the laws of physics. Second, I really didn’t want to know that story.”

No smile. He’s just staring at me, lips tight and eyes dark. I glance back down at the Russian Nesting Doll I’m working on. Her ruby-red lips are smeared. “Third thing—now she looks like the Joker.”

“She’s worthless.”

I don’t care if she was bought for fifty cents at a flea market, I set her down carefully on the table and close the gap between Lorcan and I.

It’s been two days since I’ve seen him. Since he allowed me to ask one question. Since that one question raised a million more. Also, two days since he took the phone call that made him dart out of the museum with a haunting parting gift. *If anything happens to me, China Doll...*

I can’t pretend like I’m not relieved to see him.

“What happened? Is everything okay?”

He blinks, swallows, and when the corners of his mouth turn upwards, it barely resembles a smile. Then he curls his fingers around the belt loops of my jeans and pulls me towards him, groin first. “Just kiss me.”

Not a question, and today, I don't mind. Lorcan engulfs me in his strong arms, brushing his soft lips against mine and makes the world melt away. “God, you're confusing,” I gasp, coming up for air in a daze.

Only when he answers do I realize I said that out loud. “How so?”

“One minute we're dancing in the rain, the next you're telling me it's easier if I hate you,” I mutter, fingering the collar of his cashmere sweater to avoid his hypnotic gaze. “Now you're all over me again like a rash. I don't know where I stand with you.”

He drags a thumb over my cheekbone and plants a kiss on the burning trail it leaves behind. “Then let's not stand.” In one swift motion, he picks me up and brings me into the bedroom and lowers me onto the bed. “Better?” he murmurs, climbing on top of me, pushing his thighs against either side of my hips.

It's instinctive to tilt my hips towards the bulge in his jeans. He has a magnetic pull stronger than gravity; impossible to resist. But instead of reacting to my not-so-subtle grinding, he looks down at me and gently brushes the hair off my face. He studies me with an intensity that burns every inch of my skin. But at the same time, it seems like his mind is so far away.

“What are you doing?” I whisper.

“Studying you.”

“Why?”

I see the muscle in his jaw contract. “So, I can memorize every inch of your beautiful face.”

His words melt my heart and claw at my throat at the same time. “Why?” The air feels suffocatingly thick between us. I try to lighten it so I can breathe again. “You planning on letting me go?”

A trace of a smile. “I don’t think you want to be let go, China Doll.”

He sinks down next to me, tugging me into the warm space between his arms. “In fact,” he moans into my hair, curling his hand around the nape of my neck and tangling his legs around mine. “I think you want to stay here forever.”

My eyes close at the touch of his hard chest against my face. I breathe in his oaky scent. It used to haunt me; bring me right back to the cold, cavernous space of the church all those years ago. Now, I crave it. Especially when it isn’t underpinned by the scent of bitter liquor.

I think you want to stay here forever. His words roll around my head as my eyes grow heavy. I want to stay *here* forever. Here, like this. His limbs entwined with mine, his heart pounding against my cheek. Because *here* is like a vacuum. It’s devoid of reality. An escape from the cold, hard truth of *how* we got here.

We stay in the vacuum until the sun lowers in the sky and nighttime floods the room. I don’t know if he’s awake; his breathing is rhythmic against the top of my head, his heartbeat strong and consistent. But I know what will happen when darkness comes. A kiss on my forehead, then the bed, floorboards, and door will creak, and I’ll be left alone.

Because the Devil never stays.

Suddenly, his deep voice cuts through the darkness. It’s low and loaded with an emotion I can’t put my finger on. “I don’t want to fuck you tonight, China Doll.”

Disappointment. “That’s okay,” I whisper back.

His hand finds my chin and tilts it up to him. When his lips meet mine, it feels different. They don't claim me. They *kiss* me. Soft and slow and sensual. Then, they move away from my lips to my neck, covering every inch of my throat and jaw with small butterfly kisses. Earlier he studied every inch of me with his wolf-like eyes. Now, it's like he's trying to taste every inch of me too.

I block out the sudden sadness in my chest and close my eyes, focusing on the sensation of his mouth covering my body. We're still in the vacuum, and whatever happened before—or after—this moment, it doesn't matter right now. His hands roam my body—now, he's feeling every inch of me—running along the dip of my hip and back up to the swell of my chest. His hands are caring and kind as he unbuttons my jeans and slides down my thighs like they are made of silk. They are light and fast when he unhooks my bra and drops it on the floor by the bed.

I thought he wasn't going to fuck me tonight.

With the same soft touch, he spreads my knees apart and climbs between me. “You're so special, do you know that?” He murmurs, tracing my lips with his finger. The lust claws at my voice box, and all I can manage is a strangled sigh. “You're so special to me, China Doll.” His fingers slip inside my mouth and I suck them, exactly like I've sucked his cock. He moans when I run my tongue up the length of his finger, and lightly flick the tip. Then, he pulls them out and dips the same hand between my legs, running his wet fingers along the length of my already-wet slit, stopping at my clit to rub slow, sensual circles around it.

“Please,” I gasp, my body responding to his touch like a jolt of electricity.

“Please?” he growls into my neck.

“Fuck me,” I moan, pushing my hips up to the bulge in his pants. Before I can reach down and free him from his zipper myself, he pins both my hands above my head, holding my wrists in one huge palm.

I let out a sigh of relief when I hear the sound of his zipper. Feel the warm tip of his cock against the mouth of my pussy.

He stretches me open, slow and steady, sliding me onto the length of his cock. “Yes,” I gasp, running my hands over every muscle in his back. They contract and release like the complex lock of an antique vault.

“Kiss me, China Doll,” he says, his lips against mine again.

We fall into a rhythm. His tongue massaging mine with soft, sweet kisses, his cock sliding in and out of me, building the friction in my pussy. When my breathing becomes shallow, he pushes his lips harder against mine, picking up the pace of his thrusting. “Cum for me, baby,” he groans into my lips. His hard body is flush against mine, not an inch of air between us. “I want to feel you come around my cock.”

His words send me over the edge, a wave of orgasm washing over me like a tsunami. “Good girl,” he murmurs, shifting his weight so he can stroke my forehead.

I collapse under the weight of him, gasping. Once my heart rate slows a little, I wrap my legs around his waist and pull his cock deeper into my now-sensitive pussy. We stay mouth to mouth, chest to chest, as I slowly grind against him, tilting my hips up and pushing them down into the bed. Just enough movement to work his shaft.

“Fuck,” he groans into my mouth, before nestling his head in between my shoulder and neck. His breathing is ragged and I wrap my arms around his back, crushing myself with the weight of his heavy body. I run my

hands through his thick curls, grinding my hips over his shaft, enjoying his quickening heartbeat against mine.

“I want you to come for me too,” I whisper into the curve of his ear. “I want you to fill me up and claim me. I’m yours, Lorcan Quinn. Show me I’m yours.”

His body tightens against mine, and an animalistic groan escapes his lips. I join him, moaning with pleasure at the warm sensation filling up my pussy.

We lay like this for a while, with nothing but our heavy breathing and sweat between us. My legs wrapped around his waist, his head on my chest.

As I stare up into the darkness of the ceiling, I realize that the Devil didn’t break his word: *I’m not going to fuck you, China Doll.*

He didn’t. He made love to me.

* * *

Lorcan’s already awake when the cold sunlight creeps through the window. He’s staring at me with intensity as last night as I use his bicep as a pillow.

I blink the blurriness away. “You stayed.”

“I did.”

There’s that sadness in my chest again. I can almost taste the impending doom.

Why does it feel like I’m teetering on the edge of something bigger and scarier than the Devil himself?

He lands a firm kiss on my forehead and the bed shifts around his weight as he uncurls himself from me. I watch as he tugs on his jeans and sweater.

“Do what you want today, China Doll,” he says quietly, looking out the window. “No door will be locked for you today.”

I prop myself up on the pillows and frown. “You mean under the watchful eye of your big burly guards though, right?”

He flashes a sad smile. “They are for your own protection.”

A lump forms in my throat. “Where are you going?”

“Why do you ask when you know I won’t tell you?”

I bury myself under the covers, wanting to stay in the vacuum for a little longer. Light floods back into my hiding space as he slowly peels back the bedding.

“Hey,” he says with a voice as soft as his kisses last night.

I peek out from under my pretend vacuum, locking eyes with him.

“I don’t hate you either.”

My heart hitches in my chest. Before I can respond, he puts his finger to my lips, then quickly replaces it with a long, hard kiss.

It’s impossible not to dissolve under his touch. It clears my head and any worry or fear I have disappears in a puff of smoke.

He pins me with one more lingering stare, amber eyes swirling with darkness, then he leaves.

His touch clears my head of everything except one stubborn thought.

That kiss felt very final.

Poppy

I stare down at the phone in my hand.

It feels like a relic, not only because it's so damn old, but because it's a symbol of life *before*.

Who am I going to call first?

Authorities would be the obvious choice, but one I'm not even considering for a million and one reasons. Two of those reasons come to mind straight away. The first being that if what Sam said is true—not that I can trust anything that ever came out of his stupid mouth now—and Lorcan *did* have some sort of control of the Stanford police department, then I'm pretty sure he has control over the police in his own turf.

The second is that after last night, I don't think I *want* to call the authorities.

A shiver of bliss rolls over me and I tug my cardigan tighter around me.

Nellie. Yes, I'm going to call my best friend and let her know I'm okay.

Her cell number is burnt into my retinas. She had it taped to the back wall of her desk in big red writing under the words, *Don't forget to call me!*

Why? Because if her one-night stand woke up before her, he wouldn't have to wake her up to get her number for a second date.

I tap out the digits with trembling fingers; nerves bubbling in my stomach.

The line clicks after two rings. “Yes?”

A laugh escapes me in a weird hissing noise at the sound of my best friend’s rude greeting.

“Nellie, how many times have I told you not to answer the phone like that? An unknown number isn’t always a telemarketer, you know. I could have been from the college or from—”

I’m rambling; I do that when I’m nervous sometimes.

“Poppy?” Comes her strangled voice down the line. “Holy shit, Poppy, is that *you*?”

I grip the phone tighter, squeezing my eyes shut. “It’s me, Nel.”

“Jesus. Hold on, girl. I need to go and sit down before my legs give in.” There’s rustling and footsteps and a door slamming. “Okay. Fucking hell, Pop. Start from the beginning.”

Yeah. I probably won’t start with the fact I got drugged and kidnapped by an Irish mafia boss on my nineteenth birthday. Or that the only surprise was that the whole ordeal was a year late.

So, I stick with my half-truth, half-lie concoction. “Well, first off, I’m so sorry.” *True*. “I upped and left without a word, without thinking about how worried you’d be.” *Lie*. I stressed about how worried Nellie would be over endless sleepless nights when I first got here.

Her sigh is dramatic. “Yeah, a sticky note would have been nice, you know? Oh—and rent. Since you’ve been gone, I’ve had to pay all of the rent myself!”

I inwardly cringe. “Jeez. I’ll send you a check.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she says, and I can literally see her waving her hand around with that dismissive twirl thing she does. “Another day. Right now, I need to know a few minor details—you know, like where the fuck are you

and why aren't you in *college*? Hold on. Let me find the Doritos and get comfortable." I take a deep breath and wait for the rustling. "Okay, go."

"Right. Well, there's this guy—"

"Always is," she interrupts with a loud crunch.

"I knew him from back home. We... had a thing before I left for college and I've never really been able to get over him. He turned up to surprise me on my birthday, and I just... decided to go back to Boston with him. I know I missed the last semester of school, and I didn't expect to stay all summer but... well, here I am." *Half-true.*

Crunch, crunch. "There are a few plot holes I'm happy to overlook in the name of love, and there's a few I can't. Like why the fuck couldn't you have sent a text?!"

"Uh, my phone broke," *true*, "and I've only just got around to getting a new one. But yes, I'm a shit friend, I know."

More rustling. "So, Sam's been pranging out."

"Don't even talk about that asshole."

The rustling stops. "So, is it true?! 'Cause we went to the police—yeah, now I know you just rode off into the sunset with a mystery man, I feel like that move was a bit dramatic—and they were *very* cagey about Sam. Did he ever...?"

I snort down the line. "Hurt me? Hell no. Heard he cheated on me though."

"No fucking way."

"Way. It's a long story, I'll explain when I see you."

"And when will that be?"

Resting my head against the window, I close my eyes. "Soon."

“Very mysterious. I didn’t know you had it in you. Remember our first night out together? You practically had a chastity belt on under that frumpy maxi dress, and now you’re like, swept up in your very own romance novel.”

“It’s always the quiet ones.”

“Clearly. So, looping back to when I’ll see you—I’m going to need a more definitive date. Like, are you planning on coming back to college this year?”

My heart sinks. *Who the fuck knows?* Even if, by some miracle, Lorcan let me, I doubt the college would let me pick up where I left off. I trace the pain on the windowsill with my fingernail. “Not sure yet.”

“Jesus,” she mumbles, still crunching away. “Look, girl. You know I’m all about going balls to the wall when it comes to spontaneity, but Stanford’s not exactly community college. You busted your ass to get in here, and you’re going to give it away for some dick? I hope it’s at least ten inches.”

“Yeah, it’s a bit more complicated than that.” *True.*

She pauses. “Do you love him?”

My turn to pause. “Yes, I do.”

Also true.

I manage to get off the line, but not before dodging another fistful of awkward questions. I feel a million times lighter now that I’ve spoken to my best friend. Hell, she’s the only person in this world that cares about me. It used to be her and Sam, but I’m pretty sure that after what happened last week, he wouldn’t piss on me if I was on fire.

Tugging open my bedside drawer, I reach for the scrap of paper I folded up into the smallest square possible and stuffed into the joint. Nova’s

number. I don't know why, but I feel even more nervous calling her than I do my best friend who I mysteriously vanished from.

Maybe because she's so... *cool*.

She answers in two rings.

"About time."

In the reflection of the window, I see my brows knit together. "How do you even know who it is?"

"Baby, nobody else calls me." I laugh. "Thanks for the phone. I have no idea how you winged that one."

"You know what's like kryptonite to a man? Whining. If a woman whines long enough and at the right frequency, he'll give her anything she wants."

"So, you whined until your father convinced Lorcan to give me a phone?"

"You got it. Threw in a few sobs and slammed doors to speed up the process."

A grin splits my face. "You don't strike me as a whiner."

"I'm not. I'm just a master manipulator who knows how to work daddy. Hey, listen," I hear movement in the background, like she's walking from one room to another. "I have a question. How's Lorcan treating you?"

The question comes out of nowhere. "Uh, fine?"

Her voice lowers. "Look, I know the deal. Men in our world... this is what they do. Women are a commodity to them. I want to make sure you're being treated right."

My gaze drifts out of the window, past the gaggle of guards and to the gray skies over the hedges. Is this the chance to escape I've been looking for? If I tell Nova I'm not being treated right, what could she do about it?

I shake my head. After last night, I'm not going anywhere. Besides, looking down at the solemn faces on the guards in the gardens, I have a feeling I'm safer here than out there, anyway. "I'm good, Nova. But thanks for asking. He looks after me."

Her reply is quick. "Don't rely on it."

"Rely on what?"

"Him looking after you." Is she whispering now, or is the connection dropping out? I squeeze my eyes shut to hear her better. "I don't rely on the protection of my family, which is why I'm a black belt in Karate and could shoot a tin can from a hundred feet away. Listen." Yeah, she's definitely whispering.

"Nova—"

"I said, listen. Be ready to kick a dude in the balls faster than your man could put a gun to his head. Okay?"

"I—"

"Are you understanding me, Poppy?"

My heart thumps against my chest, confused. "Uh, yeah? I guess."

"Good." Then, her voice returns to normal. "When this all blows over, let's go for a drink okay?" she says breezily. "Don't worry, I'm sure I have enough whining in me to get you out of that ivory tower for a night. See ya soon."

And with that, the line goes dead.

I stare at the phone, trying to register what the hell just happened. Either the girl I thought was super cool is actually a bit of an unhinged nutter... or she was trying to give me an ominous message.

I'm not sure what I'd prefer.

Poppy

I'm curled up in the living room in the main estate, taking good use of this new 'no locked door' policy. Feet curled up underneath me, a magazine on my lap and hot cocoa in my hand. For a moment, I can pretend life is almost normal.

Orna breezes in with a vacuum, then stop in surprise when she sees me. "Did you escape the museum only to come and chill in the reception room?" She catches me mid-slurp, and I spray a few chocolatey droplets over the seat cushion. "Oh my god I'm so sorry," I groan, slamming the mug down on the coffee table and giving the plush fabric a hard scrub.

"Don't worry about it," she says breezily, crossing the room, picking up the whole sofa seat and flipping it over. "There, good as new. Just don't do it again. I'm running out of sides to flip over."

I laugh. "Jesus, how much are you being paid to be a housekeeper?"

She flashes me a grin. "Not enough in this household." With a dramatic sigh, she flops onto the seat next to me and tugs the magazine off my lap and starts flicking through it. "So, what are you doing out here, then? Lorcan's loosened your leash?"

"Something like that."

"Well, enjoy the peace and quiet, I certainly am. It's been manic here for the last few weeks with all the different families coming and going. I've

worn a path into the carpet from the drawing-room to the kitchen, going back and forth so much.”

I seize my opportunity to be nosy. “Where are they now, then?”

Orna doesn’t look up from the agony aunt pages of the magazine. “The Tunnels, I’m guessing. Woah, check out this question: *Dear Dierdry, my partner insists that I only wear white panties, but I enjoy wearing bright neon thongs—*”

“The Tunnels?” I interject. “What’s that?”

She shrugs. “A whole network of tunnels under the city. It’s where they interrogate.”

The way she says it so casually makes me feel a little ill. When I’m curled up in Lorcan’s arms, it’s so easy to forget what a violent man he is. Even though I’ve seen it firsthand.

I sink back into the sofa. “Uh, I don’t know if you were meant to tell me that.”

Another shrug as she turns her attention back to the thong issue. “You’re Lorcan’s girlfriend. You’ll find out eventually.”

My ears go hot and there’s a strange ringing in them. “I’m not his girlfriend!” I reply acidly. It’s not lost on me that I sound like a school girl denying a crush on her teacher.

Orna does nothing but let out an easy laugh. “Please. You’re in love with each other, and even if it’s a bit weird, because well, you know, he drugged and kidnapped you to get you here, I’m still behind it.” She cocks her head and chews her cheek. “Pooran. Lopyy. Hmm, no, a celebrity couple name won’t work for you guys, I’m afraid.”

I’m pinned to the sofa, stunned. When I don’t reply, she pats my thigh. “Look, I grew up a Quinn, okay? I’ve seen enough crazy in my time,

believe me. There are stranger ways to fall in love. I'm here for it. Especially because you seem to be cracking his cold, dead heart." She pretends to shiver. "Hell, if you stick around he might even let me go back to school. Or at least give me a raise. I'll settle for a raise. Oh, shoot," she slaps her hand against her head. "I forgot to tell you something important."

Despite the embarrassment flushing my cheeks, my ears prick up. "What?"

"I was meant to tell you Lorcan's taking you for dinner at *Gatsby's*."

"Huh? When?"

She grimaces. "Tonight, seven p.m. Sorry, it completely slipped my mind—"

"Tonight?" I yelp, glancing at the clock on the mantelpiece. "Like, in an hour?"

"Yeah, yeah" she gathers up the magazine and gets to her feet, pulling me up with her. "Come on, I'll help you get ready."

"I haven't even washed my hair!"

"See," she grins, stabbing an accusatory finger at me as we stride through the halls, "I told you that you loved him. Remember when you first got here? You wouldn't even eat in the hope it'd piss him off. Now you're dining on caviar and throwing on Oscar De La Renta dresses while you're at it."

I throw back my head and laugh. Actually, I feel a little delirious at the thought of going on a date. He said, didn't he? That when this all blows over, he'll take me on a proper date. Well, maybe that's why he was acting so strange the other night. The war is over. That date is finally happening.

We stand shoulder to shoulder, staring at the contents of my closet. Orna tugs out something gold and shimmery. "How about this?"

I run my hand over the Naeem Khan dress and sigh. The silk fabric is covered with a layer of swishy beads and crystals, just like a 1920's flapper girl dress. "Very apt for *Gatsby's*. Is it a little over the top though?"

We settle on teaming it with a black boyfriend blazer and chunky boots so I don't feel too overdressed. Orna helps me slick my waves into a low ponytail, and I add hoops and a lick of bold red lipstick to round off the look.

"Stunning," Orna says, twirling me around in front of the mirror. We lock eyes in the reflection, and a sudden pang of guilt stabs my chest.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

She frowns. "For what?"

"What my father did to your mom. I didn't know. Lorcan only told me a few days ago—"

"Don't," she says, shaking the memory out of her head. "You shouldn't ever feel like you have to apologize for your father. You weren't even born. I'm the one who should apologize for ignoring you for so long over it."

"You already did."

"I know but I never really addressed it. Just kinda skirted around the issue and brushed it under the carpet. But I guess now you know who your father truly was, I can apologize properly."

I throw my arms around her, breathing in the scent of laundry and floral perfume. "Thanks, Orna."

"No, thank you," she says into the shoulder of my blazer. "I've really enjoyed having you here. You won't believe how boring it gets only having your sisters for company."

When she pulls away, she lightly punches my arm. "Hope you stick around, whether you actually want to or not."

As I laugh, it briefly crosses my mind that my world is so twisted, I'm literally brushing off my own kidnapping like a crappy joke. I now know what Orna means by seeing enough crazy.

She checks her watch and swears. "Jesus, time flies when you're having a heart-to-heart. Chop, chop, the car will be waiting for you outside."

We walk to the car together, chatting excitedly, and for the first time, it doesn't feel like I'm being escorted from one ivory tower to another. I'm actually thankful for the henchman that falls in step with us as we round the front of the manor, and for the bulletproof SUV he guides me in to. I feel safe. Protected. A feeling I never had growing up, I guess.

"Let me know how it goes!"

Orna waves from the driveway until I can't see her in the rearview window anymore.

I'm nervous.

A good kind of nervous. First date, butterflies fluttering in your stomach and your teeth chattering kind of nervous.

I realize I never had it with Sam, and the thought makes me smile at my reflection in the window. *Lorcan Quinn is really taking all my firsts.*

The sun is setting over Boston and the rush-hour traffic is heavy, but it seems like every car moves to let us pass. Within twenty minutes, we pull up outside *Gatsby's*.

And when we do, my heart sinks.

Armed guards litter the entrance to the restaurant. At least ten in the signature all-black-everything, bulletproof uniforms that the Quinn henchmen wear. Then there's a handful of others, dressed in Camo and sporting different guns across their chest.

It's clear that this war isn't over. But then a little niggle of hope tugs at my chest. *He went to all this trouble, with all this security, all to have dinner with me?*

One of the Quinn guards opens the door and helps me out. Three others form a human shield around me as he guides me into the restaurant, their backs to me and their guns pointing outwards. *Jesus, this is all a little excessive, isn't it?*

I can't wait to go inside and laugh about it. Tease Lorcan about how paranoid he is.

But when I pass through the doorway, I stop in my tracks.

Immediately, I know there'll be no laughing or teasing tonight.

Because Lorcan isn't alone.

Poppy

Among the throng of guards, there's a round table in the middle of *Gatsby's* and nothing else. I recognize both the Tiffany lamp in the middle of it, and almost all of the men around it. Bar the two who have their backs to me.

But there's only one man I zone in on.

"Lorcan? What's going on?"

The hard lines of his face as he brings a large whiskey to his mouth and drains the glass in three gulps.

The way his chest sags a fraction. It makes mine explode.

Then he's strong-jawed, back straight, hands clasped together. Staring through me.

"Lorcan— Hey!" A cold, hard shove in the small of my back makes me stumble forward. I turn around and see the henchman who escorted me from the car withdrawing the butt of his gun. Suddenly Lorcan's on his feet, a growl ripping from his throat. Next to him, Antoin also rises with him. Not to say anything to the asshole who just *hit me in the back with his gun!* but to whisper something in Lorcan's ear, all while pouring Lorcan another glass. He nods at whatever he tells him, and sinks back to his chair and gulps the drink. Then returns to staring at somewhere on the other side of my soul.

Then, Antoin turns to me. “Miss Murphy,” he says in that cool, eerie tone that he always has. It sends a shiver up my spine. “Please, take a seat.”

He gestures to the chair opposite but my legs won’t move, even if I wanted them to. What I want is for Lorcan to meet my gaze and nod. Smile—*anything*. Anything to reassure me that everything is okay.

I’m met with nothing but a blank stare.

The man to the right of the empty seat finally twists his body around, pinning me with a cruel smile. My heart leaps into my throat, and my legs threaten to give way. He’s old, ugly and scarred. Set deep under his wrinkled brow is a pair of haunting black eyes. Adding in the twisted grin stretched across his lips, he’s the face of nightmares. “Miss Murphy,” he rasps in a heavy accent. Immediately, I realize *he’s* the Russian Nova told me about. “Be a good girl and sit.”

Good girl. When it slides from Lorcan’s lips close to my ear it lights my pussy on fire. When it comes from this monster, it fills me with nausea. I glance at Lorcan, and without looking at me, he nods. Walking to the table feels like wading through syrup, but I sink down opposite Lorcan. To my right sits the Russian, to my left, is a badly-beaten man. When he turns to flash me a twisted smile, I see half of his teeth are missing.

I can’t help but think, *here we go again*.

Antoin slides a sheet of paper across the table and says, “Mr. Bratnov, here is your copy of the contract. I trust your lawyer has already read through it?”

His tree-trunk thigh pushes against mine under the table. When I look up to sneer at him, I see he’s pinning Lorcan with a smirk. “Summarize for us.”

Antoin clears his throat. “On receipt of one, Poppy Murphy, the long-standing treaty between the Quinn and the Bratnov institutions are null and void. New legislation is in place that will prevent the Bratnovs from crossing the Quinn territory lines, and the Quinns from crossing the Bratnov territory lines. Both of which have been pre-agreed.”

The room spins.

“You know, Mr. Quinn,” Bratnov snarls, amusement tinging his tone, “if you wanted out of the treaty, all you had to do was ask.”

Lorcan doesn’t reply.

“We just need a signature,” Antoin says.

Wordlessly, I watch as Bratnov signs the rights to my life, and the man I foolishly thought I was in love with doesn’t move a goddamn muscle.

Here we go again.

The realization sinks like a stone in my chest.

Claimed, stolen, sold. No matter how much I’ve tried to fight against the tide and change my own destiny, I’ve only ever been a debt owed. Then a keepsake. Now, a bargaining chip in the midst of a war.

I was stupid to think the man I spent four years trying to protect myself from would protect me now.

Then, Nova’s cryptic words float into my head. *Don’t rely on a man to save you.*

My heart rate quickens, and I feel that familiar punch of survival instinct in my gut.

Save yourself.

I’m lightning quick, lunging for the Tiffany lamp and crashing it against Bratnov’s face with a hard back-hand swing. There’s a sickening crunch, a mix of stained glass and bones breaking. I’m not listening to the angry

voices or the sound of guns clicking, I just run. Even in my heeled boots, I cross the tiles in three strides. The door is so close. The streets of Boston are within touching distance. I can get away. I can be free of this cruel world I never asked to be part of in the first place.

Except, I can't. Because there are armed men on the other side of that door. And on this side of it, identical armed men are closing in on me. A strong arm around my waist, another twisting my arm behind my back. They turn me away from freedom, forcing me to face Bratnov. His lip is bleeding, dripping down to his white shirt collar, but he's still grinning like a maniac. He cuts through the chaos with slow, deliberate steps towards me.

My screams rip from my throat. "Leave me alone! Let me go!"

His voice is a calm contrast to mine. "You're a feisty one, Miss Murphy," he snarls, rubbing a fat thumb over the trickle of blood. "I like a little fire in a plaything."

"If you touch her, the deal is off."

Lorcan's voice comes from over his shoulder, raw and vicious. We lock eyes, just for a second, and behind the smoldering rage, I can see the hurt.

Don't do this to me, I want to scream at him. *I'll do anything*.

But I know it's useless. One of the reasons the Devil is so dangerous is because he does what he wants.

"Shut it, Quinn," Bratnov snaps back. "She's mine now."

"Not quite. The contract needs two signatures. I haven't signed it yet."

Bratnov's nostrils flare as he studies me, jaw ticking. "Very well," he grunts. "I suppose I can play nice for a few more minutes. Need a pen?"

Antoin slams his hand against Lorcan's chest to stop him lunging at Bratnov. He takes a few ragged breaths, then hisses, "No. But I'd like a moment to say goodbye."

A gruff laugh escapes Bratnov. “You make me excited, Quinn. She must be good if you have become so attached to her.”

The restaurant is silent apart from Lorcan’s heavy footsteps crossing the mosaic tiles. He slides into the small space between me and Bratnov and stares down at me. “Let go of her,” he snarls out the corner of his mouth to the two henchmen holding me back. They do at once.

I feel so heartbroken I could sob. Without warning, Lorcan grabs the back of my head and pulls it towards his, crushing his mouth against mine. I tried to pull away, but his grip is relentless. He forces my lips open and slides his tongue into my mouth. He tastes like betrayal and a whole bottle of whiskey. And—metal.

“Ugh—” I try to wriggle away from him, from the foreign object he slides into my mouth, but he doesn’t let me. When he finally lets me go, he pins me with a stern glare, a million pleas in his eyes. Without a word, I move it under my tongue and keep my head down, hoping Bratnov didn’t see.

“That’s enough, Quinn,” Bratnov says icily. “I didn’t agree to damaged goods.”

“My apologies,” Lorcan hisses back in a tone that suggests he’s anything but sorry.

He searches my face for the last time, and suddenly, it clicks. This is exactly how he was looking at me the other day, studying all of my features like he was trying to etch them into his long-term memory.

He was planning this, even then. The realization and the metallic taste in my mouth are making me feel nauseous.

“Enough,” Bratnov snaps. Then he nods toward the men in the camouflage uniforms. Clearly, they belong to him because they instantly

spring into action; two grabbing my arms and another opening the restaurant door. They march me through it, and I twist around to see Lorcan one last time, but all I see is the back of his head as he strides into an adjoining room.

Bratnov's men put clunky handcuffs on me and throw me into the back of a waiting SUV, shoving me across the leather seat until I slam against the window on the other side. In the split second I'm alone in the car, I spit out the metal object from under my tongue into my lap. A key.

Quickly, I stuff it into my bra and try to stop myself from trembling

In the restaurant, I guess I always held onto the tiny shred of hope that this was all a misunderstanding and Lorcan would save me. But now he's nowhere in sight and I'm surrounded by strange men barking over my head in Russian. The panic is overwhelming.

Nova's voice pops back into my head again. *You know what's like kryptonite to a man? Whining.*

No harm in trying.

The scream that rips from me is blood-curling. I thrash my legs and arms about, kicking the back of the driver's seat. The door slides open and Bratnov dives in. He hisses in my face. "Shut the fuck up, Murphy." Then, he grabs my cheeks and slams my head against the window.

The sight of the blood trickling down his chin is the last thing I see before I black out.

Lorcan

“This was a mistake,” I growl, sweeping everything left on the dining table to the floor in one swift motion. Then I drive my heel into one of the chairs. It skids across the tiles and narrowly misses one of the three henchmen still guarding the restaurant from the inside.

“Lorcan, we need you to focus,” Angelo says, placing a firm hand on my shoulder. “The plan is foolproof, you need to remember that.”

I shake him off and something between a snarl and a howl escapes my lips. Yeah, the great fucking plan.

When Antoin said Bratnov wanted Poppy, I bust his lip open with a swift punch in the mouth. As he wiped away the blood, I said if he ever mentioned her name in the same breath as his again, he’d lose more than a few teeth. But somewhere between night and day, he managed to convince me of the plan.

We’d use Poppy as bait.

Let him think that we agreed to his conditions. Draw up a contract, sign on the fucking dotted line. But he’d be suspicious right up until he had her in his filthy clutches, which is why we had to let him leave the restaurant with her. Angelo might think the plan is foolproof, but it still relies on two important factors.

Miguel's stalking skills being as sharp as a knife, and the Bratnovs letting their guard down now they think the war is over.

My heart is slamming against my chest and I need something strong to drown it out. I take out the hip flask from my breast pocket and gulp.

I'll burn the city down to get my China Doll back.

Antoin's cell buzzes. He brings it to his ear and turns away from me. "Miguel. Okay. Coordinate with Donnacha."

"What did he say?" I snap, crossing the tiles and getting in his face.

I hate that he's so much fucking calmer than me. "The tracker he put on Bratnov's SUV is live. They are moving west towards Route One. I'm coordinating with Donnacha and the team now."

Rodrigo Mondez smooths down the breast of his suit and shakes his head. "Taking her back to New York City? Seems too obvious."

I agree.

"We need to make sure there are enough men," Antoin says suddenly. He turns and jabs a finger towards two of the henchmen by the door. "You and you. Get out of here and coordinate with Donnacha."

Alessandro raises an eyebrow. "Including my men and the Cartel, we have over a hundred men on the ground. You don't think that's enough for an unexpected attack?"

"And you really think two more men are gonna make a difference?" Rodrigo chimes in, a trace of amusement on his lips.

Antoin drags a challenging stare between the two of them. "It's better not to take chances," he says darkly.

Mondez replies, "Now, we have only one of your henchmen here, and none of us have any weapons. You know, since you agreed to Bratnov's ridiculous demand that we all come in unarmed."

“You can’t handle yourself, big man?” Antoin bites back.

I slam my fist on the table and growl, “Not. Now.” I snap my fingers towards Mondez. “You have the tracker monitor? I want to see it.”

He tugs a small black tablet from his pocket and switches it on. “Here —”

Suddenly, Antoin intercepts it, snatching it from Mondez’s hand and hurling the device against the wall.

“Fucking hell, Antoin,” I bark, “now isn’t the time to throw a tantrum —”

Bang. Bang. Bang. Three gunshots ring out, and when I turn back to my cousin, I’m looking down the barrel of his smoking gun.

“Get on your knees, Lorcan.”

What the fuck.

I drag my eyes across the chaos. Alessandro, Angelo, and Rodrigo are sprawled across the floor amongst the broken glass and silverware. Blood pools from their chest, soaking their white shirts.

I’m stunned. “If this is a joke, Antoin—”

“You’re the only joke around here, Lorcan.” Spit flies from his mouth, his eyes wild and dangerous.

“Antoin,” I say steadily, meeting his hard gaze. This must be what a mental break looks like. “Put the gun down and we’ll talk.”

He laughs, manic and cruel. “*Now* you want to talk? I’ve been trying to get you to talk for years. But that’s your problem, isn’t it Lorcan? You don’t *talk*. You *do*. And what you *do*, is whatever the fuck you want.”

My jaw ticks. “What do *you* want, Antoin?”

“I already told you. You on your knees,” he snarls back.

I growl, “The Quinn boss would never get on their knees for a *cousin*.” I spit the last word like it’s rotting in my mouth.

With a sneer on his lips, he says, “You’re not a boss, Lorcan, no matter what your bloodline says. You’re a drunk.” He regards me up and down with disgust, “Look at you, you couldn’t even keep your hand off the bottle for *one fucking day*. Probably the most important day in your life.”

The hip flask weighs heavy in my pocket. “I’ll give you one chance to drop the gun, Antoin,” I growl, “or you’re going to be real fucking sorry.”

Then it hits me. We made an agreement with the Bratnovs that none of the bosses would be armed in the restaurant. Our henchmen searched them, theirs searched us. Yet here Antoin is, Glock in hand.

A thick cocktail of rage swirls around my veins, mixing with the liter of whiskey I’ve sunk today.

“You’re working with them.”

A bitter laugh. “Finally. You see what alcohol does to you, Lorc? It makes you real fucking slow.”

The sudden revelation hits me like a tornado, sending me backward. I grab onto the table for support. “No.”

“Easy there, alcoholic.”

My bark echoes off the cavernous ceilings. “You wouldn’t betray your family like that.”

“You’re right. I’d do anything to protect the Quinn legacy, which is exactly why I’m here today, in your face with a fucking gun, telling you that I’m working with the Bratnovs.” With a hard kick, he sends the dining table sliding across the room. “We’re losing our grip on this town by the day. Businesses trying to pay us in fake money. Some not even paying us at all. And then you *cut off their supply* with no warning? It’s a matter of time

before they revolt, before other families see the chinks in our armor and try to take over. You didn't think about that though, did you, Lorcan? No, because you're too busy with your bottles of whiskey and your fancy antiques and weird *fucking obsessions*." He spits on the ground next to him, inches from Alessandro's lifeless body. "Poppy Murphy. You just had to have her, didn't you? Well, now she's back where she belongs."

My throat tightens. *Poppy*. "Don't play with me, Antoin. Where is she?"
"Back with her father."

All the air is snatched from my lungs. It doesn't even feel like my own voice when I bite, "You better fucking explain yourself."

"Simmer down, *cuz*. I'm the one with the gun, remember?" He lowers it slightly, basking in his newfound power. "Luckily for you, I have all the time in the world to explain what's been going on right under your drunken nose. We're not in a rush, are we?" He sneers with an evil smile. "We've got nowhere to be, no one to save."

The blood rushes to my fists and they itch to connect with his face. And in any other circumstance, I'd let them. If this had happened three months ago, I wouldn't think twice about taking a bullet over Antoin's betrayal. In fact, I'd probably welcome him putting me out of my goddamn misery.

But it's not about me anymore. It's about Poppy, and she needs me to save her. "Is Donnacha in on this?" I spit. He laughs. "Wouldn't you like to know? Sorry, Boss, I'll keep you guessing on that one a little while longer."

I swallow the rage in my throat and steady myself. *I have to get out of this alive for Poppy. No matter what it takes.*

"Well, then. You've piqued my curiosity."

"Good." With a cold smile, he steps across Rodriguez's body and flicks the barrel of his gun to two chairs strewn in the middle of the floor. "Sit."

Only when he sinks into one of them do I reluctantly lower into the one opposite. His gun follows me like a laser. “The thing about you, Lorc, is that you’ve always been predictably unpredictable. So, when you had Donnacha shoot that Bratnov kid outside Mickey’s, I knew exactly what was going on in that stupid head of yours. Idiots like you always want full power, and I know you didn’t have the brain cells to think about the price we’d have to pay to get it. So, when you asked me to fly to meet with the Colombians, I drove straight past the airport and went to New York.” A little more relaxed now, he throws his free arm over the back of the chair and laughs. “Yeah, I know what you’re thinking. I must have been crazy going to the Bratnovs after what you fucking did. His men shook me down a few times but eventually, Igor listened to what I had to say. See?” he says, cocking his head and raising his eyebrows at me. “That’s what real bosses do. They talk to each other. I tried to tell you, Lorcan, honestly, but—”

“Get to the point,” I snarl.

He purses his lips, raises his gun. “We had a very long chat. Yeah he’s a deranged bastard and I won’t be smoking cigars with him at the Gentleman’s Club anytime soon, but we ain’t so different, he and I. We agree on a lot. Like how the supply treaty benefits both families. How going to war for a few more square miles of territory isn’t worth the bloodshed. Oh, and that you—” he jabs his gun to point at me, “— need to go.”

“And who would replace me?” I mock him with a hard smile, “you?”

“Me,” he deadpans. “Fuck tradition. Fuck hierarchy. It should have always been me. While you were swanning around Europe collecting your little knick-knacks in the day and paying for blow jobs at night, I was at the office crunching numbers. In the Tunnels cracking jaws.” Eyes suddenly glassy, he shakes his head. “Donal would have wanted it to be me.”

Every time my father's name comes out of his mouth it stabs me in the chest. "Put your gun down," I growl, "fight me like a man."

He snorts. "No chance. You're a fucking animal. And that's the key in being a successful boss," he says simply, "knowing your strengths and weaknesses. You could rip me to shreds with your bare hands in under thirty seconds. But I knew I could out-wit you without barely lifting a finger. I did all of this," he sweeps his free hand around the room, "right under your nose. Did you notice I always convinced you to let me interrogate the Bratnovs? You didn't ask twice when I told you Viktor Bratnov was dead — shocker, he's very much alive. Sorry, I'm getting ahead of myself. Where were we? Ah, yes. I was telling you about my meeting with Bratnov. Very successful, if not surprising. Before I left, he told me that he has a new business partner."

My blood runs cold. "Who?" I spit.

"Marcus Murphy."

He lets the bastard's name marinate between us. Fuck, how quick I'd risk taking that bullet just to land one punch on him, if it wasn't for Poppy. My voice is strangled as I growl, "He betrayed our family."

"Twice. Turns out, he knew exactly what was in the package that killed your father. Yeah, he hadn't quite learned his lesson from teaming up with the West Coast Irish. He tried his luck with the Italians, and when that didn't work out, he floated around for a few years until he went crawling down to New York to beg for Bratnov's alliance. He's really determined to build his empire again from scratch."

I pin him with a lethal stare. "Murphy was working with the Italians?"

"Yup." I rake my fingers through my beard and stare up at the ceiling for a minute. Grinding my molars, I say. "And you still want to work with

him.”

“Yup.”

“Then you’re even more stupid than you think *I* am,” I snarl. “You really think he won’t betray you too?”

He chuckles. “Of course, but I’ll have a bullet in his head long before that happens. Murphy’s ruthless. I don’t have to tell you that. Men like him are useful to have onside when you’re waging war. When Bratnov and I have total control of the East Coast, then we’ll dispose of him”

“And Poppy?”

“I think Bratnov has a few plans for her,” he smiles cruelly.

The rage boils over and I leap to my feet. Antoin does too, cocking his gun to my head. “Easy there, Boss,” he murmurs with a trace of nerves. Even he’s not sure that he’ll be able to put a bullet in me faster than I can wrap my hands around his throat and choke the life out of him. “Your temper has always been what gets you in hot water.”

My breathing is ragged, the red mist clouding my vision. “You’ll never get my men to agree to this. They’ll turn against you—”

He cuts me off. “Taken care of. I have a few onside already, and the rest... disposable.” His smile hardens. “This whole keeping-it-in-the-family thing doesn’t work so well anymore. I’ll train new men that *want* to serve me, and not work for me just because they are born a male Quinn.” He takes a step closer, straightening his back and puffing out his chest. He’s so close that he pushes the barrel of the gun into my chest.

“You’re brave getting that close to me,” I growl, inches from his face. “I could reach out and claw your eyes out quicker than you can pull the trigger.”

“I’ll take the risk if it means I can look you in the eyes as you die, Boss,” he whispers back.

A gunshot rings out and I brace myself for the pain. Poppy’s face flashes in front of my eyes. Her desperate stare from across the table, laced with disbelief and betrayal. *I hope you can escape, China Doll. I hope the key to your handcuffs is enough to set you free.*

But the pain doesn’t come.

Instead, Antoin’s body crashes to the floor. A single bullet in his temple. Instinct kicks in and I grab the gun from his lifeless hand and point it in the direction of the attacker.

The one henchman left in the restaurant is pointing his AK-47 at me.

Cillian.

“Well would you look at that,” he drawls, eyes dipping to Antoin’s contorted body. “I saved your life.”

I stare at him in silence for a split second. “But why?”

He smiles. “Questions later. Right now we need to save Poppy. And lucky for you, I know exactly where she is.”

Poppy

I wake up with a banging headache and the smell of damp assaulting my nostrils.

Where the fuck am I?

I'm lying down on something soft, a slimy wall pressed against my back. The handcuffs are digging into my wrist bones, rubbing the flesh raw. When I groan into the darkness, there's a sudden movement and a light comes on.

I'm staring into my own eyes. Except they don't belong to me.

"It's good to see you again, Poppy," my father whispers.

The shock makes me bolt upright, draw my knees to my chest and push my back against the wall.

"Shh, it's okay," he murmurs, his eyes tracing me with fascination. "You're with daddy now. You're safe."

Breathing heavy, I stare at him as everything comes flooding back. *Gatsby's. Lorcan. Bratnov.*

I squeeze my eyes shut and shake my head, wincing at the tenderness at my temple.

"We'll get that patched up, Pops, don't you worry."

"Where am I?" I manage to gurgle.

"Don't worry about the logistics, just know that you're safe now."

Through blurry eyes, I sweep the room. It's nothing but a small, concrete box with a mattress and a naked lightbulb swinging above my head. This doesn't *feel* safe.

And neither does being around my father.

He looks old. Deep wrinkles distort his face and his knees creak when he stands. It's been two years since I've seen him, four since I had a proper conversation with him. Time isn't the only thing that's changed him, either. His suit is sharp, his beard neatly trimmed. There's an air of confidence surrounding him that he never had during my whole childhood.

Despite having a headache and feeling disorientated, the hairs on the back of my neck stand to attention.

Because my instincts know better.

"You've grown into such a beautiful woman, Pop. You look exactly like your mother."

"I know who you are," I hiss. "Who you *really* are. So, what am I doing here, Marcus?"

"It's Dad," he growls back, before he catches himself and softens his face. "I'm your father, Pop. And yes, I had a feeling that monster might have told you who I was. But it's okay, I was going to tell you myself anyway." He disappears into the shadows and comes back with a bottle of water. He twists off the cap and brings it to my lips. I hesitate, but my throat is sticky and raw, so I unwillingly take a sip.

Feeling more alert now, I say, "No father would let a man claim his daughter."

He offers a slow nod, sinking down into the mattress next to me. I flinch away from his hand on my knee, but he only tightens his grip. "The biggest regret of my life," he says softly. "Which is why I made it my mission to

rescue you. And I'll make up for it—all of it, Pop. The shitty house you grew up in, the ratty hand-me-downs you had to wear to school. You'll live like a princess now, I promise. I'll give you the life you were *meant* to have as a Murphy. Anything, everything, you could ever want.”

There's too much information swirling about my brain, and all it does is brew fresh questions. “You're working for Bratnov.”

“*With* Bratnov,” he snaps back, tightening his grip on my leg. “Antoin Quinn too.”

I recoil. “You're working with Lorcan's cousin?”

A cruel smile twists his lips. “We're forming a new syndicate, Pop. Gonna take over the whole East Coast, all three families joined together.”

The blood rushes to my feet, making me spin. “He betrayed Lorcan,” I choke, more to myself than my estranged father.

His face darkens. “You don't have to worry about that monster anymore. He's dead now.

An icy hand grips at my heart, threatening to squeeze it until it stops beating altogether. There are too many dots to connect. *Lorcan's dead. Antoin betrayed him. My father has been in on the plan the whole time.*

I can't breathe.

My father transfers his hand from my leg to my back. It's cold but clammy as he rubs it up and down my spine in a way that's meant to be comforting. “It's all over, sweetie,” he murmurs. “He can't hurt you anymore.”

I'm going to be sick. “Get these off me,” I croak, lifting my hands. “And let me out of here. I don't want any part of your sick plan.” The rubbing on my back stops. “Mmm. Can't do that, sweetie. Listen...” he shuffles closer, hot breath assaulting my ear. I squirm to get away from him.

“I’ll give you the life you should have had growing up. There’s only one little thing you need to do for me.”

My blood runs cold. I know—I just *know*—what’s coming.

“Between father and daughter,” he murmurs, low and leech-like. “I don’t trust Bratnov fully. I need to strengthen the alliance so he can’t... betray me at any given time. I need to bind our families together. That way, there’s no backing out.” “No,” I interrupt, “I won’t. You can’t make me—”

“You’ll marry Bratnov, Pop,” he finishes acidly. “Sooner rather than later. In fact, he’d like a word with you now.” A sob escapes my lips as he rises to his keep. “This was never about saving me, was it, Marcus? You only wanted me as your bargaining chip.”

“We’re not like normal families, Pop,” he retorts coolly, striding to the door. “Sacrifices have to be made for the greater good.”

When he slams the door behind him, I break down. A sacrifice. That’s all I ever am. And the one hope I had to be saved is now lying dead.

It feels like the weight of the underworld is on my shoulders. I squeeze my eyes shut, listening to the muffled voices somewhere in the shadows. Lorcan was cruel and possessive but he was also exciting. Like a roller coaster, full of twists and turns designed to scare you senseless, but you were always safe. The tears start to fall, squeezing themselves between my closed eyelids and trickling down my cheeks. I’ll never feel that safety again. His strong arms wrapping around my body, his hard kiss claiming my—

His kiss.

A memory trickles down my spine, cold as an ice cube. When he kissed me at *Gatsby’s*, he slipped a key in my mouth.

The key.

My hand flies to my bra and sure enough, I can feel the small outline in the cup. Breathing ragged, I contort my cuffed hands in ways I didn't think my body could move, and fish the key out from my bra. It's small and nondescript. And I'm praying it'll fit.

I hear footsteps. Heavy ones, growing closer and closer.

Come on, Poppy. You have to do this.

With trembling fingers, I practically dislocate my wrist, twisting it to slot the key into the lock. I could scream with relief when the cuffs pop open and the blood rushes back into my fingertips.

The footsteps stop, and now there's a looming shadow through the glass panel in the door. My breath hitching in my chest, I slide the cuffs back into place; loose enough so they don't lock, but tight enough so they look like they are.

The door creaks open, flooding more dim light into the room. "There she is," a gruff voice comes from the shadows. "Little Miss Feisty."

Bratnov steps out of the darkened corners and into the light of the naked bulb. Fear claws at my throat. Not only because he's a towering, scarred Russian, but because of the cuts streaking across his left cheek. They are fresh and ugly, the result of me smashing him around the head with the Tiffany lamp. And then there are his eyes. Brimming with revenge.

Without a word, he crosses the damp concrete between us and scoops me up from the mattress like I weigh nothing. "Put me down!" I hiss, thumping against his chest. My squirming emits a raspy laugh.

It's now or never.

Just before we cross into the unknown of the corridor, I slip one wrist out from the cuffs and sling the heavy metal against his head, as hard as my shaking hands can muster. There's a sickening crack, and then I'm falling.

Falling out of his arms and away from his musty smell and hot breath. I hit the concrete awkwardly, my ankle twisting in on itself, but I ignore the searing pain and run.

I don't know where I'm running to, only who I'm running from. The brick tunnel turns and twists into another one, and then another, all identical to the last. A blur of dripping ceilings and harsh strip lighting and the throbbing pain in my leg. Then the adrenaline starts to fade, replaced by the realization that I have no idea where I am, or where I'm going.

“Poppy!”

My name echoes off the brickwork, loud and angry. My lungs are burning and my legs are turning to jelly but I refuse to stop.

“Poppy!” The voice is furious now, chasing me through the tunnels as I take a hard right. A new tunnel. The strip lighting stops halfway down it before plunging into darkness, but I still half-run, half-limp down it. My boots splash into murky puddles and mud splatters up my calves, but I keep running.

Then my body slams into a brick wall.

Fuck. A dead end.

“Poppy.” The voice is closer now and it's growling my name.

There's no other option but to turn back on myself, back into the light, and hope I can get out of this tunnel and into another one before the owner of the voice catches up with me. My lungs are burning as I retrace my steps back into the previous tunnel.

“Poppy!”

The voice is so close now that it makes me flinch. I whip around to chase it, and see my father standing at the mouth of the tunnel.

Holding a gun.

“Don’t take another step,” he growls, raising it towards me. “I mean it, Pop.”

But I learned a long time ago not to trust my father. I haven’t trusted him since I was nine and saw him slit Cedric O’Sullivan’s throat in his study. And I sure as hell wasn’t going to trust him now.

I turn on my heels and run, even faster than before.

My name rips from his lips one last time, followed by another noise. This one is deafening and within a fraction of a second, it hits me. The white, hot heat rips through my body, starting at my thigh and crawling across my skin like a million tiny spiders. Blood. Lots of it and all coming from me. It seeps over the damp concrete floor, staining my dress, entwining itself in the crevices of my hand.

Footsteps. This time they are fading, and so is the shouting. More voices now, in a quiet, angry chorus a million miles from me.

I was nine when I realized my father was a bad man.

I was nineteen when I realized he was the real Devil.

Lorcan

“The Tunnels?” I roar, slamming the barrel of my gun into Cillian’s temple. He swerves across the road and I grab the steering wheel to steady it. Despite wanting to blow Cillian’s brains out, I can’t save Poppy if I’m tangled up in a road accident downtown.

“It’d be a lot easier to drive if you weren’t pointing a gun at my head,” he says sourly, his eyes trained on the road ahead.

“How do I know I can trust you?”

He shrugs with a calmness that would suggest he wasn’t driving a hundred miles an hour in a twenty-five zone. “You know I just saved your life, right?”

I grab hold of the steering wheel *before* I hit him again this time. “Why the Tunnels?” I growl.

“My suggestion. Because you’d never look there. You’d never expect for this shit to be happening right under your nose. But really, I know you know the Tunnels like the back of your hand.”

Even I have to admit, if he’s telling me the truth, it’s smart.

My cell buzzes and I answer in the first ring.

“What’s going on? I’m waiting on your instruction,” Donnacha growls down the line.

“Are you in on this?”

“On what?” he snaps back, impatient.

“Antoin’s plan,” I say sourly, glaring at downtown Boston passing in a blur. “His pathetic attempt at a coup.”

Silence. I squeeze my eyes shut and grip the bridge of my nose with my thumb and forefinger. *Not you too, Don.*

Eventually, his reply comes, quiet and stoic. “I’ll kill him myself.”

I swallow the lump in my throat. Donnacha isn’t like Antoin. Never has been. He says what he means and shoots when he says he will. No deception, no lies. Just pure dedication to the Quinn name.

“Too late.”

He lets out a groan and mutters something laced with curse words.

“All right. We can sort this shit out later. Where’s your girl?”

My girl. It feels like an ax is swinging against my chest, chipping away at my heart. If I make it out of this alive, I’ll never forgive myself for the look on her face when she walked into *Gatsby’s*. Pure betrayal.

I drag a hard stare over to Cillian. “The Tunnels,” I say sourly. *If this cunt is telling me the truth.* Before Donnacha can show his surprise, I continue with, “Antoin was working with Bratnov and Marcus Murphy.” *Yeah, we’ll unpick that fuck-fest later.* “Go alone. We don’t know who of your men is compromised.” After a brief pause, I say, “Put Miguel on the line.”

Heavy footsteps, a car door slamming, and an engine starts. There’s a muffled exchange. “Lorcan,” A gruff voice says.

I take a deep breath and stiffen my jaw. I’ve never been one to sugarcoat shit. “Antoin betrayed us. He was working with Bratnov all along. Your father was caught in the crossfire.”

Despite the backdrop of skidding tires and honking horns, his silence is deafening. “I’m sorry man,” I say, dragging my knuckle over my beard. “Antoin’s dead, but I’ll make sure Bratnov and Murphy suffer slow deaths.”

When Miguel speaks, his voice is detached. “No. First, he raped and killed my sister. Now he is the reason my father is dead. Bratnov’s mine.”

Without another word, I hang up and focus on the road ahead.

He can have Bratnov.

It’s Murphy I want.

Poppy

I've been here before. This never-ending tunnel lined with the world's most revered paintings. *Mona Lisa. The Starry Night. The Girl with the Pearl Earring.*

The last time I was here, I was desperate to reach the small door at the end. This time, the searing pain in my ankle and the bullet lodged in my thigh means I can't run toward it. And I wouldn't, even if I could.

I pull my knees up to my chest and squeeze my eyes shut and wait. Wait for the floorboards to give way, to reveal the burning fire that's underneath.

I'm desperate to hear his voice.

Welcome to hell, I told you you'd be joining me here.

I'd give anything to be with him there.

A floorboard to the left of me falls, revealing the burning furnace underneath.

Soon, my love. I'll be with you soon.

Another floorboard cracks and groans and falls into the fire below. With every board that tumbles away from me, I feel more at peace.

"Poppy."

A small smile stretches across my lips. One more board left.

I'm so close now. We're so close.

"Poppy."

Strong arms from above. They lift me up, just as the last floorboard falls from underneath me.

No.

No, I want to scream, I'm going the wrong way. Put me down. Down, down, down into the flames below.

“Hold on, kid.” The voice is so familiar but it’s not *his*. There are no more floorboards left, but I’m soaring, not falling. Moving towards the small door, encased in strong arms. “You just gotta hold on for me.”

The flames sizzle and fizzle and settle into nothing more than a bed of embers.

He’s not there.

“It’s gonna be okay, kid. It’s gonna be okay.”

Poppy

From dangling above the fiery pits of Hell to heaven's waiting room.

Well, maybe.

When the rhythmic beeping grows louder, I open my eyes. I'm in a bedroom. It's light and breezy and white, with a window at the bottom of the bed that frames the sparkling sea. Boats, lazy and serene, float across it like they have no place they need to be.

I'm tempted to close my eyes and bask in the calm. But I've been here before. Not *here*, in this room, but in this situation. Waking up in an unknown bed, head groggy and heart-thumping faster than I can make sense of.

"You're awake."

I chase the voice to an armchair in the corner.

Lorcan.

He rises to his feet and crosses the cream carpet in half a second, sliding his cold hands into mine.

"You're..." I croak.

Here. Alive.

Heartbreakingly handsome.

He silences me with a delicate kiss on my lips. "Shh," he mutters, stroking my forehead. Those eyes—*those goddamn eyes*—they sparkle like

citrine whirlpools as he studies me with the intensity that I've come to crave.

That I thought I'd never be the subject of again.

"Rest, my China Doll," he murmurs, his warm mouth a beautiful contrast to his cool touch. "You're safe now. Go back to sleep, everything is okay, I promise."

The pillow is soft and so is his hand wrapped in mine.

Lorcan Quinn claimed me. Stole me. Betrayed me. Yet when he tells me everything is going to be okay, I melt faster than butter on a warm day.

And I let go.

Lorcan

I pace the oak floorboards of the study, from the bookcase to the desk and back again, only stopping myself when Antoin's hard face pops into my head.

The bastard always paced.

I force myself to slow down to a stop, right in front of the window. My fingers twitch towards a drink I don't have, so I stuff my hands in my pockets and focus on the view.

Martha's Vineyard. Where sun, sand, and sea all roll into one nostalgic childhood memory.

There's a sharp knock on the door.

"Enter."

"It hasn't changed in here since we were kids. Not even the goddamn books on the shelf."

I turn to face Donnacha. He's leaning against the door frame, drinking in my father's old study.

"Only difference was the inch-thick layer of dust covering everything. You look tired."

He rubs the dark circles under his eyes and throws me a lazy grin. "It's been a long three days."

I nod. "You want to update me?"

My cousin lets out a lazy groan and sinks into an armchair. “They’d taken her to the east tunnels. The ones the city had boarded up years ago. There was not a chance in hell we’d even think about checking in there if it wasn’t for Murphy. ‘Could hear him screaming Poppy’s name from behind the plywood walls.’ He lowers his voice and raises an eyebrow. “Could fuckin’ hear that bastard from New York, he was so loud. We ran into Bratnov pretty quickly. Big gash on his head, acting like a caged animal as always. I left him with Miguel so he could finish his business with him in private, and went off to follow Murphy’s barking. That’s when I heard the gunshot.”

My heart quickens. What I’m about to hear would go down a hell of a lot easier with a glass of whiskey. “He shot her,” I say, grinding my molars together.

“Got her in the thigh. She fell pretty hard and smacked her head, and that’s what would have finished her off.” He pauses, before saying quietly, “Sorry man. I couldn’t bring Murphy back to you. Had my hands full with Poppy, and you know I had none of our men with us, just in case they’d been turned by Antoin too. It was easier to put a bullet in his head.”

I turn back to the window, jaw clenched, hands curled into balls. “It’s not always about seeking revenge. If the job is done by someone else, it’s done regardless.”

“Your father used to say that.”

When I turn back around, Donnacha is smirking at me, almost triumphantly.

Yeah. Maybe I’m becoming a bit more like him.

“And the rest of the men?”

His shoulders sag. I know this is why he looks so tired. After he brought Poppy to me at the airfield, so I could fly her directly to the chalet here at Martha's Vineyard to recover in safety, he went back down to our part of the Tunnels. One by one, he and Miguel interrogated each of our men to see who had been turned.

"He'd got to three of them," he says darkly. "And I disposed of them properly. The rest are as shocked as I am." He adds wearily, "I didn't know Antoin had it in him."

I recoil at Antoin's name. It sounds like betrayal. Usually, I drown my anger in a sea of whiskey, and I'm not ready to deal with the impact of his coup yet. Not sober, anyway.

When I don't reply, Donnacha's voice floats through the study again. "So, what's next, boss?"

What's next? Poppy is next. She consumes my foreseeable future and nothing else matters. Not the Estate. Not the new coke supply chain. Not even the reputation of the Quinn dynasty.

Just Poppy.

"I'll keep you posted," I grunt, straightening my cufflinks.

Donnacha rises to his feet and grips my hand, before bringing me into a strong hug. "Then, if it's all right with you, I'm going away for a while," he says, eyes dark. "Fuck knows where. I just... need a break."

He doesn't need to say anymore. Donnacha has been loyal to this family since the day he turned fourteen. I don't think he's taken a vacation since then, either. "Take all the time you need."

He nods and turns to leave, pausing with his hand on the doorknob. "I forgot. Cillian's here to see you."

"Send him in."

A few moments later, there's another knock on the door. Cillian appears, stern-faced and rigid. Cold eyes following me around the study.

"Sit."

He does what he's told. He always has, ever since I closed the casket lid on his father. Alive.

"I think you have some explaining to do."

Challenging my glare with one of his own, he says acidly, "There's not much to explain. Antoin brought me in on his plan because he knew I was the perfect ally. You buried my father alive and made me listen to his screams for three hours. You've held me prisoner for over four years. Made me fight battles I didn't give a flying fuck about. I should want revenge."

My voice drips with ice. "But you didn't take it."

"No, I didn't."

I walk around the desk and sink into the armchair opposite, pinning him with a hard glare. "Why?"

A cruel smirk tugs at his lips, his eyes never leaving mine. "Because now you owe me a favor."

"You want your freedom."

"Antoin would have given me that. No, I want something that your cousin was too weak to give me. Your alliance."

It's hard to conceal the surprise on my face, but I quickly rearrange my features and put up the stone wall. "You want to go out on your own."

He smirks. "Antoin would always say how stupid you were. I always knew better."

I take him in. Young, fresh-faced Cillian. Skinny legs shaking in his combat boots the day I took him down to the Tunnels for the first time, aged just fourteen. It took him a week to pick up a gun, three to take his first life.

But that drop of blood changed him. Made him. Yet he's always been a fascinating contradiction. In the darkness of the Tunnels, he morphed into a stone-cold assassin with the aim of a trained sniper. In the light of the Quinn gardens, he was an artist. Trimming bushes with a gentle hand.

But he's not that young kid in the Doc Martens anymore. He's a fully-fledged, hardened killer with razor-sharp thinking.

He fascinates me. And suddenly I can see past Poppy just enough to envision the future of my family.

"You'd be a good right-hand man," I say. "Stay."

He stiffens for a moment, letting that hard facade slip, before shaking his head. "It's time I went out on my own."

I understand. I took his life from him, and now I owe him mine. Rising to my feet when he does, I hold out my hand. "Very well," I say. "Then you have my word. As long as you don't encroach on the Quinn territory, you'll have our alliance. In whatever you choose to do. Consider yourself free, kid. I'll arrange the jet to get you out of here."

He glances down at my hand and pauses before taking it. When he does, his grip matches mine in strength. "Thank you," he says with thick seriousness in his eyes. With one last lingering stare, he turns and leaves.

Four years ago, I staked my claim on two lives. I've let one go, now it's time to do the same with the other.

Poppy

For the first time in a long while, I laugh. It hurts my ribs and gets stuck somewhere in my throat, but it comes out in a hard wheeze.

Orna looks up at me, puffing. “We didn’t think this through.”

We’re on the small path leading down to the chalet’s private beach. Patches of stubborn beach grass push out from the dunes and rocks on either side. As we get closer to the sea, the sand thickens, and the wheels of my wheelchair are lodged a few inches deep underneath it.

“I hate to break it to you, but you might have to carry me.”

She groans, hitching up her shorts and sinking down onto a nearby rock. “No chance. I’m not on duty, you know?”

I look out to the sparkling sea and the gray clouds rolling over it. The salty breeze whips around my face. It’s the first time since I woke up in the white room that I’ve left it.

Daisy, the nice nurse I immediately knew was a Quinn by her dark hair and yellow eyes, finally agreed that I was well enough for Orna to wheel me out into the fresh air. As long as I cover up the cut on my forehead and don’t get my leg cast wet.

“It’s okay, here will do.”

Orna breathes a dramatic sigh of relief, eyes twinkling up at me. After a few moments of listening to the waves lap against the shore, she says, “So,

how are you feeling?”

“Surprisingly okay,” I admit. “Those pills your cousin prescribed me have me feeling as high as a kite.”

She smiles. “That’s Daisy for you. Anyway, that’s not what I meant.”

I know what she meant. How I feel about Lorcan using me as bait. About my father promising me to a sixty-year-old Russian mob boss and then shooting me when I tried to run.

What my father did? Broke me, but didn’t surprise me.

What Lorcan did? Left a confused, twisted knot in my chest.

It’s been about a week since I woke up at the Quinn chalet on Martha’s Vineyard, head, leg, and heart all aching. I drifted in and out of medicated sleep for a few days, and every time I woke up, he was there. Reading a dusty book in the armchair. Watching the television on mute. Always silent, but there.

He disappeared when I could sit up again and hold a conversation. Orna filled the void, bounding in with wide eyes and a pack of cards. Between peppermint teas and games of Black Jack, she filled me in on what she knew.

The Quinns decided to use me as bait to lure the Bratnovs into a false sense of security. Only, Antoin betrayed the family and both he and Bratnov are now dead. So are the Regazzis and Rodrigo Mondez. My heart breaks for Nova, and as soon as the dust settles, I’ll give her a call. She told me about Cillian, how he saved Lorcan’s life, and then how their cousin, Donnacha, saved mine.

“It’s a lot to take in,” I say slowly. I reach out and squeeze her hand. “But enough about me; how are you?” I ask softly.

Her eyes begin to brim and she stops the tears from falling with a swift shake of her head. “I’m struggling to understand how Antoin could do this. It’ll take time.”

I nod, still gripping her hand. I know better than anyone that coming to terms with a family betrayal takes time.

I’m one level of consciousness above a hypnotic state, listening to the leaves rustling on the trees above us when the breeze carries in a low voice.

“You shouldn’t be out here without a jacket.”

I snap out of my daydream, and following the voice, I lock eyes with Lorcan.

He’s standing in the middle of the path, the chalet looming behind him. He looks heartbreakingly handsome, in a softer way than usual. Tapered cream chinos and a slate-gray sweater hug his muscular silhouette. His hair untamed, unruly curls framing the hard lines of his face.

The intensity of his stare takes my breath away.

The silence is broken by Orna rising to her feet and letting out an awkward groan. “Well,” she says, clapping her hands together, “I’m gonna go raid the pantry and hunt for my millionth snack of the day.”

I squeak something in acknowledgment but it doesn’t meet her ears. She claps Lorcan’s shoulder as she brushes past him and disappears into the chalet gardens.

Once again, I’m face to face with the Devil. Only this time, I’m not so scared.

He frowns, dragging his eyes away from mine long enough to assess the wheelchair situation. A trace of amusement on his lips and he says, “Are you stuck?”

“Maybe.”

He closes the gap between us and wraps his arms around me. Within seconds, my ass is in the air and we're striding across the beach, me pressed against his chest, the wind blowing in my hair. "See," he scowls, glancing down at my teeth chattering, "I told you, you shouldn't be out here without a jacket."

Gently, he places me down on a flat bed of rocks, like I'm the most delicate antique in his collection. Then, he tugs off his sweater, revealing a white T-shirt and the sculpted, tanned skin just above his waistband, and tosses it to me. "Put it on."

I do what I'm told, melting into the touch of cashmere, warmth and faint trace of cologne against my skin. It feels like the most welcome hug in the world.

We sit for a moment, his eyes boring into me. "How are you?"

"Alive," I bite back. I look out to the Atlantic, because if I look at him, I'll last half a second before I burst into tears.

I might not look at him, but I feel him. His possessive arms around my waist as he pulls me close. His heart beating hard against my ear as he clamps my head to his chest.

God, his embrace is like a drug.

He murmurs into my hair, "I have something for you."

I look up as he slides something from his back pocket and presses it into my hands. A letter. A thick, cream envelope that has already been torn open. With a suspicious glance up at Lorcan, I shake out the paper and gingerly unfold it.

My eyes scan over the header, then my name, and home in on buzz phrases like "we'd be delighted" and "return in the new year."

It's a letter from the Dean of Stanford Business School, inviting me to pick up my studies where I left off.

I blink, once, twice, refusing to let the tears fall. Lorcan's face contorts into a frown and he cups his hand against my cheek, studying me. "I thought you'd be happy."

"How did you get the school to agree to this?"

A faint outline of a smirk on his lips. "The same way I got you disenrolled."

A million thoughts fight to get to the front of my brain. A hundred words are stuck in the back of my throat. "I don't know what to say."

Being careful of my cast, Lorcan turns me around to face him, holding me so close that the tip of our noses brush. He draws in a deep breath and says, "Then I'll say something. I'm sorry, China Doll. I should have never agreed to use you as bait." His face darkens. "It was Antoin's idea, and I'd never have thought he had other intentions. If I ever thought there was even the smallest chance I'd lose you, I'd never have gone through with it."

I bite the inside of my lip, letting his apology stew between us. "I thought you'd sold me."

He squeezes his arms around me tighter. "You're not mine to sell."

Confused, I look up at him, searching his citrine eyes. He takes a deep breath and says, "Poppy, you're the perfect keepsake. You're precious and priceless, and there is truly only one of you. But you don't deserve to be kept in a cabinet, locked away in my museum for my own pleasure. You're free, China Doll."

I'm free.

So why does my heart snap in two and sink to the pit of my stomach?

The realization settles like dust and I twist away so he can't see the tears trickling down my cheeks. "You always said you'd do it."

"Do what, China Doll?" He murmurs in my ear. Despite telling me I'm free, his hands lock around me like the iron bars of a cage.

"Discard me once you no longer had use for me." A bitter laugh escapes me; it's immediately snatched away by the wind. "That's what you said, right? Now my father is dead and you have my virginity. I guess I'm no use to you anymore."

His chest stiffens against my back, and a low rumble vibrates deep in his chest. "Look at me," he growls. Spurred on by the fury in his voice, I twist around to meet his burning eyes. Anger and pain swirl in his glare. "Poppy, when I claimed you all those years ago, I knew I'd ruin your life. I didn't realize you'd ruin mine too. I will never be able to look at another woman again without thinking of you. I'll never run my hands over a priceless antique without thinking of you. I'll never be able to pick up a fucking paintbrush, listen to that goddamn *Beatles* song you hum as you work, or even stand in the rain without *thinking about you.*" Lorcan pauses, turning his attention to the sea, nostrils flaring. "Goddamit, Poppy," he says quietly, "I hate you, and for all the wrong reasons."

I can barely see him through the tears. "Then ask me," I whisper.

His warm hands clamp my face and pull it to his. He grits his teeth and says, "Stay," he growls. "Stay with me."

"What have I told you about asking questions?"

His hard lips soften into a smile as he brushes them against mine. Voice like velvet and with the touch of an angel, he whispers into my mouth.

"Poppy, will you stay with me?"

Lorcan

Poppy agreed to stay but she had two conditions. Both were going to be tough to fulfill, but I'd move fucking mountains to have her stay.

I had one condition of my own. We'd stay here, at the chalet, until the new year. Almost three months spent together, not as captor and keepsake, but as a couple.

All was quiet in Boston; the news of Bratnov's demise spread like wildfire through the city. It put the fear of God back into the businesses that were lax on payments and earned us respect from other families across the country. Donnacha agreed to postpone his travels until January, working with Miguel to hold down the fort until I get back. With business in order, I didn't have to focus on anything but Poppy.

And boy, did I focus on Poppy.

We spent the rest of September exploring the coast in my Jeep. With her leg still in the cast, I'd carry her down to the beaches so we could watch the surfers brave the waves over hot cocoa and pastries. October, she spent the days making pumpkin-everything in the kitchen, and I spent the nights with her curled up in my arms with the lights off, telling her cheesy ghost stories with a torch tucked under my chin. November came, knocking the leaves off the trees and bringing in the snow. We locked the doors and closed the

curtains, spending the evenings making love in front of the fireplace, wrapped up in the tartan throws she'd bought from a local boutique.

Poppy could walk again by December, and the angry scars had melted away from her smooth skin. Visitors came and went; Nova Mondez came to get away from the storm cloud of her dad's passing. I owe her family a lot, especially her brother, so I told her she could stay as long as she needed. Then Donnacha and Orna came over, bringing sacks of presents, Poppy's workroom tools, and anecdotes from the estate. Poppy would disappear on long walks with Orna, while Donnacha and I played poker and smoked illegal cigars in the drawing room.

Poppy was my new drug, and by the time Christmas morning comes, I'm addicted to every inch of her porcelain body.

"Good morning," she drawls, planting a long, passionate kiss on my mouth the second I opened my eyes. I groan into her lips and pulled her against my chest.

"Merry Christmas, China Doll," I murmur into her messy bun, running my hands over her soft, naked curves and breathing in her sleepy scent. As always, the mere feeling of Poppy against me makes my cock stand to attention. In one swift motion, I flip her onto her back and climb on top of her. Like the good girl she is, she opens her legs, curls them around my hips and pulls me closer to the warm spot between her thighs. I moan into her mouth, brushing my erection along the length of her warm pussy lips. I pull myself away from her kiss just long enough to look into her eyes. As I sweep the stray strand of hair from her forehead, I wonder how I'm going to fuck her on our first Christmas together. Am I going to pin her down and tie her wrists to the bedposts and spank her until she comes over my hand, then wrap my hand into her hair as she chokes on my cock? Or am I going to

replace my spansks with soft kisses, gently licking, sucking, and fucking every inch of her soft body? Then, eyes never leaving hers, slide into her and bring her to one of many orgasms in slow, rhythmic waves?

I might be the boss of Boston, but in the bedroom, Poppy is the boss of me.

“Are you on the naughty or nice list, China Doll?”

Her eyes twinkle and she bites her lip. “Naughty,” she whispers back.

With a low growl, I rip back the covers and flip her onto her front, revealing her pert ass. I grab the silk ribbon from the bedside table and wrapped them around her hands, cuffing them behind her. Leaning down into the crook of her ear, I say, “Naughty if you want me to carry on. Nice if you want me to stop, baby.”

She gasps something excitable into the mound of pillows and pushes her ass upward in anticipation.

I push it back down into the mattress and part her legs with a strong hand, mindful of the tender scar on her thigh. Her sweet pussy lips reveal themselves to me, already glistening with anticipation. With the lightest touch I can muster, I run my fingertips up the back of her thighs and to the curve of her ass, enjoying the ripple of goosebumps that suddenly appear on her pale skin. I’ve barely touched her, but she’s already moaning into the pillow and writhing around underneath me.

My hand comes down rigid and hard on her ass cheek, suddenly and unexpectedly. I love how the soft flesh of her ass jiggles under my slap and flushes pink almost immediately. She squeals into the Egyptian cotton.

“Use your words, China Doll,” I growl. “Naughty or nice.”

“Naughty,” she groans, arching herself up towards me, tugging at the silk restraints on her wrist.

“Good girl,” I moan, landing another hard slap on her cheeks. And then another and another, until her pussy juices are dripping down her thigh and she can barely take it anymore.

“Naughty,” she gasps, “God, so much naughty.”

The lust in her tone is too much for me. “Face down and on your knees,” I growl, using the restraints to move her into position. My good girl knows the drill, immediately propping herself up on her knees and burying her head back into the gap between the cushions, presenting her ass to me. Dipping my hand between her thighs, I slide two fingers into her wet hole and rub her juices over her tight asshole. She squeals at my touch, gasping when I slowly slide a finger into it.

“Naughty or nice.”

A pause, then, “Naughty.”

When I prop myself up on my own knees, I tower over her. With one firm hand on her ass, I guide myself into her tight asshole, holding her firmly in place when she buckles under my weight.

“Naughty,” she moans into the pillow, cuffed hands balling into fists. “Naughty, naughty, naughty.”

* * *

After, I wrap Poppy in a blanket and carry her down to the living room. As soon as she sees the present under the tree, she scowls. “We said we weren’t doing gifts.”

I nod to the box next to it. “Seems like you broke that promise too,” I say with a small kiss on the tip of her nose. “Me first.”

I pick up the large box and the gentleness with which I lower it into her lap makes her eyebrows raise. “You really shouldn’t have.”

“You don’t even know what it is yet.”

With a sheepish grin, she rips off the wrapping paper and claws at the big brown box underneath. When she pops the lid, she scowls, then her mouth melts into the perfect O and her eyes widen. “Is it real?” she whispers.

A laugh escapes me. “I’m offended.”

With shaking hands, she delicately lifts the Tiffany lamp out of the box and stares at it in awe. “The Pond Lily,” she murmurs, tracing her fingers over the leaves and flowers carved into the brass base. “I didn’t... it isn’t... *who did you have to kill?*” She squeals, before shushing herself like her loud voice will shatter the stained glass.

I drink in her broad grin and shiny eyes; not even twenty bottles of whiskey could ever make me feel this euphoric. I didn’t have to kill anyone, but I had Donnacha strong-arm the curator at the New York Historical Society. I don’t know, or care, how many bones he had to break or how many of his children’s lives he had to threaten. All of it is worth seeing two of the rarest things in the world, right here in my living room.

“Okay, your turn,” Poppy says, setting the lamp down on the coffee table, pausing for a second longer to admire it there, before diving back under the tree. The box she gives me is medium-sized, wrapped in silky gift wrap and finished with a comically large bow. Flashing her an amused grin, I lift it to my ear and give it a good shake. “Sounds like a box of chocolates.”

“Lorcan Quinn!” She barks, lunging off the sofa to grab the box. “Be careful! It’s delicate.”

“Oops.” Still smiling, I peel off the paper and open the box.

The contents make me numb.

“I had Orna bring me the pieces when she and Donnacha came to visit,” Poppy cuts through the heavy silence. “I was missing the shard I cut you with, but Orna found it in one of your suit pockets,” she laughs awkwardly. “It took me a while to glue the—”

“Why?” I choke out, voice wrapped in emotion. I turn the Faberge egg in my hand, the diamonds glistening in the glow of the tree lights.

This is the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me.

Poppy brushes her soft hand over my cheekbone, following it with a small kiss.

“Because, like an old teacher once said to me, even the most broken things can be beautiful. They just need a little love.”

Powered by a sudden surge of love of my own, I sweep her into my arms and crush my lips against hers. I wrap my hand in her hair, drawing her closer, until there’s not even a millimeter of air between our bodies. “I love you, Poppy Valentina.”

“And I love you, Lorcan Quinn.”

Epilogue

EIGHTEEN MONTHS LATER

LORCAN

“My name is Lorcan Quinn and I’m an alcoholic.”

The sea of people in the church hall is unfamiliar to me. This isn’t my usual weekly AA group, but the faces are friendly and welcoming as they all murmur a chorus of greetings.

Poppy had two conditions when she agreed to stay with me. The first was easy. I’d send Orna to school to study whatever she wanted.

The second was a lot harder to stick to. I’d get sober.

But like I said, I’d move mountains for my China Doll.

Forty minutes later, I’m walking down the steps of the church to the Bentley, early morning sun beating down the collar of my shirt.

It feels like I’ve driven down this road leading up to Stanford University a million times since last January, but in reality, it’s been only every other weekend. I go from the jet to the Bentley to her dorm room—the one she insisted on keeping with Nellie despite me demanding that I buy her a house with full security detail. I’ve learned that being in love is all about compromise. We *compromised* by her having two security guards that keep

a ten-foot distance at all times. I wanted her to come home to the estate every weekend—instead, we *compromised* by alternating between me coming here, entwining our bodies in her tiny single bed with her best friend feet away, and her coming home, where we spent those precious twenty-four-hours sprawled out in my California King.

Today is different from my other visits. In fact, it'll be my last.

I follow the signs to the Stanford Stadium and pull up into the parking lot. Sliding on my Cartier aviators, I stride out into the sun and follow the crowds through the entrance gates, and take my seat, front row center, on the bleachers. Yeah, I would have broken bones and snapped a few fucking necks to get this spot.

All for the perfect view of my China Doll's graduation.

I'm impatient, strumming my foot against the grass, waiting for the graduates to file in and fill the row of chairs in front of us. When they do, I rise to my feet and crane my neck to find her. It'd be impossible not to spot Poppy amongst the sea of identical black gowns and square caps. We lock eyes and my heart beats three times faster as she blows me a kiss.

Yeah, Poppy only has to breathe to have that effect on me.

I stick my fingers in my mouth and whistle the loudest when the Dean calls her name. I cheer and clap as she walks across the stage and gives the crowd an awkward wave, scroll in hand. As the caps rain down onto the pitch, I fight my way through the crowd towards her, sweep her up into my arms and crush my lips against hers.

"I could hear you even if you were still in Boston," she laughs, melting against my chest.

"Good. I want the whole world to know that my girlfriend is a Stanford Business School graduate," I say, swinging her around like she weighs

nothing. “And that I’m the luckiest man alive.”

She laughs and wraps her arms around my neck.

“You two make me sick. Where can I get me one of you?”

I look up from Poppy just long enough to see Nellie popping her gum and rolling her eyes. Poppy’s best friend is a wild child with a smart-ass mouth. I wasn’t a fan at first, but her quick wit and sarcastic retorts have grown on me over the last eighteen months, and now, we have quite the fiery relationship.

“Congratulations, Nellie,” I say, bringing her in for a one-armed hug. “Although it’s not a requirement for hookers to have degrees, let alone from Stanford.”

She laughs and slaps me with her graduation cap. “Yeah, fuck off, Lorc. Hey look—” She nods to a seat halfway down the third row. It hasn’t been touched, and there’s a place card still sitting perfectly neat against the backrest. “Looks like old Sammy-boy got cold feet. Must have known you were coming.”

“Good,” I grunt, turning my attention back to my girl. In all honesty, I couldn’t give a flying fuck about Poppy’s ex-boyfriend now. We’ve come so far and no past relationship would ever match what we have. But that doesn’t mean I wouldn’t kick his ass—again—behind the bleachers if I saw him here today. I twist my hand into Poppy’s and bring it to my mouth to kiss the back of it. “I’m taking you to dinner.” Then, I turn to Nellie. “Would you like to join us?”

I challenge her with my stare. *You better go along with the plan, Nel.*

But she wants to toy with me today, scratching at her jaw, pretending to think about it. “Umm... nah, I’ll pass. I’ve got a hot date.” She flings her

arms around Poppy and gives her an extra squeeze. Then, she gives me another hug, tip-toeing in her stilettos to whisper in my ear, “Good luck.”

Left alone, I stoop to pick Poppy up, striding across the grass with her in my arms. We part the crowds like Moses did the Red Sea, and she playfully beats on my chest, flustered. “You know I can walk again, right? Have been doing fine on my own for the last year or so.”

“Call it a habit. Besides, those heels look lethal.”

She doesn’t protest anymore, happily leaning against me until we reach the Bentley. “Where are we going?” She asks, resting her hand on my thigh as I drive away from the red-bricked buildings and join the Interstate.

“It’s a surprise.”

“Hmm. I’m not sure if I can handle any more Quinn surprises.”

“Well buckle up. Orna’s planning a big bash at *Gatsby’s* for you when we get home.”

She laughs. “It’ll be her graduation party too, soon.”

“Uh-huh. Only six months until she finishes her accounting and finance degree at Boston College.”

Poppy squeezes my hand and whispers, “Thank you.”

“For what?” I ask, trying to focus on the road ahead.

“Sticking to my condition.”

I pause for a moment, letting the hum of the radio fill the silence. “Check the glove compartment.”

“Is it a graduation present?” She teases.

“One of many.”

She rummages around and fishes out the small bronze coin. A squeal escapes her lips as she studies it and she clutches it to her chest. “I’m so proud of you, baby.” Then, she picks up her purse from the footwell and

gives it a shake. It rattles like a bag of marbles. “I’ll add it to my collection.”

One bronze chip means one year sober. I give Poppy every one of my chips as a reminder of my commitment to her.

I bring her hand to my lips, enjoying the sensation of her soft skin.

“You’re quiet. What are you thinking about?”

I pause, then say, “I was your demon for years. I never thought you’d free me from my own.”

* * *

POPPY

“Le Papillon?” I snap, folding my arms and staring out of the windshield. “Really?”

Lorcan’s face melts into concern and he tilts my chin, forcing me to meet his gaze. “I have good reason, I promise,” he whispers, landing a soft kiss against my lips.

With his strong hand gripped in mine, I feel the trust growing and follow him into the restaurant.

Everything’s the same. Velvet booths, soft amber lighting, and nobody here apart from us.

The hostess guides us to the same table I saw the Devil sitting at two years ago. I’m thankful that the server that comes out from the red velvet curtain isn’t the petrified woman whose face is permanently etched into my memory.

“This is where it all started,” I say, scanning the restaurant as Lorcan pulls out the chair for me.

The night I walked through the doors to see the Devil darkening the shadows feels like a million years ago, not only two. And it couldn't be more different. When he drapes the napkin over my naked thigh, I shiver with pleasure instead of shake with fear. When the server brings out a large chocolate cake with a comically small candle, I laugh as Lorcan feeds me my first bite with his fork.

Because I'm not here with the Devil. I'm here with Lorcan Quinn.

“So,” he says, leaning on his palms as the server pours him iced water. “Poppy Valentina, the Stanford Business School graduate. You must be inundated with job offers.”

“There's a few flying about.”

Lorcan pretends to think. “Hmm,” he says, stroking his beard, a trace of amusement on his lips. “I know a place that's hiring.”

I wipe chocolate from my mouth and cock my head. “Do you now?”

“Yes. It's in desperate need of a Chief Financial Officer. I've heard the pay is outstanding, the perks are unbeatable, and the boss is ridiculously handsome,” he says, eyes twinkling at me.

I flush with happiness but rearrange my features to keep a straight face. “I'll think about it,” I say, but he knows as well as I do that I don't need to think about it.

“You're probably wondering why I brought you here,” Lorcan says, reaching across the table and sliding his hands over mine.

“Er, yeah. The question has crossed my mind.”

He draws a deep breath. “I hate that we have bad memories together. Me, I was so blind drunk I barely remember being here,” he says with a

grimace, “and you, you were so scared that you’ll always tie this place to being kidnapped by the Devil. I want to scrub those bad memories and replace them with new ones.”

My heart skips a beat and I squeeze his hands. “That’s really cute,” I say, “we’ll be getting married at the church you claimed me at next.”

He pins me with an amused stare. “You’re always one step ahead, China Doll.”

Before I can open my mouth to speak, he pulls out something from his breast pocket. It’s square and velvety, and when he opens it, the biggest emerald I’ve ever seen sparkles up at me.

My jaw drops open.

“Poppy Valentina, I’m the Devil and you’re my angel. I’m hoping we can meet somewhere in the middle and spend the rest of our time on this earth together. Marry me.”

My heart hammers so hard against my chest that I’m scared it’ll rip through my ribcage and explode all over the table.

“That’s not a question,” I choke out.

The Devil, *my* handsome Devil, smiles darkly, takes the beautiful ring from its box, and slides it onto my finger. It slips on like butter, and instantly, it feels like a part of my own body.

“No, it isn’t.”

And if it was, my answer would be yes, a thousand times over.

Because I want to dance with the Devil for the rest of my life.

THE END

What's next?

I hope you loved Poppy and Lorcan's story!
Intrigued about Cillian? Good, because his story is next in [The Devil's Deal](#).

WANT TO KEEP IN TOUCH? I'D LOVE THAT!

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