

MONSTERS & MUSES
BOOK FIVE

SOULS
AND
SORROWS

SAVER. MILLER

SOULS
AND
SORROWS

SAV R. MILLER

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Epilogue

Thanks for reading!

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Also by Sav R. Miller

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Souls and Sorrows is a dark, contemporary romance inspired by the myth of Eros and Psyche. It borrows elements from their story, as well as from Eros and Psyche's characters, but is NOT a true retelling.

This book contains mature scenes and situations that may not be appropriate for all audiences.

Please check the content warning list [HERE](#) before reading.

Though Souls and Sorrows is a standalone, I highly recommend reading the Monsters & Muses series in order, as it may enhance your reading experience.

[Start with Promises and Pomegranates \(Book 1\)](#)

For the ones who grew up far too soon.

“It is a difficult matter to keep love imprisoned.”

— APULEIUS

PLAYLIST

“Family Line” - Conan Gray
“Push” - Matchbox Twenty
“Call Out My Name” - The Weeknd
“Haunt You” - Social House
“Matilda” - Harry Styles
“I Wouldn’t Mind” - He Is We
“Box in a Heart” - The Maine, renforshort
“Bite My Tongue” - You Me At Six, Oli Sykes
“Nightmare” - Halsey

To listen on Spotify, [CLICK HERE](#)

PROLOGUE



Like every woman before me, my soul was born fractured.

But the cracks didn't come from closed fists and wandering fingers. They were made from extreme pressure and took years to take shape, like diamonds formed beneath the earth's surface.

They were forged by those who claimed to only want the best for me.

"I hope that isn't what you're wearing to the recital."

My fist tightens around the box of my brand-new pointe shoe, crushing the stiff material under my palm, as Mamma strides into the studio. Any other time, she'd send one of the house staff to help break in a new pair of

slippers, and I hate the hope springing inside my chest at the thought of her choosing to be here instead.

As if she's here for any other reason than to desecrate the only house of worship I still respect.

The Hermès tote draped on her wrist catches my eye, and a tiny sliver of uncertainty flashes in the pit of my stomach. I wonder if she even brought the Leatherman to break in my shoes or if the contents are just her normal wallet, makeup, and pills.

Her dark gaze stays on the mirrored wall in front of the barre, though I can't tell if she's watching me or herself.

Keeping my expression neutral, I glance down at my short-sleeved black leotard and the fishnet rehearsal skirt I got this morning. The mesh material is a little transparent, but it's what our instructor suggested for flexibility, and all the other girls in the class wear the same kind.

"It's for rehearsal," I say, swallowing. "What's wrong with it?"

"You look like a prostitute."

"Ms. Laurie picked it out."

Mamma huffs, lifting her arm to tuck her brown hair behind one ear. Her engagement ring shines beneath the fluorescent lights, and a tiny pang of jealousy strikes my abdomen that Papà bought her such a nice piece of jewelry.

I've always had to beg my nonna for her hand-me-downs, because I've never been allowed to buy anything new.

"Laurie Pereira can't be trusted to know what is and isn't appropriate for little girls. For God's sake, look how she dresses herself." Mamma shakes her head, glancing at a black-and-white class portrait hanging above one of the windows. "You don't see Elena or Stella traipsing around in tight skirts with their breasts hanging out, do you?"

The comparison to my sisters isn't new or surprising, but it annoys me nonetheless.

Heat rises in my cheeks, spreading across the bridge of my nose. The box of the shoe gives beneath my grip, and I slide my fingers to the shank, applying pressure there. The tighter I squeeze, the less chance mortification has of settling in my bones.

I can't help the way my body developed over the summer, and I'm not sure why it makes Mamma so angry. My sisters dress modestly, but only because they're the two constantly being invited to important business

dinners and functions. Meanwhile, I'm mostly hidden away, where I can't embarrass anyone.

"I'm not a little girl," I mutter, turning so she can't see my chest at all. The Lycra neckline barely scoops past my collarbone, so I'm not even sure what the problem is.

She stops several feet away, and I try to shrink into myself as her shadow looms near me.

"Ah, yes, I forgot thirteen is such a *big* number. Tell me, Ariana, is that what that boy from Mass told you last weekend before he kissed you in the confessional? That you're an *adult* and your urges are normal?"

Oh crap. Freaking Lorenzo Barone. I knew going into the booth after Sunday service was a mistake, but Mamma had stepped out to speak to parishioners about a potluck, so I thought it was okay to talk to him.

Or maybe, in the moment, I didn't really care about who was watching. All I knew was that Lorenzo had a nice smile, and he *looked* at me the same way Papà had once looked at Mamma and the way I'd seen Mamma look at the scary man who came around on occasional holidays.

I thought that look meant something, so I let him trick me into going inside, and he stole my first kiss. I certainly didn't return the gesture, but I suppose the truth doesn't exactly matter now.

My chest tightens to the point I can barely breathe, and I glare down at my shoes, desperate not to let my apprehension show. If Mamma sees vulnerability, she'll grab a hold of it and twist until it hurts.

As she draws even closer, the clicking of her Givenchy heels echoes off the glass walls, and I'm tempted to look out and search the building for potential witnesses.

Then again, she wouldn't have come at all if her presence could be made into a spectacle.

Black leather fills my vision as she comes to a halt in front of me, digging into her bag. She pulls a Zippo lighter out, then bends at the knees and snatches a shoe from the floor.

"What did he promise you? That he could make you feel good for a little while? They always say that, you know, and they *always* end up hurting you. Men are evil, Ariana. They take and take without remorse. Without apology. They will drag you to the depths of hell and leave you there, helpless and alone with no one to blame but yourself."

I watch, silent, as she flips open the lighter and takes one of the shoe's ribbons between two fingers.

"All I've ever tried to do is keep you from getting hurt by boys. Keep you pure, so one day, you might actually be useful to your family, and this is the thanks I get? You slutted it up before your sixteenth birthday and not even with someone of some circumstance." Disgust bleeds from her words, each syllable hot, slicing into my heart. "You've always been an ungrateful, spoiled child though, so I suppose I shouldn't be surprised."

Shame slithers up my spine like a snake, drawing the muscles in my abdomen taut. I can't keep the tremble from my voice when I speak. "I didn't *do* any—"

"It's not always about action, Ariana. Perception is everything, and these little outfits of yours don't help."

I don't respond to her. Anything that comes out of my mouth at this point will only get me into more trouble.

"I shouldn't even let you perform tonight."

My eyes snap to hers as they turn down at the corners, and she teases the end of the ribbon with the lighter's flame.

"It sends a bad message, letting you prance around in that tutu onstage like some flightless bird, desperate for a crumb of attention from anyone who will give it. Especially after your rendezvous with the Barone boy."

My face burns, and I lower my chin, glaring at the polished wood floor. Still, I don't answer, trying to pretend instead that she isn't here. In my head, I'm at my *Cinderella* recital later tonight, showing off the double fouetté I've *finally* perfected and dazzling the audience with my performance.

Mamma's right about one thing: I *do* like the attention I get from the crowd when I'm onstage. People pay to see me twirl and glide, my body liquid as it takes cues from the score.

Up there, with spotlights turned in my direction and hundreds of faces enraptured by my movements, I'm somebody. For a few hours, I'm more than just an invisible middle child whose only talent to the rest of the world is looking pretty.

All the girls in the Boston Ballet School are pretty. That simply isn't enough.

To stand out, you have to be *good*.

More than that, you have to be *great*.

Phenomenal.

So, I don't like the attention because I'm desperate for it. I like it because it proves I belong here.

Proves that I'm better than the rest of my family.

I wouldn't give that feeling up for anything.

Two fingers wrap around my chin, yanking my head back. I swallow as Mamma forces me to look into her eyes again, my chest hollowing out with fear.

Please don't.

Not here.

She pinches, and I grit my teeth, desperately trying to keep my tears at bay. I hate that she can spark them so quickly, even after all these years. After all the pain.

"Everyone thinks you're the most beautiful girl in the world, inside and out. They want to sully that beauty with their sins."

Malice drips off the last words of her sentence as she releases me, dropping onto my skin like venom and burning where it touches.

If I'm the most beautiful girl in the world, that means she isn't. And for a woman who's spent her life relying on her looks to get her through a painful existence, that isn't acceptable.

She resumes her focus on the shoe. "As soon as you're eighteen, you'll be pawned off to some pervert, and he'll spend his life defiling you, just like they did to me and your nonna and all your ancestors before us. They'll use you until you're no longer beautiful."

The flame drifts closer to the ribbon, brushing the uncut edge. Nerves spread through my bones, locking them up as I drop my gaze, watching.

"One day, I won't be around to warn you against them." Mamma's head cocks to the side, her Italian accent thickening the more she speaks. "That's what you want, Ariana, isn't it? To be away from me, so you can sin any way you'd like?"

I shake my head. My sisters are the ones who want to escape.

I just want to dance.

"Dio mio. Don't lie, Ariana. It's unbecoming."

Emotion clogs my throat, and the other pointe shoe falls from my grasp. She's barely even touched me, and already, the studio, my place of worship, feels forever tainted.

“But don’t worry, my beautiful butterfly. I understand you. You’re a temptress,” she says, bringing the lighter up higher and higher until the orange tip of fire catches the polyester material. It engulfs the ribbon slowly, and I watch with a pit in my stomach as it climbs, consuming everything in its path. “Just like your mamma, but we can fix that. Make you useless to these men... so your mistakes won’t cost you your salvation.”

What she doesn’t say: *It’s your fault.*

Everything is *my fault.*

Agony, unlike any I’ve ever known, sears a path up my chest as the ribbon incinerates before my eyes. The flames spread to the heel and shank of the shoe, burning more quickly now that the fire is certain no one’s trying to stop it.

“Please,” I say softly, my hand twitching as it extends toward her.

“Please what?” Her pupils dilate, gaze narrowing. “Don’t you want my help? Or do you think you’re too good for it now? Too old perhaps?”

My nostrils flare. I know what her version of help is.

It’s not this.

Mamma only helps when it benefits her.

“I think you need a lesson in humility, carina,” she murmurs, trailing a manicured nail down my throat. Dropping the shoe to the ground, she reaches with one hand and pats out the flames, letting me see that the garment is unusable now.

Her other hand wraps around my neck, squeezing lightly, and I wonder if she’ll let me see the darkness before she begins.

Most of the time, she makes me endure her abuse and then puts me to sleep. Like a perverted lullaby.

With her free hand, she reaches up and tugs the sleeve of my leotard down my shoulder. Tears well up in my eyes, nausea churning in my belly.

“You might be beautiful now,” she says, and for the first time, I wish Ms. Laurie would show up to rehearsal early. Or one of the other dancers. I wish it were anyone but *her*. “But by the time I’m through with you, only the most hideous, monstrous creature will be able to love you.”

What I don’t say: *I believe you.*

Because when she drags me to the shadows of the room, defiling me the way she’s done since I was little, I don’t even love myself.



“WHAT’S YOUR POISON, SUGAR?”

Bright blue eyes stare down at me from across the red velvet-covered table. Our server—a blonde with Rebecca scribbled on her name badge—leans forward as she waits for my order, offering a detailed view of her cleavage through the undone buttons of her white uniform.

Her tits are nice, I suppose. I stare at them a beat longer than I normally would, willing my dick to twitch or pulse at their presence.

It doesn’t. Not even when I imagine cupping them in my large hands, rolling my thumbs over what I’m certain would be delicate, sensitive pink nipples.

Nothing happens, and eventually, I tear my eyes from the swells, cringing at the way a smile brightens her face.

In the booth beside me, my twin brother, Palmer, tips his head back and laughs. “Subtle.”

Without responding, I shove the drink menu toward the server, avoiding eye contact. “Vodka neat, please.”

She lingers, likely waiting for something more, something I’m not capable of, before turning on her heels and stalking back to the bar across the restaurant.

“Not interested then?” Palmer drawls, sipping on his raspberry martini.

“Am I ever?”

His lips purse around his straw. “I thought it was funny when we were younger, but I don’t know, Cash. I’m starting to get concerned.”

Rapping my knuckles against the table, I toss him an indignant look. As if there’s something wrong with my dedication to work over partying with him and our younger sister, Lenny.

I simply don’t have the time—or desire—to be social.

Even tonight, Palmer practically had to drag me to one of the sticky, dimly lit clubs on the outskirts of Boston. Leather booths line the dark alcoves of the dining area, creating a U-shape around the stage at the back, which is roped off and guarded by several large, stocky men in black T-shirts.

A woman gyrates wildly against the pole in the middle of the stage, her holographic bikini catching in the light as she spins and twists to mild fanfare.

Not my scene at all, which makes me question my brother’s intentions. I’d much rather be spending our birthday the way I normally do—eating Chinese takeout at my waterfront apartment and catching up on court proceedings.

But apparently, my regular festivities weren’t cutting it this year for our thirty-first.

Sliding my hands into my lap, I give my brother an unimpressed look. “Did you bring me here to get me laid or to celebrate?”

“Both?” Palmer lifts one shoulder in a half-shrug. My brows shoot up, and he snorts, reaching to tug on the blond bun at the nape of his neck. “Not together, obviously. I’m just worried about you, all right? It’s not healthy to spend as much time in an office environment as you do.”

“Perhaps if you don’t enjoy the work,” I counter, uncomfortable having the spotlight shone on my inadequacies.

Evidently, not everyone in the world is married to their career, and those who are tend to cheat on their wives frequently.

Or die early.

“Dad enjoyed his work.”

My eyes cut to his, narrowing. “What’s your point?”

“Just that maybe *enjoyability* isn’t a great variable to measure by.”

I open my mouth to retort just as Rebecca returns with my drink and the tray of shots with blue liquid that Palmer ordered, sliding the tall glass in my direction. I catch it, still not meeting her gaze, though I feel hers volley between my brother and me.

Curling my fingers around the glass, I lift it and sip, soaking in the briny taste that licks down my esophagus. For a brief moment, I’m distracted by that and not wishing my father hadn’t been sent to an untimely grave so I could put him in one myself.

Palmer exhales, reaching into the breast pocket of his chevron-print button-down. He pulls out a couple of bills, then takes Rebecca’s forearm, turning it over to press the money into her hand.

“Keep the change, okay, Bex?” His voice dips, oozing charm, and I feel a familiar stab of envy at how easy it is for him to interact with strangers, no matter the setting.

Palmer’s the definition of extrovert. He loves social outings and is an expert flirt, wielding his likability to get him into exclusive clubs and private or sold-out venues rather than using the Primrose name.

Which, since our father’s death, doesn’t really amount to much anyway.

“Bex?” Rebecca asks.

“All my friends get nicknames,” he tells her, sliding away from me in the curved booth. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’m gonna try to get my brother shit-faced, so maybe he’ll go home with someone other than me tonight.”

Her stare bores a hole into my forehead as I take another sip, swirling the liquid around my mouth, pacing myself. The table dips as she leans in, showing off her cleavage again. Against my better judgment, I swing my eyes up to hers, mulling over what it might be like to take her up on the offer.

I wonder if I could drink enough to get my dick intrigued. I’m certain she’d be more than willing to try anything in the bedroom—or the restroom

down the hall since I wouldn't bother bringing her back to my place.

Sipping some more vodka, I let my gaze travel over her soft, feminine form, considering how she might feel beneath my fingertips. The way her mouth could be hot and tight, wrapped around my cock, sucking as though her life depended on it.

Rebecca hoods her pretty blue eyes, and I swallow, something stirring in my gut.

When she smiles, practically presenting herself naked on a silver platter, the sensation evaporates. Any man would jump at the chance to take her to a dark corner and have his way with her. It's that thought that turns me off.

I've never been very keen on wanting what everyone else desires.

I like the rejects.

After an awkward beat of silence, she clears her throat and moves on, sashaying away to another table.

Sighing, I finish off my drink, slamming it onto the table with more force than necessary. Palmer studies me over his shot, pursing his lips.

"What?"

He raises a hand in mock surrender. "Nothing. You just seem especially stiff tonight. Everything okay?"

An ache sprouts in my chest, picking away at my heart like an ice sculpture, and I briefly consider confiding in him. Truth be told though, there isn't much to say; on the surface, everything is fucking peaches and cream.

I've got the coveted corner office in one of the premier business law firms on the East Coast and the seniority title to match it. Never mind that the position is nearly unheard of for someone who's been in the field less than eight years, but after securing one of our largest clients last quarter, I was promoted.

Much to the dismay of several associates who have significant experience over me. But it's not like I didn't earn the title, given that I've clocked more billable hours during my time at Cupid & Associates than our top three attorneys combined.

Beneath all the glamour though, something is missing. Like the middle piece of a jigsaw puzzle that got swept away from the box and never replaced before it was sealed.

I'm just not sure what it is, and I don't want to burden Palmer with the unknown.

“Everything’s perfect,” I tell him instead, leaning over to take a shot. “But I’m not going home with anyone.”

“We’ll see.”

Bringing the shot to my lips, I down it quickly, shooting a glance across the restaurant as a group of scantily clad women traipse inside, their obnoxious laughter bouncing off the dark-paneled walls.

They take one of the individual tables closer to the stage, a redhead nearly toppling over as she goes to sit. Her friend, a leggy blonde in a red sequined minidress, grasps her shoulders and holds her upright.

She bends, red polyester stretching tight across her heart-shaped ass, and says something in the other girl’s ear that makes her giggle. Golden hair spills down her tanned back as she flips her head up, scanning the room with narrowed eyes, like she’s looking for someone.

Our gazes intersect for a split second, and I grit my teeth against the whirlwind of emotion her attention causes. The delicate angles of her face seem oddly familiar, and I squint through the poor lighting, trying to place her.

My dick pulses, just slightly, as I watch her watching me. My hands find the table, gripping tight. She stares, unashamed in her perusal, and her tiny pink tongue darts out, laving over her plump bottom lip.

After a beat, I notice that I’m still staring, glued to her form as she makes the rounds with her girlfriends. Everyone else in the club seems interested in the group now, which should turn me off to her entirely.

But for some reason, I find myself not wanting to look away.

“You’re ogling,” Palmer mutters, taking another shot. He pinches his eyes shut as the blue liquid goes down, then wrenches them open again, pinning me with a look.

“Not ogling. Observing.”

“Are you really arguing semantics right now?”

I shrug, forcing nonchalance as I lean back in the booth, stretching my arms across the leather back. “You know what they say. You can take the man out of the courtroom...”

“Lawyers,” he scoffs.

Reclining slightly in my seat, I watch as a woman with brown skin and short, braided hair places a sash around the blonde’s shoulders. She gives a little twirl, fixing the white fabric against her breasts, meeting my eyes again.

My throat constricts as I read the rhinestone letters.

Bride-to-be.

Inexplicable disappointment roars like an angry tide inside my chest, and I tense my jaw, turning to look at my brother.

He smirks, and I reach past him, grabbing two more shots.

“Well, look who just got interesting.”

Rolling my eyes, I down the drinks one after the other.

“Shouldn’t you be sucking your boyfriend off in the alley outside?” I ask, redirecting the conversation.

“Whoa, I’m not into that exhibitionist bullshit. I like to keep my private parts *private*.”

I don’t respond because it never occurred to me just how dissimilar my brother and I are until tonight.

Palmer’s face falls, and he continues, “Plus, Troy and I broke up.”

There’s a shift in his tone, and when I look back at him, he’s turning a fork over in his hands, somewhat subdued. Exhaling, I run a hand through my hair, pulling on the ends. I really don’t want to stay here and get fucked up all night, especially given the important deposition I have in the morning.

But I can’t stand the dejection on my brother’s face.

I’m not sure if it’s our similar bone structure or something else, but it feels too familiar.

So, instead of getting up and leaving the way I want to, I grab another shot, clinking it against the one in front of him. Palmer grins, perking slightly, and loops his arm through mine, pulling me close as we drink.

It burns less on the way down, the sensation now warm and filling, and I’m almost happy I decided to come out.

My bones grow icy when I glance over Palmer’s shoulder, meeting the hazel eyes of the only woman I’ve ever looked at twice. Pulling myself away is a feat, and I order another round, if only to distract myself from the weight of her attention.

Something tells me nothing good has ever come to those who have it.



THE WOODEN TABLE vibrates as my older sister, Elena, makes her sixth attempt at contact tonight. With my free hand, I press the side buttons on my phone simultaneously, powering it off, while the other brings a tiny glass to my lips.

As I flip the device facedown, I tilt my head back and take the shot, letting tequila sear the inside of my mouth and kill off any emotions it finds lodged in my throat. They don't deserve to be there, and Elena doesn't deserve to hear from me right now.

Not when she ditched me to spend her evening doing God knows what with her husband and kids.

A tiny, almost-imperceptible ounce of guilt flares inside my chest, but I chase it down with the next shot that's shoved into my hand. Logically, I know being jealous of my sister's happiness does nothing but strengthen the divide between us, but at this point in my life, I'm powerless against the sentiment.

It's hereditary. A disease not unlike cancer in how it appears sometimes out of nowhere, metastasizing into an incurable illness that ravages your body when left unchecked.

Even as an adult, living comfortably in spite of a strict and shitty childhood, I find myself driven primarily by envy. This sick sensation that sometimes keeps me up at night because there's something deep within me that has never been fulfilled. Something passed on by the woman who brought me into this world and then spent my upbringing wishing she could take me out of it.

"That guy's looking at you again." Vincenza Moretti's stuffy voice slashes its way through my pity party, yanking me from my thoughts as her icy hand grips my bicep.

She tosses her auburn hair over a shoulder, a miserable expression decorating her face that makes me wonder why she showed up tonight. We were childhood friends, mostly due to proximity and a lack of choice—our families, prominent in Boston's gritty criminal underworld, attended Mass together every Sunday, and she even taught me how to French kiss in ninth grade. But like everyone else in my life, she moved away after graduation while I stayed frozen in time and place, like a real-life Peter Pan.

Her acceptance of an invitation I hadn't sent was the first time I'd heard from her in six years. I hadn't even known she was back in the city.

Turning my head, I drop my gaze to where her fingers rest against my skin. After a moment, she retreats, a deep blush staining her golden skin.

"Men do that," I tell her, not bothering to see who she means. "Women too."

Everyone *always* stares. If I had things my way, I'd never go out because of the constant gawking, but it does the Ricci family no good for me to stay holed up inside all the time, according to my nonna.

Vincenza leers over my shoulder, pensive as she takes in whatever sits behind me. *Whoever*. The smoky liner creasing her eyelids makes her look nervous, and I resist the urge to laugh in her face.

As if she has a reason to be nervous. It's not like they're looking at her. Not like they'll write a scathing piece about how she's out for a night on the town, enjoying herself instead of staying silent and unnoticed, like the other women in this world are expected to.

Oh well. If Vitus Tallerico, the man I'm supposed to marry, cared what the tabloids said about me, he'd never have let me out of his sight tonight anyway. As the unofficial boss of what's left of Ricci Inc., he's more concerned than most with the politics of the business realm, and my going out hardly makes him look good.

But I'm fairly certain Vitus is balls deep in one of his groupies right about now, so he has other things on his mind.

Besides, there are at least three men stalking from the shadows of this club, tasked with keeping an eye on me. Like I'm an elusive flame, prone to disappearing.

Like I have anywhere to go.

"I've never seen anyone look at someone like this," Vincenza mutters.

Sighing, I lean against our table and adjust the white sash I didn't want to wear. "Like *what?*"

"Like... they want to devour you whole."

Something light and airy feathers over me, like a butterfly's wings fluttering against my skin. I ignore it as Mamma's voice rings in my ears, telling me not to trust the attention.

"No offense, Vin," I counter, swirling the ice in my drink, "but how would you know what that looks like?"

She makes a face. "You know, Ari, you don't have to be such a bitch *all* the time. Take a freaking holiday every once in a while."

"I could, but someone has to keep you humble."

"Hilarious. When you quit ballet, I didn't realize it was because you took up comedy."

A sharp pain pierces my chest, but I pretend I don't feel it, not interested in entertaining her jabs. Although I'm starting to remember why we stopped being friends in the first place.

Taking my glass in one hand, I give her a saccharine smile and swivel around in my seat to scan the club.

As I turn around and look out at the tables peppering the main area outside the bar, I expect to be met with some severe leering. Instead, my

chest deflates ever so slightly when I realize no one—not *one* single person—is paying me any mind.

Every patron seems to be off in their own little world, chattering with mouths full of food or drinking and enjoying their company. A few linger near the stage as the girls change sets, waiting for the first look at who might come out next.

What's the point in going out if no one even notices you?

I make another sweep of the floor, pausing to watch the dancer flip herself upside down and hook her calf around the pole, before moving to look at the back walls.

Tucked away in a corner, the imposing form of a tall, broad man sits statue still—so still that I almost mistake him for decor. A chill sweeps over me as I take him in. He leans back, arms outstretched over the booth, as he watches the crowd with what appears to be practiced disinterest. Almost as if it's something he has to actively work at.

Or perhaps he's observing. A hunter, gathering intelligence for when he goes in for a kill.

Seated directly beneath a wall sconce, I can make out the dark blond, almost-brown hair combed neatly on top of his head. His harsh jaw tapers down into a thick, corded neck that disappears beneath the collar of a charcoal sweater, the sleeves of which are pushed up to reveal strong forearms and long fingers.

Dark eyes lift to mine, capturing my attention like inescapable magnets, and suddenly, my limbs feel unbearably heavy. Like I could easily collapse beneath the weight of his gaze.

But I don't allow myself even though his rapture feels like warm honey drizzling over my skin. My blood heats, and I shift my thighs, aware that my body is most likely just reacting to the fact that I haven't had sex in weeks.

It most certainly isn't because I'm interested.

Jerking my head to the side, I force a disconnect between us before someone else can see and claim I was making googly eyes at a handsome stranger. My fingers find the edge of the table, then crawl inward, and I consider picking my phone up again.

Even though I just turned it off, I'm tempted to check for more missed calls. It's almost a compulsion at this point.

Sighing, I resist the urge to sate the part of my soul that's irreparably soiled, knowing I won't be satisfied with what's on the phone either way.

Vincenza babbles on about how she wants to spend Christmas in the Maldives, but she's not even really talking to me anymore as she leans down the table. Slowly, I push my chair back, take my phone and purse, and slip away from the party.

I make my way through the throng of clubgoers, noting how no one but the woman onstage seems to be dancing. Everyone else just watches, entranced, and a pang of envy splits my stomach in half.

It's been six years since I danced in front of anyone. Six years since I last felt the euphoria that accompanies a heavy stage presence and the weighted breath of an audience with no other interest but to see your body come alive for the music.

Pausing at one of the exits toward the back of the club, I steal a last glance at the stage. The woman, clad in a sheer blue bodysuit and transparent platform heels, sweeps the floor with bright pink hair as she spins and spins and *spins*.

Like she never wants to stop.

I stare, mesmerized, until I start to feel a little dizzy.

A warm presence suddenly appears at my side, buzzing around me like tiny sparks of light. I suck in a silent breath when electric heat sears my bare elbow, and an earthy, alluring scent assaults my senses, making my toes curl inside of my heels.

"Leaving so soon?" the presence says, voice low and gravelly.

I lift a shoulder. "Midnight calls."

The stranger hums, and the sound is tempting. I almost turn my head to look, but I know Vitus's men are watching. Judging silently.

"I've always admired these dancers," he says after a moment. "Performances of any kind take grit and confidence, but the ability to get up there and entertain perverts is a skill not many possess."

My mouth dries up like I've swallowed cotton. "Are you not entertained?"

"By her?" A pause, then, "I tend to prefer more classic branches of the sport. Tap, ballroom... *ballet*."

Ice freezes the blood rushing through my veins, and my head snaps to the side, taking the man in for the first time. Up close, that is. I'm met by a

warm brown gaze and a stoic, poised face that could have been chiseled directly from a slab of marble with its razor-sharp angles.

His nose slants in a straight line, stopping to billow out above plush lips, the top of which has a tiny scar slashing through the corner. It's faint, barely visible over his peachy skin tone, but my eyes find it anyway, as if needing the flaw to offset his statuesque beauty.

The stranger from across the room.

Furrowing my brows, I cut a quick glance to the corner booth he was in minutes ago, wondering how fast he must have walked to make it here. Granted, he has a good six inches on me, and I have no clue how long I was standing here, admiring the dancer.

"I've been trying to figure out why you look so familiar," he notes once I've finally blinked and returned to reality.

There might be a spot of drool on my bottom lip, but I don't dare move my eyes from his.

"The blonde is pretty convincing—I'll give you that."

"How generous," I spit, ignoring the way his attention seems to tie me in knots. Once the shock of him wears off, I stiffen, realizing he's made me. "So, what? Did you come over here in the hopes of taking a picture or maybe copping a feel? Something you could sell to the paps outside, waiting for a juicy story?"

"No, nothing like that." His head cocks to one side. "They're really that interested in you?"

"They're interested in making money. Not me."

He hums again, but I can't tell if it's in agreement or not. I watch his eyes drop, reaching my feet and then slowly gliding back up, and I resist the shiver that threatens the outer layer of my skin.

"I find that difficult to believe."

"Well, I don't know what you've heard about me, but my days of gracing the front pages of online tabloids are over."

"I see. Is that because you've settled down?" His gaze dips to the sash around my chest. I forgot I had it on.

"Yep. Not that it's any of your business."

"Maybe I'm *interested*."

I cock a brow, and the scarred corner of his mouth tugs up.

My throat constricts at the matter-of-fact tone. The way his eyes don't leave mine, confident and electric.

It shouldn't flatter me, having this god's attention. In fact, I should be running in the opposite direction. If Vitus finds out I so much as looked at another man, there will be hell to pay, and I don't feel like dealing with him.

Letting out a little hollow laugh, I roll my eyes and turn back toward the front. "Well, I don't cheat. If you're looking for a lap dance, might I suggest the girl *currently* onstage?"

"Like I said" —his eyes flicker to my lips, then back up— "not the kind of dancing I want to see."

For a moment, we just stare at each other. He goes so long without blinking that I have to discreetly pinch my side, just to make sure I'm still alive.

"But that's right," he says after a beat. He draws closer, maneuvering so his right forearm props up against the wall at my back. His free hand rises, long fingers reaching to wrap around a tendril of the synthetic blonde hair draped over my breasts.

They heave at his proximity, the breath leaving my chest like floodwaters rushing from a broken dam. I don't even understand what's happening, or why my body is reacting so viscerally to a man I don't know and who I'm pretty sure is trying to goad me into something.

Into what? I have no idea, but I don't like it.

"Ariana Ricci doesn't dance anymore, does she? Gave up ballet because of an undisclosed injury, according to what the papers reported years ago." He curls my hair around one digit, tugging gently. Heat from him grates against my skin, setting it aflame. "So, what exactly keeps her in Boston? Her sisters live out of town, her father is in prison, and her mother..."

As he trails off suggestively, I tilt my head back with defiance narrowing my gaze; standing so close to him, I have to careen my head to look in his eyes, and I think he likes the dynamic.

I don't.

Makes me feel small.

"Where *is* your mother, Ariana?"

The question snaps me out of whatever daydream my mind wanted to slip into, and I slap his hand away, shoving him in the gut with my elbow. The planes of his abdomen, hidden beneath the sweater he has on, are defined and rigid, but I manage to push him a few inches anyway.

"Are you making a biopic of my life or something? What the fuck is any of this to you?"

If he's a cop, I'm in more trouble than I'd have been if I'd open-mouthed kissed him in the middle of the club. Vitus would never believe that I didn't tell secrets, especially not after Elena ratted out our father six years back.

Unbothered, the stranger shrugs. The features on his face seem slightly amused—the corners of his eyes crinkle, and his nostrils flare a bit. Like he's having fun riling me up despite the fact that he seems incapable of smiling.

“Nothing really. Call it a morbid curiosity.”

I squint up at him. He doesn't particularly look like a cop or even a PI. Those have a certain degree of sleaze that this man lacks—like he's interested for the sake of interest rather than exploitation. Still, I don't think continuing the conversation is a good idea, so I slip past his arm, backing away.

“You should reconsider your interests,” I tell him, my hands reaching behind me and finding the push bar of the glass door. Shoving back with my ass, I split the immediate temperature as a gust of wind tears down the street, rolling into the building. “Curiosity killed the cat and all.”

The backs of my heels slip over the threshold, and I'm outside while my eyes remain on the strange man, waiting to see if he follows. Someone trying to lure me into a trap wouldn't let me get away.

He shoves his hands into the pockets of his dark jeans. “That almost sounds like a threat, Ms. Ricci.”

I grin, bringing one shoulder up to my chin. “It is.”

When I turn and let the door fall shut, I pause on the sidewalk, staring up at the Boston city skyline painting the horizon. Waiting. Several minutes pass, and nothing happens. The door doesn't reopen, and no one rushes to shuffle me into a big black town car.

People pass by, completely unaware of who they're weaving themselves around, and my veins sag with the weight of relief. There's also a bite of annoyance, confusing as it might be, that no one else seems to realize who I am.

How did a stranger notice me from across the room, but people walking right past aren't giving me a second glance?

Bitter, irrational hurt courses through me, igniting a violence that makes my fingers shake. I hail a cab, powering on my phone as one pulls up to the curb, and I climb into the backseat silently.

Behind the wheel, a girl with wide silver eyes turns her head to look at me. She doesn't speak, just cocks an eyebrow, as if to ask if I'm ready to go.

I nod, giving her the address and buckling in as she puts the car in drive, then pulls into the street. Damaged heart in my throat, I check my texts, noticing that the group chat with my two sisters is silent. Elena hasn't spoken in over half an hour, and Stella's last message had nothing to do with me, instead detailing an upcoming molecular biology fellowship she applied to.

The only message awaiting me is one from Vitus, telling me he'll be out late, followed immediately by: **I'll be over in fifteen. Leave the door unlocked and the panties off.**

Assuming that wasn't meant for me, I roll my eyes and slump down in my seat.

Well, Ariana, isn't this what you wanted? For everyone to leave you alone?

Contradicting pain radiates from the wounded organ in my chest, spreading through my limbs. I delete the thread entirely, just so I don't have to see it anymore.

Then, because I'm irritated and hurt and confused and I hate the emotions, I change the destination. The driver looks at me in the rearview but doesn't say a word, and I sit back, folding my hands in my lap to stop them from shaking.

I'm not sure what I'm doing. Not sure if I should be doing it.

But emotion isn't driven by logic, and right now, the former is firmly in control.

When we pull up to the three-story brownstone in Roxbury, my hands are steady. I thank the driver and slip out the door, staring up at the short stone walkway to the narrow porch. Potted flowers and wind chimes clutter the stairs leading up to the front door, and I stand there for a few seconds, waiting for sadness or remorse to settle in alongside my jealousy and anger.

I should go home. I'm not thinking straight.

But home is a studio apartment at the bottom of my nonna's building, decorated with the same expensive furniture I've had since I was a teenager. It's cold and empty, and going there means facing myself in the mirror.

Tonight, there isn't a single part of me that wants to do that.

Jealousy and anger don't leave, and they'll still be there if I go home. The bitter emotions sit in the center of my chest, waiting for action. Tucking my hair behind my ears, I reach around and yank off my sash, letting it fall to the ground. The wig follows.

My thoughts of Vitus and the stranger at the club halt, dissipating as I solidify my decision to be here right now.

I leave my doubts behind as I ascend the stairs and approach the door, raising my knuckles to rap against the glass.

A minute passes, and I think maybe he isn't home. Or maybe he's avoiding me.

But then a lock unlatches, loud on the quiet street, and the door swings open.

He isn't standing there where anyone can see, but off to the side, in the shadows. As if he's been waiting for me, although this is the first time I've been here on my own.

Tilting my chin up, I reach for the storm door and pull it open, stepping inside. My eyes catch on the nameplate above the wall-mounted mailbox, and I scan it slowly as I pass before shutting myself inside.

Tallerico.



I'D LIKE to say my internal clock goes easy on me when it's under particular strains of stress, but that's never been the case.

Rest fucks with my routine, and routine is paramount for keeping life tidy and neat, even when the outside world is anything but.

So, despite the fact that I feel like I was slowly fed through an industrial-sized meat processor after my night with Palmer, I find myself perching on the side of my bed at four in the morning anyway, yanking on a pair of gray sweatpants and tennis shoes.

Half an hour later, my head throbs incessantly with each fall of my feet against the pavement, and I try to concentrate on working through the strain

of my muscles over my regrets from last night.

I lost track of how many shots Palmer and I wound up taking around the same time I let Ariana Ricci out of my sight. When I returned to the table, my brother was seated in a random man's lap, and I slid back into the booth, grabbing the first drink in my reach.

Anyone else probably would've followed her out of the building. Part of me felt like that was her expectation too—when you're renowned as the most beautiful creature on the planet, I'm certain you get used to being chased.

But I have never been in the mood to chase. When I run, I prefer not to have a destination or target and instead let my legs carry me until the real world falls away.

I've been doing it since high school; between extracurricular activities and unpaid internships my father signed me up for, alone time was a scarce commodity.

Solitude became a forbidden luxury I had to steal away at odd hours to indulge in. I'd slip out of Primrose Manor—the sprawling estate my family bought upon moving to Aplana Island, off the Massachusetts coast—early in the morning to run a few miles. The shock of my feet on the ground absorbed the weight of my problems even if only in spirit.

Even if my problems seemed to be minuscule in comparison to those of the rest of my family. The trauma that affected my parents and siblings to their very core appeared to have sidestepped me entirely, and I always wondered if it was because of the running.

As if my inability to remain still, even for a moment, perhaps let me evade certain disillusionment and disappointments. While everyone else was focused on Primrose Realty and how to further our father's success, I distanced myself and found time to plan my own.

And as an adult, I've cultivated what was once an uncommon good and turned it into my lifestyle. After my three-mile run, I turn around at the Boston city limits and lap back to my apartment—the penthouse of one of the district's oldest oceanfront buildings. It's equidistant to Cupid & Associates and the ferry and only a few yards from the dry cleaners, a local grocery, and the bank, meaning that when I'm not in court or the office, I don't have to stray very far.

I punch in the code to the gate and then jog through the underground parking garage to get inside. Sweat drips down my forehead, and as I hop

into the private elevator, the brutal ache throbbing behind my temples spikes, unamused by my attempt to quell its violence.

The elevator chimes as it reaches my floor, and the doors open immediately into the penthouse foyer. Cream-colored walls bow out in an octagonal shape with wide archways leading to the living room and halls that border the back patio.

When I walk into the gourmet kitchen, I'm not at all surprised to find my sister sitting at the breakfast bar, eating Greek yogurt from the container. She smirks as I cross the room to the cabinet above the sink and shake four ibuprofen from a bottle.

"Rough night?" Lenny quips, turning the spoon over in her mouth.

I swallow the pills dry and face her, leaning against the quartz countertop.

She snorts, shaking golden-brown locks from her shoulders. "Well, if it helps, you don't look half as bad as I was expecting."

"That does not help." Scrubbing my hands over my face, I exhale. "What are you doing here?"

"Can't a girl come visit her favorite brother on his birthday?"

"Sure, but Palmer doesn't live here, and my birthday was yesterday."

I'm under no illusion that I'm Lenny's preferred sibling even if we have gotten closer over the last year since our father's passing. Though that might have more to do with my awareness of her role in his death and the fact that it's not really something she could confide in Palmer.

Where my twin is energetic and pure, Lenny and I have always had a certain degree of darkness in common. With that shared moral repugnancy, there has always been an unspoken understanding—the *buried body* clause.

When "bodies" start showing up, neither of us asks questions. We just pitch in however needed.

Even if that means having your friend at the medical examiner's office pad your father's cause and manner of death. Most middle-aged men in perfect health don't suddenly die of heart attacks, but according to his official autopsy report, that's exactly what took him.

Never mind the blood we needed bleached from the floors of Primrose Manor or the subsequent disappearance of Lenny's ex-boyfriend at the same time.

Reaching over the counter, I swipe the plastic container from her hands, slapping the lid back on.

“Hey!” she snaps, licking the spoon. “I was eating that.”

“Don’t you have your own fridge to raid? Or is your fiancé letting you starve?”

Her green eyes crinkle up at the corners, genuine happiness lighting her features at the mere mention of the British assassin waiting for her at home. “He keeps me plenty fed, thank you,” she replies, wiggling her brows.

I groan at the image and return the yogurt to the fridge. “Then, go bother him,” I say, crossing my arms against my chest.

A beat of silence passes, and I shift my weight on my heels, uncrossing my arms just as quickly.

Lenny’s mouth twists, as if she’s in thought. “You seem weird.”

An incredulous sound comes from my throat, and I laugh, holding my fingers up in a Y-shape and bringing them to my ear. “Pot? Kettle calling.”

“Well, that’s not *news*. Little sisters are supposed to be weird, and I grew up with Mama and Daddy as my closest friends, so weird was my only option. But you seem more off than normal. Are you sure everything’s okay?” She pauses, dropping her gaze for a moment before looking back up. “Palmer said you were drinking last night.”

“Palmer brought me out specifically *to drink*.”

“Which you never do.” One of her brows lifts. “So, what gives?”

The *buried body* clause is on the tip of my tongue, but for some reason, I can’t force the words through. They stick on the ridges of my teeth, collecting like stalagmites.

Guilt over things she doesn’t know about eats me alive. It’s a burden I don’t want to share.

“Nothing *gives*, swan,” I say instead, watching her eyes narrow at the use of her childhood nickname.

For a few moments, we stare at each other, waiting for a confession.

Maybe things would be different between us if I admitted what I know. What happened after our father passed—hell, even before then. Things had changed, grown sinister, in the decade before he died.

Perhaps if I came clean, it would expunge my soul of its stains.

But we didn’t grow up Catholic, so we’ve never believed in that anyway. And if I’ve learned anything since leaving Harvard, it’s that all confessions do is drum up more trouble.

Fuck acquiescing guilt. I’ll just be buried alongside my sins.

They’ll be my company in hell.

Lenny sighs, snapping the spaghetti strap of her pink corset against her tanned skin. She hops off the barstool and grabs her leather clutch from the counter. “Fine. Be moody and broody. You’re gonna die alone because of it, just like Daddy.”

As she starts toward the front of the apartment, words tumble out of me, unbidden. “*Just like him?*”

My brows arch, and she turns her head to the side, not meeting my gaze. I’m technically breaking the clause for the first time ever, and I’m not really sure why.

Something about being compared to such evil brings out the worst in me, I suppose.

Without saying anything else, Lenny walks out of the kitchen, and a few seconds later, the chime of the elevator echoes off the vaulted ceiling. I stand in place longer than necessary, staring at the space she no longer occupies.

My headache is marginally gone, but at what cost?

Eventually, I drag myself away from the room. The narrow back hall opens up to a private, semi-secluded spiral staircase, and I take the steps two at a time, aware that Lenny’s unannounced visit has thrown a severe wrench in my routine. Closed doors pepper the walls at the top of the stairs, and I head for one at the very end, slipping into the master suite and then farther into the bathroom.

Stepping into the sleek black-tiled shower, I let the rainfall faucet spray down the length of my body, massaging aches I didn’t realize existed until now. Droplets of water pelt against my skin and run down my nose. Propping one hand on the wall next to the handle, I take my dick in the other and pump slowly.

Meticulously, like I haven’t done it in ages and am relearning the ropes.

Pinching my eyes shut as tiny webs of pleasure skirt along my shaft, I lean my weight into the wall, letting my mind drift. Flashes of warm, wet flesh erupt across my vision as I tighten my fist, and electricity tingles along my spine, spurring me on.

Hazel irises, wide and glassy, stare up at me above a soft, slightly upturned nose and bow-shaped mouth. Her lips part for me, enveloping my crown as I move faster, harsher, tugging while I imagine feeding my length into the awaiting hole.

The tip of her tongue prods my slit, tasting, and I feel myself unraveling. The thread stitching every ounce of my self-control together unspools, caught on my depravity as I picture shoving myself into her throat and staying there. Feeling her struggle for air around me before unloading my seed so deep that only surgical efforts could remove my remnants.

I come on a staggered breath, spilling into my fist as if it were the young Ricci girl instead. My eyes pop open, exhaustion from the sudden exertion clinging to my limbs like waterlogged carcasses, and I shake my head to dispel the images.

Ariana Ricci is a goddamn nightmare—that’s for certain. I spent the formative years of law school poring over every detail of her father’s trial, and the rest of his life because of the similar circles our families ran in, so the adage is not new to me. The general public just finds her alarming and unsettling, and I can’t say I feel differently.

Whether that’s because everyone thinks she’s secretly doing her father’s bidding while he rots in prison or just because of some primal, untapped part of me finds her desirable, I can’t tell.

Whatever the reason, when I finally make it to Cupid & Associates a while later, I push thoughts of her as far from my mind as they’ll get. She might have plagued me since our little run-in last night, but she will not occupy my mind any longer.

I have no interest in entertaining chaos.

A knock sounds on the door of my office as I’m reviewing a green energy initiative between one of the local water companies and an industrial plant up the coast. My assistant, Zephyr, watches through the glass wall, tugging on the end of a spirally black curl as she cradles a neon-orange mug with her free hand.

I ignore her, and she enters a moment later, stopping in front of my oak desk.

“You look...”

Pausing, I lift a brow, glancing at her from my peripheral as I adjust my wire-rimmed glasses.

She purses her purple-painted lips. “Tired?”

“Are you asking or telling me?”

“Well, I’m trying to find a nice way to say you look like shit.” Her brown cheeks darken with the hint of a blush, and she drags the tea bag from her mug and takes a sip. “I take it, your birthday went well?”

Annoyance bubbles right beneath the surface of my skin. Gritting my teeth, I just stare at her. “Did you need something?”

“Fine, don’t tell me. I’ll just get the deets from your brother next time he comes in for lunch.”

“Do we need to have another discussion about you prying into my personal life?”

The main reason I hired Zephyr Corentin when I made senior associate was because of our natural rapport; she’s a no-nonsense person with an impeccable work ethic, and I admire her drive and dedication to the law.

But I think she’s a bit lonely, which means, sometimes, she interrogates despite my resistance to small talk. I should introduce her to my sister. They’d likely bond over what a miserable sack of shit I can be.

“It’s not prying when Palmer offers hot gossip, free of charge.” She shrugs, setting her mug down and grabbing the stack of folders tucked beneath one armpit. Plucking one, she tosses it to me. “Citium requested to push back the deposition, and Cupid wants a meeting with you sometime soon at Anteros.”

“What the hell did Citium push back for this time?”

She makes a face. “Their CEO had a Brazilian scheduled.”

“For fuck’s sake.” I lean forward, snatching the folder and turning to the first page of Citium’s file. “Does he not realize how close he is to going to prison for *life*? Prosecution’s riding our asses over here while they try to figure out how two tons of radioactive waste got into the landfill across from an elementary school, and I can’t even get my notes together to prep for an indictment because the fucker won’t show up.”

“Oh, he’s aware of his offenses. I think he has very little faith in getting off.”

Irritation claws inside my chest. I don’t appreciate people wasting my time or money, or underestimating my goddamn abilities to secure acquittals. Especially when taking their case was a favor I owed to the managing partner of the firm anyway.

With one hand, I skim through the sheets of paper inside the file and motion at the telephone with my other. Zephyr perches on the edge of the desk, reaching down to dial on the telephone base.

When the ringing clicks off, signaling a presence on the other end of the line, I cut in before Samuel Armas, Citium’s CEO, can say anything.

“When I agreed to take you on, I asked for one simple courtesy. Do you recall what it was?”

Samuel remains quiet, and I can almost hear beads of sweat popping up along his wide forehead.

“I said I don’t typically take on criminal cases anymore, and if I do yours, I want fair compensation. Didn’t I?”

“You’ve *been* paid already—”

“Ah, ah,” I interrupt, hovering my thumb over the red disconnect button. “I asked you a question, Sammy. The terms of our contractual work agreement. What were they?”

He hesitates. “Payment for billed hours at the disclosed rate and perfect attendance.”

“Perfect attendance,” I repeat slowly. “Because you’d been fired by your previous attorney for not ever showing up, correct?”

“I wouldn’t say fired—”

“*Is* that correct?”

“Yes,” he grumbles.

Zephyr smirks, sliding off the desk and exiting the way she came in.

“Okay then. As long as we’re on the same page.”

Leaning back in my chair, I spin around and take in the Boston Harbor in the distance through the exterior glass wall. Blue ocean water kisses the cloudy skyline, and I momentarily forget every single one of my troubles, reminding myself that this is the best view in the office, best in town, and exactly what I’ve worked for all these years.

My father’s name may be on a plethora of commercial buildings on the East Coast, but it’s *mine* on the wall outside this office. My name brought me here, and no amount of guilt or distraction can take that away.

“If I don’t see you this afternoon, that’s it for our working relationship. I have the grounds to terminate it, and you *will* go to prison for mail fraud and illegal hazardous waste dumping.” I pause, reveling in the slight puff of air Samuel sucks in through his teeth. “But that won’t be the worst of it because if you insist on wasting my time, I’ll be forced to find you and bring you here myself.”

A deep sigh crackles over the line. “All right, I’ll be there.”

“Good.” Propping the heels of my Oxfords up on the safe sitting behind my desk, I fold my arms across my chest and rock in my chair. “I have no use for a spineless jellyfish such as yourself, but I can guarantee that if you

continue wasting my time, life in prison won't compare to what I'll do to you."

"Are you allowed to speak to civilians this way? I could have you disbarred, Primrose."

"You could try," I concede. "But you haven't exactly made a strong case for yourself thus far, so I'm certain no one would believe you."

Then, I hang up.



MY ENTIRE BODY protests as I lift off the floor with one leg and come down on both, completing an assemblé as though I never stopped dancing in the first place. The hardwood floor is unforgiving on my feet, but I don't mind it right now.

The ache serves as a reminder. Penance for my many sins since I won't step foot near a church anymore.

Kicking one leg up on the portable barre, I fold my body inward, reaching for the point of my toes. There's no mirror here, which I love. The theater itself is borderline abandoned, used only sparingly by religious cults and NA groups for meetings. I happened upon it one afternoon during a trip

uptown, and have been rehearsing old numbers and crafting my own choreography in the months since, loving the solo role after a lifetime of being in the background.

Each movement comes to me naturally even though I'm a bit out of practice, flowing through my limbs like liquid honey as I soak in the solitude. Part of me likes the fact that I have no audience up here after performing for so long; it's a reclaiming of sorts—dancing because I love it and not because I crave how *others* love it.

Onstage, I can't even see myself, which means I can't be my own worst critic.

One of the metal doors at the far end of the large auditorium creaks open, and my spine goes rigid, my fingers curling over the barre. Seconds later, it slams shut, and my spine tightens as the sound of closure echoes against the ceiling.

My throat runs dry as footsteps approach.

“What the fuck have you done?” His voice is low. Dangerous. He crosses over to me slowly, each thud of his Italian loafers loud in the amplified space.

I swallow, searching the back of my tongue for words. “How did you find me?”

He ignores my question, the same as I did his. Silence bears down on my shoulders, pushing desperately.

Sighing, I turn my head slightly, catching his muscular silhouette in my peripheral. Black hair, streaked with early gray, hangs over his forehead, indicating that he's glaring down at me, though he remains quiet.

I try another tactic. “Are you referring to the warm hospitality your parents showed me last night, or something else?”

He scoffs, and the scent of hickory and tobacco surrounds me as his shadow falls over my form, enveloping me in its darkness. “I knew you were a slut before I met you, but I didn't know you were this bad. How were they, *puttana*? Did they give as good as me before you killed them?”

Disbelief burns behind my eyes. “I don't know what you're talking about, but for what it's worth, they were both better. You could really learn a thing or two from Fiero and Cosetta.”

Suddenly, his hand tangles in my hair, pitching me forward and shoving my face against the wall with a metal rail bolted to it.

My mouth falls open, a retort scraping against my teeth.

“The *point*,” Vitus says, his tone dark, “is that you’re a jealous little *bitch*, and I’m sick of your shit.”

“Well, I’m sick of yours too.”

He pulls my head back, slamming it into the plaster, and pain explodes along my jaw.

“Do you know how embarrassing this is? A dozen of my men saw photos of you online, showing up at my parents’ house late last night and then sneaking out in the morning, in that tiny red dress. The dress I *told* you not to wear.”

Is that what he cares about? The dress?

Not about his parents?

“Do you not think it’s embarrassing for me to get messages you meant to send to your mistress?” My heel drives into his shin, and he grunts, gripping harder. “Besides, you’re not *my* father.”

“Good thing,” he mutters, toying with the waistband of my leggings. “I think I’d kill myself if I had such a fuckup for a daughter.”

“As if you could ever keep it up long enough to make a kid.”

Blood spurts in my mouth, one of my molars loosening as he knocks my face into the window again. And again. And *again*. Nausea rolls around my stomach in a hot ball, and when he finally stops, I let out a hollow laugh, spitting some of the coppery liquid onto the floor.

“What’s wrong, Vitus? You seem angrier than usual. Was she not very good in bed?”

“She’s had less practice than some people.”

I spit more blood out, and this time, it splatters against his shoes, staining the gray suede.

The hand in my hair tightens, yanking me back against his chest. His other arm reaches for my ankle, lifting so it rests on the railing, and he bends it forward, slipping my foot between the metal and the wall. I suck in a sharp breath when he pulls, my knee catching on the surface as he tries to disconnect it from my calf, sending spirals of agony through the entire limb.

My palms paw at the paint, trying to gain purchase, and he presses moist lips to my ear.

“Where are they, Ariana? What did you do with my mother and father?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I snap, something hot and fiery sparking within me.

“Apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.” He pulls harder, tighter, and my bone feels like it might actually break in two. “Your papà’s a liar, and your mamma’s a whore. I don’t know why I’m so surprised.”

“Don’t talk about them like you know them.”

“I’m going to ask one more time.” His hand leaves my hair, dropping to wrap around my neck, stealing the breath from my body. “Where the *fuck* are my parents? You were the last one with them, last one to see them alive. Your DNA is probably all over them, so if I find their corpses, you have to know this won’t end well for you.”

Rage pulses in my blood, and red splashes across my vision, blotting out everything else. Bracing my weight on the twisted leg, I lean forward, pushing off the wall and swiveling around, using my elbows to break the hold he has on me. My skull whips against his jaw as I turn, and he stumbles back, momentarily stunned by the sudden movement—just long enough for me to disentangle my leg and dive to my purse on the floor.

I cry out when I feel his hands on my ankles, dragging me across the hardwood toward him. My fingers feel around inside my bag until they graze plastic. Wrapping around the canister, I pull it out and roll just as Vitus looms over me. Unlatching the lock, I push down on the release button.

Pepper spray paints his skin, the orange liquid assaulting his eyes and nose. He screams, immediately reaching for his face, and I scramble out from beneath him, hobbling to my feet and keeping as much weight as possible off the leg he’s injured.

Vitus falls to his knees, using his white T-shirt to rub his face, and I spray another time for good measure.

He sobs on the floor, and I just stand there, watching him. Wondering if it’s just the spray causing such raw emotion or something more.

The man’s taken bullets before, so I have a hard time imagining a little capsaicin is making him react so strongly.

On the other hand, Vitus has always been close with his parents, especially his father. If not for the stroke the elder Tallerico had a few years back, they’d undoubtedly be running Ricci Inc. together.

Maybe I went too far this time. My relationship with Vitus, for the better part of the years we’ve been together, is one marred by mind games and paybacks, neither of us very faithful to anything, except the idea of us.

Maybe I shouldn’t have gone to his parents at all.

But I did, and that isn't something I can take back.
Not that I would want to anyway.



PAPÀ DROPS his head into cuffed hands, threading mangled fingers through his overgrown salt-and-pepper hair. Caverns hollow the swells of his cheeks, and dark purple bags puff up beneath his dark eyes, aging him significantly.

He no longer resembles the terrifying Mafia don I grew up wishing for crumbs of affection from. I guess two thirty-year sentences for money laundering, racketeering, and domestic terrorism will do that to you.

But I still yearn, especially as the same old lines of disappointment crease his features.

“Do you have any idea what you’ve done, you stupid girl?” His head lifts, and he glances at the closed door.

His visitation allotments are short and heavily monitored by officers just outside, so we can’t exactly talk specifics, but clearly, word travels fast in prison.

“Why are you here instead of at St. Leonard’s, marrying the Tallerico boy and tying yourself to him before he figures out what you did to his parents?”

As if they were blameless, unsuspecting victims. Just because Fiero and Cosetta didn’t do anything directly to me doesn’t mean they were innocent and didn’t deserve what they got.

“Obviously, I no longer want to.”

“*Sei un rompicoglioni,*” he spits, though the verbiage is lost on me. “You don’t get a choice.”

“*Elena* got a choice.”

Years ago, my older sister was betrothed to the heir of some big media company, an alliance Papà had secured before she was even born. But then his in-house physician and hit man stepped in, swooping her away to his cushy little island to be his wife, and my parents barely did anything to stop it.

“You are not Elena.” The observation, though one I’ve heard many times, stings. He continues, “And she might have gotten a choice, but not one *I* granted her. Do you understand the strings I had to pull in order for Vitus to agree to take you on in the first place?”

I make a face, crossing my arms. “Gee, Papà, maybe if you’d left me alone to live my life, I wouldn’t have had to take measures into my own hands.”

His fist comes down on the table—gently though, so he doesn’t alarm the guards. “You are a *Ricci*, Ariana. Your entire purpose on this earth is to do what I fucking say. It’s not to go around...”—he pauses, lowering his voice as his eyebrows draw in— “*screwing* your fiancé over when he pisses you off.”

I glare at a spot on the metal table between us that’s been warped from sunlight. “So, he can cheat on me, but I can’t cheat back? I can’t retaliate? Wasn’t that the little arrangement you and Mamma had?”

Grunting, he leans back in his chair, and his stare bores fiery holes into the top of my head. I can feel his judgment, but when I look up, his eyes are turned down. Almost... softened, as if in understanding.

My parents didn’t like me, growing up, but I always wanted to believe that Papà loved me in his own distant, abnormal way. That maybe he just didn’t know how to express it and didn’t know what to do with people who didn’t serve a direct purpose he could exploit.

Mamma destroyed everyone she came into contact with, including him, and I’ve always held on to the shred of hope that Papà and I silently bonded over that. The stolen pats on the shoulder in passing and new leotards every time Mamma had “lost” one made me think he cared more than he could let on.

Even if he couldn’t do anything to stop her, at least there was a little solace, knowing I wasn’t the only one she tormented.

Wasn’t the only one she fucked up.

Tapping his fingers on the edge of the table, Papà lets out a long sigh. “Ariana, it’s just how men are—”

Everything inside of me deflates, like the air being released from a tire. It leaks out the sides, my hope spilling with it.

An incredulous laugh tumbles out of my mouth, and I shove back my chair to get to my feet. “Oh Jesus, not the *boys will be boys* speech. I’ve heard that one plenty, thanks.”

The metal door swings open, and a redheaded guard enters, hanging off to the side. Papà clears his throat, lifting his hands, as if to show he's still cuffed and not *technically* dangerous. Even though we both know violence isn't the only way to hurt others.

“*Cucciolotta.*”

I pause, recognizing one of the few Italian words I picked up from my parents, since they didn't teach us any outright.

“Your... indiscretion doesn't absolve you from your commitment. Vitus will still expect you to marry him, and if you don't, he'll look for you. That man has no intention of giving you or his proximity to the Ricci fortune up.”

My mouth parts to tell him where to shove his fortune—especially since the money is all tied up in legal crosshairs now anyway—but he gives me a tired almost half-smile.

“If I'd been given an out when I was paired with your mother, things might have been different. They certainly would've been for you.” He folds his hands together on top of the table. “You want out? You'll need to find an excuse. A reason for visiting his parents, and a reason why you couldn't possibly have... taken care of them, like he thinks. Otherwise, Tallerico will still claim you, but he'll end up killing you.” One long finger points in my direction. “I will *not* have that happen.”

I snort. As if that hasn't been Vitus's plan all along. Marry me, gain access to the business, and murder me before I can complain. “Aw, it's almost like you care about me.”

“Vitus marrying into this family and becoming the face of Ricci Inc. doesn't mean he'll be its *brains*. That stays in the bloodline.” He licks his lips, glancing at the guard, who narrows her eyes at him. “The Barbieris are hosting a party tonight at some club outside of town. Get your ass there, and I'll have one of my contacts fix you up with an airtight alibi.”

“I don't need one—”

“Okay,” the guard snaps, rounding the table to roughly grasp my father's bicep, “that's enough. Do we need to add conspiratorial solicitation to your list of charges, Ricci?”

“I was only offering my daughter some advice—”

She ignores him, unlocking the silver cuffs around his ankles from where they're linked to the floor, then hauls him to his feet. He stumbles as

she shoves him out, and she kicks the back of his calf to get him to move again.

Another officer comes into the room to escort me from the facility, and I go slowly, trying to process the visual of my father being manhandled. He was once the most powerful and feared criminal in the city, but now, it honestly feels as though he's just... given up.

Whether that's because of his conviction or the fact that he hasn't been in charge in years, I don't know.

And I don't really care.

Coming here didn't solve my problems, so I'm not going to make more for myself by giving a shit about his feelings.

He never has cared much about mine.

Bright sunlight impedes my vision as I step out of the correctional facility, and I slide my Gucci sunglasses down over my nose to block it out. The building itself is just outside of Boston in some little no-name town, and I take a deep breath, inhaling the semi-fresh air that seems less polluted outside city limits.

The bottoms of my red Prada heels grind against the sidewalk pavement as I slow to an immediate stop, nearly running into the human storm cloud waiting at the top of the stairs, just outside the security gate.

A silent growl escapes me as I shuffle back a step.

My sister's husband stares down at me, though he hardly towers over me the way he does Elena, especially since I'm in heels. If he notices the light bruising across my jaw and cheekbones and the scab at the top of my lip from my run-in with Vitus, he doesn't mention them.

Still, his presence feels no less formidable. A single tendril of inky-black hair swoops down over his forehead, just long enough to brush against his harsh brows. His strong jaw shifts as he takes me in, running his nearly-black eyes over my form with a slow, clinical assessment.

Cold seeps into my pores as he studies me, and I almost avert my gaze out of sheer discomfort. There's no doubt in my mind why my father used to employ this man to torture adversaries and rats. I think most people would shit their pants after a single terse glance from him.

I don't get the appeal of Kal Anderson, to be honest. He's attractive, sure, but I've never really wanted to be afraid of my lovers. Evidently, my sister sees no issue with his severity.

Neither did our mother, I suppose.

Maybe she's why he turned out that way.

"Visiting your old friend?" I ask him after the silence stretches for far too long, tossing my hair over my shoulder. "What would the ol' ball and chain think about you going to see the man she put in prison?"

"I imagine she'd feel the same as she would about you visiting him." Kal cocks his head to one side. "But she doesn't know, does she?"

"I don't have to give her a play-by-play of my life."

"A courtesy check-in every once in a while would be nice though. Especially when you evade Vitus's guards at some bar two weeks ago, and the last Elena thing knows, you're taking the stairs up to Fiero and Cosetta Tallerico's home, and no one's heard from you since."

The breaths stall in my throat, dying out like the last sputtering of a broken car exhaust. My eyes cut to his. "You told her where I went?"

Kal's face remains expressionless. I can't imagine what it would be like to receive a terminal diagnosis from this man—his lack of bedside manner is probably what ended his medical career so early on.

Realization dawns on me the longer he stares, and my shoulders slump. "She's tracking me."

Of course, he wouldn't tell her that he helped me clean something up, but I can almost guarantee that the tracking was his idea for her. A way to ease his conscience, since I have him keeping my secrets.

As if he can read where my thoughts have traveled, he rolls his eyes. "You have GPS on your phone, Ariana. Anyone in the world who wants to could find you."

His words sound vaguely threatening, but there's something else too. Something laced in the tone and shining in his gaze.

A warning.

"Elena is worried about you," he says.

"So worried that she couldn't even bother to come find me herself? If she has GPS on me, she can see where I'm at."

His nostrils flare. "Actually, I insisted on coming. Just in case you'd managed to get yourself carved up like a Thanksgiving turkey. I imagine Vitus must be quite cross with you."

In truth, I haven't seen him since that day at the theater. I'm sure he's planning something awful in retaliation though. Especially since his parents still haven't turned up.

Squaring my shoulders, I shrug and run my hands over the A-line skirt blowing against my thighs in the breeze. “Nope, I think I’ll leave the carving to you and Elena. Isn’t that kind of your thing?”

Surprise flickers across his sharp features, its presence fleeting. As if I don’t know all the raunchy details of his sex life and the kinky shit they’re into.

Sisters talk.

At least... we used to.

Kal looks at me for a long, long time, staring as if he could see through to my soul. I wonder if evil looks different when you’re on the other side of it or if being tainted yourself makes it all taste the same.

Finally, he gives a small shake of his head, stuffing his hands into the pockets of his black trench coat.

“Be careful,” he says, pressing his lips together. “The path of vengeance is a slippery slope.”



“TWO NIGHTS OUT in less than a month. Must be some sort of record for you.”

Turning my head toward the adenoidal voice, I lift my complimentary beer in greeting as the firm’s managing partner takes the stool next to me.

“Yes, it seems some people are overestimating my desire to mingle.”

I’ve been here half an hour waiting for him to show, and have been offered drinks more times than I can keep track—by both men and women as they trickle in and out of the dance floor.

Most attorneys will host meetings in offices or even the local courthouse. Some even make house calls, but the bar setting is certainly a

first for me. One of the largest partners for the premier law firm in the region, Jay Cupid is known for his innovative ideas and utilizing ways to lessen his carbon footprint. This is his version of upcycling.

Never mind that there could be prying eyes and ears, ready to absorb company and client secrets. When you view yourself as untouchable, the distant chatter doesn't really matter.

But I know better. I've seen more prestigious men fall.

"Nonsense. You might not be a people person on the surface, Cassius, but you know how to turn it on when you need to," he says.

Hazard of the job, unfortunately. Playing nice with others is one of the few ways I'm able to get clients to open up upon introduction, so we don't waste time leaving out details and potentially fucking up trials or cases.

Jay waves a hand at the bartender, a tall woman with gauged ears, and leans his elbows on the metal counter. "So, what do you think of Anteros, my boy?"

I steal a quick look around the club with its pulsing red lights and the circular stage directly in the center of the floor. It looks like most other nightclubs in the city, if not smaller and more intimate. Professional dancers sit in the laps of wealthy men—men who I *know* have wives waiting for them at home, though I suppose I shouldn't be surprised to find them here.

My father was a member, back in his day.

"I'm not sure I've been here long enough to pass judgment," I say, sipping my beer just for something to do.

He chuckles, clapping a hand on my shoulder. "Ah, but that's what I've always loved most about you. Ten seconds into any meeting, and you can discern the sharks from the clownfish."

"Is that what you brought me here for?" I push the beer back, looking out at the club patrons. "This your metaphorical sea tonight?"

"The entire world is the sea, Primrose. Full of undiscovered territories..." He pauses, a smirk tugging at the corners of his lips as the red lights morph into flashing blues and greens. They flicker across the stage, highlighting the platform as a woman is led out onto it. "And deep, dark secrets."

"I do love how cryptic you're being." Rolling my eyes, I turn on the stool and lean my weight on the bar, matching Jay's stance as he spins around.

“Ever heard of the Barbieris?” he asks, keeping his gaze on the stage. “Italian Mafia subfamily who pretty much silently runs the East Coast because of their political connections.”

“Don’t insult me,” I tell him.

My capstone thesis in undergrad was on the Mafia and their collective effects on climate change, and then there was always my own father’s ties to it. Thomas Primrose had a long history of buying up prime real estate and selling it to the mob, allowing them land monopolies in major sections of the state.

With them in that much control, imposing protection and infiltrating the government and law enforcement were easy.

My father might have eventually come to regret those ties, but he learned pretty quickly how resistant the Mafia was to people rescinding their word.

After his death, I made sure they knew I was nothing like that man. That if I promised them something—or *someone*—I’d deliver.

The woman onstage shakes bright red hair free from her ponytail and discards the sheer cover-up draped around her shoulders. A speaker crackles at the far corner of the club, and the music softens, followed by the abrasive tone of feedback piercing the room.

“*Benvenuti nella notte infernale,*” the man onstage says, making a sweeping gesture at the crowd with his free arm. “Our most favored members-only tradition. I hope you’ve come with your wallets stuffed because the talent backstage is some of the best I’ve seen in ages. We’ve got the sweet, the innocent, and the downright *dirty*. Everything your heart desires, and she’s all yours once your payment goes through.”

The crowd cheers, sending an eerie sensation creeping up my spine.

I shift, somehow trying to shrink into myself more, as if the members’ presence might taint my already-darkened soul. “What the hell is going on, Cupid?”

“The Barbieris have their greedy little hands in everything these days, it seems. Even these auctions, which used to be cheaper to enter, by the way.” Reaching into the inside of his sports coat, Jay pulls out two shiny gold tickets, handing me one.

Turning it over, I read the number printed on the front along with the fine print: ***All sales are final.***

“What is this? What are we buying?” I don’t know why I ask—maybe some sort of courtesy, giving Jay the opportunity to lie and say he didn’t bring me to a goddamn flesh auction.

Taking the cocktail that the bartender slides over, he lifts a shoulder, shrugging as the woman onstage begins her slinky little routine. Every eye in the club is glued to the shimmering pink teddy she has on, and she gyrates her hips slowly, grinding against the railing.

Raucous cheers erupt among the men surrounding her, making me flinch from their volume. It’s as if they’ve never been in the same room as an uninhibited woman and they don’t know how to control themselves otherwise.

Music kicks back up, a heavy bass note giving her a rhythm to follow, and after a few minutes, the man with the microphone returns.

He reaches out, grabbing the woman by the back of her head, and yanks her into his side. The crowd settles, the alcohol coursing through their bloodstreams perhaps diluted enough now for them to get a grip, but still, there’s a primal edge pulsing through the air.

These men aren’t unlike the ones I see in the courtroom; they’re bloodthirsty and single-minded, present for exactly one thing tonight.

A girl.

“You all know the rules,” the announcer says, giving the woman a little shake.

Her eyes widen as hands fly into the air, frantically grasping their tickets, as if afraid they might lose them.

“We’ll start the bidding at five big ones.”

“Five thousand!” one person shouts, almost shooting out of their seat.

“Fifty-five hundred!”

“Six K!”

“Ten grand!”

Clenching my jaw, I slide my gaze to Jay, who watches the bidding with an amused look on his face. I’m not sure why I’m surprised that he’s turned out to be such a slimy bastard. Normally, I’m a much better judge of character, although when it comes to lawyers in general, ascertaining the despicable from the selfish becomes a bit harder.

I’ve always assumed Jay has certain affiliations with organized crime. We all do—wouldn’t be able to have careers without them. But I figured his

ran more along the lines of illegal gambling rings and helping criminals get lesser sentences in exchange for kickbacks.

Not *this*.

“Going once...” The announcer glides his hand from the woman’s neck and down over her bare shoulder, and then it disappears at her waist, around her back.

Tension floods her round face, and she suddenly seems much younger. Like a girl who agreed to something she didn’t fully comprehend.

“*Sold* for ten g’s to Mr. Agosti.”

Stefano Agosti, an older gentleman with a sparse head of hair and a reputation for being a brute in bed, scrambles to his feet, handing his ticket to an usher just offstage. He leers up at the woman, who stares back at him with a fearful expression.

A slow-burning grin works across his lips, and my stomach rolls.

He likes that she’s afraid.

She’s shuffled away, probably to the back, where they can truss her up perfectly to finalize the sale. My eyes narrow at Jay, who rolls his eyes, taking a drink of his cocktail.

“Lighten up, Primrose. You just needed a ticket to stay for the auction. You don’t have to bid.” He props an elbow on the bar. “In fact, I don’t want you to bid. We’re here to observe.”

“Observe *what*?”

“There’s a rumor going around that Ricci Inc. didn’t go under six years ago. At least, not the way everyone thinks it did. Supposedly, Vitus Tallerico and his father took over the reins when Rafael went to prison, and the Barbieris are very close cousins to the Tallericos.”

I stare at the dimple in his chin. “So?”

“Well, if it’s true and they’re aligning themselves rather than remaining rivals, the entire state’s ecosystem is at risk of a major imbalance.” Jay levels me with a look. “If that happens and a Barbieri gets his hands on the Ricci throne, we’re pretty much fucked. They’ll bring in their own government officials, their own legal teams, and the fabric of society as we know it will shift completely on its axis. Tonight, we’re just here to watch our possible downfall in real time.”

“But *why*?” I cross my ankles, using my pinkie to push my glasses higher up on my nose. “I give zero fucks about any of this.”

“You give zero fucks about *anything*,” Jay corrects, and I hate the way he says it so smoothly, as if he knows me. As if I don’t put up a front every day, just to get through menial tasks. “With one exception—money. You know better than anyone how the almighty dollar runs everything. If the Barbieris gain control of Ricci Inc. or of the back channels, you won’t just walk away and find another firm to work for. They’ll blacklist you on account of who your father was, and you’ll be hard-pressed to find even pro bono cases.”

A pause.

He shifts, clearing his throat. “And they’re liable to come after you, Primrose. Your name still holds enough weight in the state that you pose a direct threat to their culmination of power.”

Annoyance boils just below the surface of my skin, and I stare at the flashing lights until my vision warps, dots splashing across my line of sight.

“How would the Barbieris even take over? If Ricci Inc. really is still around, it’s not going to be as powerful as it once was. Their don is in *prison*, his wife is MIA, and the daughters...”

Another round of applause fills the room, crackling like thunder as the lights shift again back to their previous red. Strobes flash as the announcer comes back to the stage, this time dragging someone by a prong collar and attached chain.

The tendons in my neck stretch, bulging against my skin as I sit up straighter. My feet slap against the floor, the heels of my Oxfords glued to the sticky linoleum.

My gaze catches on long chestnut locks as they fall back over bare, sun-kissed shoulders. A dancer’s body, long and lithe and touched by the softest curves, wrapped in complete lace sin. The white bodice of the little number she has on clings to her like a second skin, pushing her breasts up so they’re front and center while a massive amethyst rests between them.

A high-cut pair of panties attach to a garter belt around her waist, and sheer stockings encase the length of her legs. The announcer holds her close by the leash hooked through the thick metal collar around her neck, like he’s afraid she’s capable of bolting, even with the skinny six-inch heels on her feet.

Where the previous woman looked terrified, *she* seems comfortable. Like she was born for the stage and does her best work there.

I’m not familiar with this kind of performance.

I don't like it.

My skin grows exceedingly warm, and I reach up to tug at the collar of the white dress shirt beneath my black suit jacket. Red-hot fire burns bright in the pit of my stomach, its flames growing and scratching at my chest.

"We have a special little item up for bid tonight," the announcer says, chuckling low in his throat.

A wicked murmur spreads through the crowd, and I see people sit forward, hanging on the edge of their seats.

"This *piccolina* is certainly a well-used model, but, hey, at least we know you'll be satisfied."

Men jitter, lewd thoughts bouncing around in their brains.

I swallow, forcing down my discomfort. There's no reason for it anyway.

A single conversation—and years of an unhealthy fixation with her family—does not give me the right to have feelings about Ariana Ricci or her poor decisions. If Jay hadn't forced me to come out tonight, I wouldn't have even known this was going on at all, and I would've carried on with my life tomorrow as usual.

But I *do* know, and I recall that night last week at the club outside of town. How she was ready to dip but stuck around because she wanted to see what I was about.

Too bad I couldn't really show her. Not fully anyway. That's a secret I keep hidden, tucked away with the depravity in my veins.

I think about how badly I wanted her in that moment though.

For a split second, a fraction of time, she eclipsed all reason and forethought. Everything that'd ever caused me to resist or pass over women evaporated with just a single glance, and as absurd as it was, part of me liked it.

Liked that she couldn't seem to look away either.

And I certainly don't like the attention she's gathering now. As if anyone in this establishment has somehow earned the right to leer.

Still, I pace myself, trying to maintain a shred of cool in front of Jay. Exhaling as someone in the crowd asks to sample the merchandise, I grip the tops of my knees and glance at the floor when they break away and haul themselves onstage.

A sharp gasp breaks through the music and low chatter, and my eyes snap back up. Ariana's bent over some sort of makeshift pillory, her head

kept in place by the shortened chain around her throat, which they've bolted to a hook in the floor. Her hands are stuffed into the holes on either side, and she glares at the man sliding his palm over her exposed ass.

"A live wire," he remarks into the mic offered by the announcer.

Suddenly, three more men take the stage, Ariana's body like a magnet to their groping. One stands at her head, shoving his thumb into her mouth, while the other two flank her, reaching around to cup her breasts.

"We'll start her off at the steep end of things." The announcer stands back a few steps, watching the assault with a glint in his eye.

My jaw tenses, working back and forth.

Jay turns his head in my direction. "You okay there, Primrose?"

I nod, silent. Unable to speak through the anger fusing my teeth together.

"Fifty grand!" someone calls out, and the flames in my chest grow taller, more feral.

"One hundred!"

"*Three* hundred!"

The vein splitting my forehead in half pulses with anxiety.

It doesn't even make sense, my reaction. By nature, the fact that she's clearly so popular should turn me off.

Ariana's mouth falls open, an almost-imperceptible moan coming from her lips, but for some reason, I catch it. One of the men dips his fingers between her thighs, though I can't see what exactly he's doing.

It's obvious anyway.

Chest on fire, I blink several times, trying to eradicate myself from the onslaught of rage coursing through me. My vision weakens, morphing to reflect the color of the flames, and I don't even notice my arm extending.

Don't notice the ticket clasped tight between my fingers.

And I certainly don't recognize the words that come from my mouth, brought on by blind emotions I don't want to put a face to.

"Two hundred fifty million dollars."



PLAY STUPID GAMES, win stupid prizes.

If she could have, Mamma would've branded that mantra across my forehead, though it wouldn't have done any good.

Apparently, I don't learn lessons, and I'm not sure this can be cataloged as an *intelligent* decision on my part. Even if it was Papà's idea to come here tonight.

I don't know what I expected to happen when I arrived at Anteros, a nightclub specifically frequented by men of the underground, but I can't exactly say it was *this*. Auction participation is what Ermete Barbieri—the head of his notorious crime family—suggested as my story for visiting the

Tallericos last week, citing that Fiero and Cosetta were regulars here and it could be conceived that I had reached out to them for advice on how to secure the highest bids.

Apparently, allowing yourself to be touched by strangers in front of other strangers is the way to go.

Vitus would be here tonight, Ermes said, and he'd most certainly bid when he saw me up there. Then, it would take only a little convincing to prove that I'd been practicing my stage presence for weeks before his parents' disappearance and that my participation was driven by a need for income, not revenge or anything else.

It was all very convoluted, but I went along with it because Vitus is an idiot, and it seemed like the sort of thing he would believe even if I did admit that I'd been with his parents for nefarious reasons.

Most people will believe what you tell them if it's what they want to hear. They don't want the truth; they just want whatever reality makes them feel best.

Mikey P., the auctioneer, drags me off to one of the dressing rooms in the back of Anteros, where Ermes still sits on a leather chair against the wall, smoking a giant cigar. Two scantily clad dancers kneel on the floor on either side of him, stroking up and down his pant legs.

Metal spikes dig into my neck as I'm shuffled along, and I reach up for the millionth time, trying to give myself a little reprieve. The restraint isn't as tight as it could be, but each prong is sharp and digs into my throat with every movement.

Evidently, it's what the club members like.

"Ah," he says as the metal door swings shut behind us, "there's my little star. See what I told you about the collar? These men want pets, not dancers."

"Well, we like the dancers too," Mikey P. grumbles, his hand still wrapped around the metal leash. "Maybe not more than the virginal bride bit, but I bet you could've gotten even more if you'd gone out in a tutu and done some pirouettes."

My brows shoot up. "Wow, *Mikey*, you know a ballet term. I can't decide if that makes you more or less of a pervert."

"Ballerina is my favorite search category." He grins, reaching down and grabbing a handful of my ass, yanking me into him.

Bile teases the back of my throat as the hard length of his arousal pushes into my stomach, and I attempt to twist away.

Ermes clicks his tongue, blowing out a plume of smoke. “Stop harassing my merchandise, Pacetti. Not every day we get a record-breaker in here.” He pauses, letting his gaze dip slowly over me, so I know he isn’t intervening for my benefit. “Besides, she belongs to someone else now.”

“Yeah, about that—”

“What do you mean, belongs?” I ask, making a move to step forward.

Mikey P. tugs against the leash, pulling me back.

“What the fuck, asshole? I did my song and dance. Let me go.”

His blue eyes slide slowly across the room toward Ermes, and he shifts his weight between his legs. “Can’t do that, little lady. Sorry.”

My nostrils flare, and I curl my hands into fists at my sides. “Why?”

Ermes drops his hand to the side, pulling a sheet of paper from the bench. “Didn’t you read the fine print before you signed this contract? Not every auction night at Anteros is for a single interaction. Some of them are a little more... permanent.”

He grins, and the nausea in my stomach leaps, desperate to escape me.

“Which do you think tonight was?”

Fuck. Have I sold myself indefinitely to Vitus?

A sharp pain slices through my chest, like a knife cutting directly through to my heart beneath the protective bone. I don’t blink, don’t breathe, don’t move.

“Don’t move, my beautiful butterfly. I’m helping you. You’ll be useless to the men who want you, and then they’ll never be able to hurt you.”

Panic swells inside my body like a boat that’s sprung a leak and is fast on the verge of capsizing.

Clearly, Mamma was a liar.

Men don’t stop wanting what they want even if it’s a little dirtied up. They’ll take pride in making it worse.

The door opens again, and my spine goes rigid. Mikey hooks a finger in the prong collar, causing the spikes on the opposite side to sink into my skin, almost breaking the surface. I make a strangled noise, but he ignores it, pulling me over to where Ermes and the girls sit.

Gritting my teeth, I glare at the thinning patch of dark hair on top of the Mafia boss’s head. “My father won’t allow this—”

Ermes's hand whips out, catching the leash in his fist, and then he's yanking me down so we're eye-level. I sputter, my fingers immediately clawing at the collar as a spike pierces my skin; I feel a bead of blood trickle down slowly, and Ermes just tugs harder.

"Your father is nothing to me. Your last name might still be associated with the grandeur that once was, but aside from residual authority and a little operation out in bumfuck, Maine, you *are* nothing. Do not think I'll hesitate to end you just because you came here, asking for my help. I know your betrayals, *gattina*, and I will use them against you."

"Is that any way to speak to someone apparently worth as much as Paul Cézanne's *The Card Players*?"

A silky, shadowy form stops in the dressing room doorway, not coming any closer. Just props a forearm up on the frame, leaning so his face is obscured.

But that voice...

Ermes relinquishes his hold on me. Barely. "A collector. That explains your bid."

"My sister is a painter. I know value when I see it."

Heat fans the edges of my face. *Is he talking about me?*

Did... he place the winning bid?

Tension coils tight in my body, spiraling up through my chest and scattering my breaths.

"Yes, well, that might be the case, but I'm afraid there are still certain protocols in place," Mikey P. interjects, taking a step in the stranger's direction. "Unfortunately, bids are only open to members. As we have no way of verifying your account information or—"

A white envelope drops to the floor in front of the man's feet. He bends down, shaking his arms so the sleeves of his suit jacket rise up, revealing muscular forearms corded with thick veins. With a flick of his wrist, he sends the envelope skidding across the floor. Ermes traps it with the tip of a shoe, not removing his gaze from the other man.

"This can't be all the money."

The stranger stands back up. "Obviously. But it should prove I'm good for it. Now, give me my prize."

That voice...

Like deep silk that I feel between my legs as it drifts toward me, warming the coldest parts of my body.

He takes a step closer, and the girls at Ermes's side slink away, as if pushed back by some sort of force field. My bones tingle with anticipation as the man from the club last week exits the shadows, his face a careful mask of impassivity.

He's wearing a fitted black suit and square glasses with wire frames, and I'm slightly daunted by how different he looks right now. Still massive and imposing yet for entirely opposing reasons. The man I met last week was suave and mysterious, and this one is incredibly well put together and calculated.

Not a strand of that almost-brown hair strays from the slicked-back style he has it in, even as smoke winds up around it. He's clean-shaven, and for a brief moment, I let my mind wander to how his smooth jaw would feel, dragging up the inside of my thigh, coasting over my sensitive skin.

My pulse migrates south, and I clear my throat as the man's mahogany eyes meet Ermes's, whose grip tightens impossibly on the collar. So much that I think he's trying to sever my head from the rest of my body.

Tears blur my vision, but I blink them away. Sucking in a deep breath, I relax my hold on the prongs, allowing the agony to absorb into my body the way I did when breaking in new pointe shoes as a kid.

Some pain is necessary. A means to a better end.

"I'm growing quite bored of these games, Barbieri." The man shoves his hands into the pockets of his dress pants. "Do you send your regulars through such hoops to collect their winnings?"

"Ms. Ricci is no ordinary win," Ermes says, finally releasing the collar. He toys with the attached chain, sliding the cool metal over the exposed skin of my thigh above the stockings, and then lets it fall to the floor. "In fact, we didn't even do an assessment of her before she took the stage tonight. Perhaps we should perform one now? So you know exactly what you paid for?"

His hand comes up, a fingertip ghosting over the top of my ass. I smack it away, and he chuckles.

"A real-life firecracker, this one. You'll certainly have your hands full."

The stranger's voice is a low, gravelly rumble when he responds. "And you'll have yours in a box if you do not remove them from her person immediately."

Mikey's face turns ashen, and Ermes pauses his caress.

“A man of the law threatening bodily harm to a civilian? Interesting.” He glances at me, letting his hand fall away. “You *must* be something special, gattina.”

A lawyer? I study the stranger, recoiling slightly in disgust.

He still doesn't look at me, as if I'm as insignificant to him as the chipped purple paint on the walls.

No one moves for a few beats, and the silence throbs around us, threatening to crush us in its grasp.

“Well, go on, girl. Say hello to your new husband.”

My head whips toward him. “My what?”

A slow, sadistic smile blooms on the *capo's* mouth. “You heard me. What did you think I meant by permanent?”

Clearing his throat, Mikey reaches up, gripping the back of his neck. “Boss, Vitus is gonna be pretty pissed—”

“Well, he should've bid faster. What's that saying? You snooze, you lose?” His arms extend, drawing the two girls from where they drifted off to the side, beckoning them closer. They settle back at his feet, like they think they belong there. “If he has a problem, he can take it up with the newlyweds.”

Newlyweds.

That's not possible, right? Aren't there stipulations in place, licenses to sign, before you can marry someone?

My throat burns, the urge to call my sister and have her rescue me from this absolute mess overwhelming. Pressure builds, rushing between my ears the longer I stand frozen in place, in time, wondering what the fuck I've just done.

Did Papà know when he sent me here?

Sliding my gaze past the stranger to where the exterior door is still propped open, I weigh my options. They aren't great really—stay and accept my fate or take my chances running.

I'm not sure I want to know what kind of monster just *bought* me. If he outbid the other people here tonight, the odds of him being decent are likely not in my favor.

I don't think I'll make it. There are three massive men standing around, poised as if waiting for me to spring into action.

But I never have liked to disappoint.

They want a show? I'll give the performance of my life.

Without waiting for anyone to unlock the collar from my neck, I gather the chain in my hands and bolt, sticking to the wall so it's tougher to stop me. Mikey P. lets out a whoop of surprise, but by the time I reach the door, no one has grabbed me.

I can't tell if that's a good thing or not.



OF COURSE SHE RUNS.

I don't know why I expected anything less.

I've had approximately ten minutes to process the consequences of my impulsive action. Ariana had thirty seconds, and several of those were spent being touched and degraded by a man the state prosecutor's office has been trying to convict with *something* for the last decade.

Blinking at the space she occupied moments ago, I wonder if ten minutes is even long enough to fully absorb what I've done. In those six hundred seconds, I've managed to sign away a fraction of my inheritance

and freedom, all because I didn't like the idea of someone else claiming Ricci Inc.

At least, that's what I've spent the majority of this time convincing myself of.

The alternative—that I'm as helpless to my impulses and desires as Lenny or even my father—is too grim to indulge.

Married.

What the fuck was I thinking, saying yes? Even when they brought me to a small office off the back of the building, where I signed the license, and they somehow superimposed Ariana's signature on the document despite her seeming to be unaware of the result of this auction—even then, when the notary and the witness asked not once, but *twice*, if I was sure I wanted her—I said yes.

Bound myself legally to a woman I don't even know, and for what?

More money?

When will it ever be enough?

Ermes smirks at me as he sits forward, sticking his cigar between the lips of the blonde at his left foot. "She's your problem now."

His tone makes my veins vibrate with irritation.

"Perhaps seeing her as such is what drove her to be one in the first place."

His smirk widens, creating a dimple in his cheek. "A noble sentiment, but way off the mark. That little *gattina* was trouble the moment she came screaming out of her mother's hole, like she was desperate to get away. Born without a lick of loyalty in her blood."

"Which is bad for business," the announcer from before says, crossing his stocky arms over his chest. "Probably why her parents never trusted her with anything."

"But now, she's the only Ricci left in the city." Ermes narrows his beady eyes. "And with Rafe in prison, she's the access point to their fortune."

"The fortune the government seized six years ago in their asset forfeiture?"

"Ah," Ermes says, snapping his fingers. "And *who* better to find a loophole to release the money than an attorney?"

I don't respond because their truth is much simpler than the reality, although I can't believe he thinks it's *just* about money for me. With money,

there's power, and I want my father rolling over in his grave when his ghost realizes I have more than he could have ever dreamed of.

"Ticktock, Primrose." Ermes removes his cigar from the blonde's mouth, tapping the butt on the tip of her nose so some ash falls to the floor. "Better go find your bride before someone else does."

Leaving him there to continue using the two dancers as glorified ashtrays, I make my way to the front of Anteros, where Jay is waiting by the entrance with a stupid grin on his face.

"Not a goddamn word," I warn, sweeping past him before he can say something idiotic.

Unfortunately, he follows me onto the street and gets in the way as I scan it for a woman in nothing but lingerie and a collar.

"I couldn't have made this up in my wildest fucking fantasies," he says, bouncing on his heels.

"Fantasize about me a lot there, Cupid?"

"Can you blame me? The amount of money you've made the firm in the last few years would be enough to get any dick hard."

Rolling my eyes, I pull my phone from the breast pocket of my jacket, shooting a text to Zephyr even though I'm sure she's asleep right now in her downtown studio apartment. The message is a simple request to scan the surrounding blocks for my runaway bride, and I suppress a smile when she doesn't question it.

Her dedication to discretion is the main reason I keep her on my staff.

"*Sfigato*," someone says from over my shoulder.

I turn just in time to see Vitus Tallerico approaching with two of his henchmen. His black hair is slicked back, highlighting the graying hairline I presume comes from a life of living in the shadows, always afraid of someone jumping out to get you.

"What's this I hear about you stepping in on my girl?" he drawls, stopping just mere inches from me. So close that I can almost taste the tequila lacing his breath.

"Didn't really look like your girl when she was onstage, getting pawed by a bunch of men."

"Good thing nobody fucking asked for your opinion, *stronzo*. Who the hell do you think you are? You can't just swoop in and steal things that don't belong to you."

“Oh, but she does belong to me.” Leaning back on my heels as he shifts forward, puffing his chest so it brushes mine, I give a small shrug. “At least, she does now. Unless you’d like to buy me out of my contract?”

Buy me out of it.

Do it, you piece of shit.

Every fiber of my being strains, silently urging him to offer money I know he doesn’t have. If he did, I’m certain there would’ve been other ways for him to obtain Ricci Inc.

Maybe he does love her though. Maybe I’ve stepped in and ruined something that wasn’t mine to ruin.

I let my gaze fall down over the crisp wrinkles of his brown suit and the unmistakably puckered red flesh just above the collar of his undershirt. The fresh beginnings of a mouth-shaped bruise, matching the shade of his lips.

Ariana’s lips were painted a pretty pink. Something dainty and light that matched the white of her outfit.

My jaw clenches, teeth gnashing together. I raise my brows, shrugging as I answer my own question. “Yeah, didn’t think so.”

“You’re gonna regret this.” He shifts forward. Something cold and hard presses into my sternum, and I bite back a laugh at how juvenile this entire scene is. “I didn’t put in all this goddamn work, so a Primrose could sneak his way into my business.”

“Winning fair and square is hardly sneaking in.”

Beside me, Jay takes a step away. As if he’s afraid things here might actually get out of hand.

As if we haven’t been held at gunpoint by rival defenses, or anti-climate change activist groups, or the occasional rogue witness. Even my own father pulled a .44 on me a few times as a kid, convinced that weaponized metal was the best way to drive home certain lessons.

Half the battle of survival comes from knowing what your opponent values and being aware of what *you* hold dear. People can extort you if they know you care about something.

If Vitus were going to shoot me, he would’ve done it already.

“She owes me shit. Knows what happened to my parents,” Vitus says, and I just stare at him because I have no idea what he’s talking about. “I’m not just letting her go without a fight.”

Jay clears his throat. “You’d have to find her first.”

Vitus's head swings right, and he blinks at my colleague, as if just realizing we aren't within the safety of Anteros. There are witnesses out here, and not all of them are on the Mafia's payroll.

Then, he smiles, though it doesn't quite reach his eyes. "I take it, you don't know where she ran off to then? My girl has a knack for hiding, you know. In places you'd never think to look. She's sleazy like that. Wouldn't be surprised if she's out there, fucking someone else already, just so you have a reason not to go through with your contract."

My hand comes up, hidden beneath the flap of my jacket, and strikes his wrist while the other grips the back of the gun, bending his hand and the weapon back. He grunts, applying pressure in the opposite direction as he tries to shake me off, but I raise my foot and drive my heel into the soft toe of his shoe, making him stumble.

He falls, catching himself on one palm while the other remains on the gun, even with the barrel pointed at him. The men flanking him rush forward, but he jerks his chin from side to side, waving them off.

"Doesn't seem wise to speak about another man's wife that way," I tell him in a low voice. "Especially when you don't know how that man might react."

"I will kill you," he grits through clenched teeth.

A few people waiting in line at the club entrance are watching, so I'm careful to lower my voice in case anyone is recording. Part of me knows that's inevitable, but self-defense will be much easier to spin if they don't hear our conversation or know what sparked it.

Lowering my mouth to his ear, I press the barrel into him. Right between his ribs. I don't let it rest, instead driving it so it wedges between the protective anatomy, separated by his clothing and layers of skin.

"I'd advise not making idle threats," I whisper, reveling in the gasp of air that escapes him as my hand shoves deeper. "One day, you'll meet someone who doesn't take kindly to inaction, and he might not let you leave without a hole in your stomach."

Ripping myself away, I get to my feet, the soles of my shoes loud as they scrape against the concrete sidewalk. Vitus's breaths come in harsh beats, pounding out of his puffed chest as he glares at me. His men come over, hauling him up by the armpits, eyeing me with disdain I normally don't see outside the courtroom.

It feeds the sick, depraved parts of me. Indulges some darkness that otherwise remains dormant.

When a valet driver pulls my BMW around, I climb behind the wheel and take note of the address Zephyr sent, wondering if I should be concerned about the creature that tonight seems to have freed from somewhere deep inside of me.

But I type the street into the GPS anyway, no longer in the mood to think about anything other than my runaway bride.



“WELL, I’LL BE HONEST,” Palmer says slowly, almost as if he’s carefully considering each word before he speaks it. “This does make a lot of sense.”

Lenny gives him a look, her mouth falling open as she tucks a skinny paintbrush behind her ear. Their faces take up side-by-side squares on my computer monitor with a tiny one reflecting me in the bottom right corner, and I glance up, peering out into the hall through the glass wall of my office to make sure no one’s trying to eavesdrop.

Not that I can be certain my assistant isn’t just around the corner with a pad of paper and pen, waiting to take notes as if this were some sort of indictment and not a regularly scheduled group video call.

Although, with me having just dropped the sudden news of my engagement, it’s beginning to feel a lot like a sentencing.

“How do you figure it makes sense?” my sister asks. “In what world does Cassius Reed Primrose being *engaged* even skim the bottom of the sanity chart?”

“Well, you know, he never wants to go home with anyone. Or be set up,” Palmer notes.

“Call me crazy,” I mutter, neither of them acknowledging me at this point. I absently flip through the venire sent over by the sheriff’s office, scanning potential jurors for pertinent biases in the Citium case.

“Now, we know why.”

Lenny scoffs at Palmer’s words, moving her phone so the camera is propped up a foot away.

She's in the living room of the beach house she shares with her fiancé, and I glance past her to the blue-gray walls and the ajar French doors overlooking the seagrass and ocean.

It's been months since I stepped foot on Aplana Island, and watching her now fills me with a small pit of regret. Not big enough to spur me into action, but enough to grate on my nerves anyway.

A small wooden easel and canvas sit before her, and she reaches for a new, thicker brush, dipping it into a jar of light-orange paint.

I watch as the bristles connect with the white linen fabric, spreading color in fluid, long strokes. Longing stretches from my chest to the scene as Lenny's face softens slightly, her soul bleeding into her art.

Once upon a time, I knew what that felt like.

Dropping that brush into a red Solo cup, she plucks another from a leather satchel, this time opting for a sky blue. "It just seems fishy to me, is all. You can't blame a girl for being concerned."

"I can actually." Cocking my head to one side, I narrow my eyes at her. "And I do. *Buried body* clause, swan."

Her dark brows quirk. "Did you kill someone?"

Palmer leans into his camera.

Groaning, I prop my elbows on my desk, shove my glasses up my forehead, and drive the heels of my hands into my eyes. "For fuck's sake, does no one know what a metaphor is? Just because you've invoked the clause for less than magnanimous reasons doesn't mean there's blood on my hands."

"You could just tell us to mind our own business," Palmer grumbles, unaware of what we're even talking about. He knows of the clause, but not to the extent that Lenny and I do.

"Cash is our business."

"Fine." I adjust my glasses, sitting back in my chair. "Can you two just accept that maybe I haven't been absolutely forthcoming with every aspect of my life in the past and that I'm trying to make up for it now by letting you in before I change shit forever?"

They purse their lips.

"Fine," Lenny mocks, and in the distance, I hear a door creak open, my hackles rising as footsteps echo through the room she's in. "When do we get to meet her?"

“Meet whom?” a gruff English voice asks, and in seconds, Jonas Wolfe is filling the camera with his wild, dark brown curls and piercing violet eyes. He bends, giving a guarded smile and a half-salute when he notices who Lenny is speaking to before turning toward her and cupping her jaw in his hands.

I grind my teeth together, irritated with the interruption, and I look away just before he brings his lips to hers. Palmer snickers, likely at my total discomfort, and I clear my throat when a low moan breaks the sudden silence.

“Sorry, mate,” Jonas says, and I glance back to see him wiping Lenny’s bottom lip with his thumb before licking whatever residue off and pulling away. “Just can’t get enough of her. You know how it is, I’m sure.”

He leaves through the side of the screen, and I stare at my sister’s flushed cheeks. My brows knit together as her flush turns fuchsia, the reality of what he just said settling in.

“I might have texted him as soon as you said you were getting married,” she admits, resuming her painting.

“Okay, I have to go.” Moving my hand to the mouse, I swing the cursor over the red End button. “Thanks for the support.”

“Whoa, wait a second!” Palmer shakes his phone. “Are you gonna tell Mama?”

“No.”

Click.

As if that self-righteous bitch has any right to know what’s going on in my life.

Not when she ditched us, heading back to Savannah less than five minutes after they lowered my father’s empty grave into its plot. And certainly not when she made no effort to contest the will he’d left behind, bequeathing the Primrose fortune—outside of the nest eggs set aside for her, Lenny, and Palmer—to me.

Leaving me to deal with the guilt over being the sole heir and unsure of how to break that fact to my siblings. Not to mention, I’m still unable to even the playing field by gifting them cash or assets since my father did a fantastic job, legally binding the inheritance to me and ensuring that if it left me, it would be seized.

I’m still not even sure where he had amassed the billions. At the time of his death, my father was purportedly in extreme debt to the mafia, and it

was no secret that he was desperate. Yet the funds padding my accounts and the properties leased in my name beg to differ.

Shutting down the computer, I close the venire and shove it into the safe behind my desk, swiping my phone and shrugging into my coat. The outside air is particularly chilly for a late September afternoon, the breeze picking up when I step out of Cupid & Associates a few moments later.

I turn west, my gaze landing on a tall, shadowy building off in the distance. When I first swung by last week, she wasn't there, not that I was at all surprised; if it was easy for my assistant to find, I'm certain the location had already been on Vitus's radar, and she would have been stupid to have gone there, knowing he'd be looking for her.

Word on the street is that Vitus is out of town though after receiving an anonymous tip regarding his parents' whereabouts in Montreal. Something about a networking opportunity and moving illegal jewels through some pig farm upstate.

And I'll bet my little quarter-billion-dollar bride thinks she's safe. A beautiful nightmare, wrapped in spandex, expensive jewelry, and a snarky attitude, living her life as if she belongs to no one.

But she doesn't know who sent Vitus away.

Or that I have no intentions of setting her free.



A SINGLE FLICKERING light provides bare minimum visibility into the dilapidated lobby. There's an old ticket window against the far wall, separating the two halls on either side of it that lead to different auditoriums. Tables sit overturned with chairs hanging from their edges, and piles of trash and dust litter the corners of the area, creating a repulsive smell and film in the air.

When I was younger, Palmer and I used to fuck around in this theater when we came to the city. Even back then, it was lackluster.

Now, it looks like the remnants of a war-torn country, and I can't fathom why Ariana would want to rehearse here rather than at any of the numerous

architecturally sound institutions in the city.

Passing the ticket window, I take the hall on the right, squinting through to find theater three. The door is open, soft classical music playing from a speaker somewhere inside, and I round the corner slowly, doing my best not to draw attention to myself.

My feet carry me to the back row of cushioned seats, though I do my part to stick to the shadows as I take one of them. Slinking down as low as I can get, I focus my attention on the stage as a young woman takes it, keeping her back toward me until the score begins.

The gentle notes of Tchaikovsky's "Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy" fill the darkened auditorium, and I find myself mesmerized as everything seems to suddenly come to life with an audience.

Though *audience* might be a generous term, considering I'm the only one here and this is hardly a show fit for public discretion.

She starts slow, stiff and unpracticed, as though warming up to the number. A glide of her hips as she shuffles across the stage, then the flicker of her pointed feet against the polished floor and a sweeping of her long legs in wide circles.

Her movements are borderline pornographic, the motion of her delicate, feminine frame like wax drizzling over me.

Clad in a short-sleeved pink leotard that contrasts with her tan skin and a pair of frayed slippers, she twirls and kicks for each crescendo and decrescendo. Her arms come up, meeting atop the chestnut bun on her head, and then curl back down in front of her pelvis, and she arches into the motion, keeping her chin pointed outward at all times.

Pure, unadulterated beauty. Such a rare sight to behold in this life that doing so now feels sacrilegious.

But I have never been one to indulge in divine worship anyway.

I much prefer worldly pleasures.

She leaps across the stage, alternating between leading with her left and right legs. On a turn, she hooks her foot on the edge of the stage and seems to lose balance; I sit forward, gripping the armrests until my knuckles blanch, waiting to see if she falls or rights herself.

Effortlessly, she arches her spine and scoops back into position, the serious look on her face shifting for a single moment. A small flash of fear splicing across the angular planes, extinguished before anyone would even notice.

But I saw it, and I watched her stifle it. Fear doesn't dim with this woman; it's smothered, as if there were simply no room in her body for the emotion at all.

It's *captivating*.

I don't even notice at first when she stops dancing, propped on the tips of her toes as she stares out at the empty audience.

Empty, except for me.

The air is still for a heartbeat—one I feel throbbing in my throat, low and unsteady, like a guitar string plucked in slow motion.

She doesn't say anything.

I think she likes being watched.

Nothing comes from my mouth either.

I like watching.

Part of me wonders if she's been aware of my presence this entire time because she doesn't look at all surprised. More resolute, as if I've simply met her expectations instead of rising above and beyond them.

She drops to the flats of her feet, arms hanging limp at her sides. Another second passes, the silence tangling in the rafters, before she spins and slips backstage.

Reaching up, I slide my glasses from the bridge of my nose and tuck them into my coat pocket. Then, I follow after her.

Taking the stairs, I walk in the direction she disappeared in. Light glows through a doorway at the end of the hall, and I move carefully, stepping over buckets of paint and discarded props as I approach.

Ariana's seated before a lit vanity that sits on top of a shabby trunk, pulling bobby pins from her hair. It begins to unravel in thick sections, blocking my immediate view of her reflection in the mirror.

"I was starting to think maybe you'd gotten a refund, *Counselor*," she says when I'm fully inside.

I'm not sure why, but the way her lips twist around that word, that nickname, makes the blood boil deliciously beneath the surface of my skin.

My hand extends backward, gripping the doorknob and pulling it shut behind me. "Not big on calculating returns, to be honest. I just live with my mistakes."

She rolls her big, glossy eyes. "How gallant."

"Not really." I move slowly, inching closer. The scent of her perfume cascades in invisible waves around me, notes of jasmine and clementines

clinging to the air and invading my senses. “Just proves that I’m a selfish man.”

“How so?”

“I’d rather live with a massive debt than admit I was a bit hasty in making a purchase.”

A swallow works through her, bobbing up and down her slender neck. She sets the last of her pins on the pink vanity counter, freeing her hair; it tumbles over, shimmering bright against the bare, tanned skin of her sharp, drawn-back shoulders.

“You could just exchange me,” she offers, finally lifting her eyes to mine in the mirror. “I’m sure Vitus has something you’d like more.”

A smile threatens the muscles of my mouth. “I’m not sure you understand how these auctions work, Ms. Ricci. I don’t think exchanges are common practice.”

“Right, and there’s never been an exception to any rule.”

Stopping just behind her, I grind my teeth together until I’m certain the interior ridges have been razed. She’s virtually flawless, all tender, exposed flesh and soft, feminine curves with the exception of the light scabs lining the middle of her throat.

Evidence of the collar that kept her in place at last week’s auction.

My hand comes up of its own volition, reaching around her front. She watches, unflinching, as I drag my fingers over the small divots of tough, reddened skin, then down the slope of her shoulder.

I’ve never touched a woman like this before.

Never had the desire to do so.

And yet it’s as if I’m driven now by some unnatural force, incapable of keeping myself away. As if I need to feel the residue left from that fateful night in order to accept it in my brain once and for all.

Her skin is buttery smooth as I glide over it. My thumb hooks in the sleeve of her leotard, and both of us just stare at the fabric as it stretches with my knuckle, revealing more of her as it retreats.

“Your ex-fiancé no longer has anything that appeals to me,” I tell her. “It might be unconventional and not exactly what you were hoping for, but you *will* be my wife. I’ve already got your signature on the official documentation. I’ve just been giving you space to warm up to the idea.”

“Why?” She blinks up at me, curiosity lightening her features. “What do you get out of this? You’re not even *from* this world. Why would you ever

want to join it?”

“It’s not about joining. I’m merely preventing a monopoly of underground power that would certainly disrupt the fabric of our city, and taking the money and power and redistributing them to the people.”

And preventing anyone else from having you.

I don’t add that part though, even as it bounces around the recesses of my brain, a painful reminder. It doesn’t matter anyway—just because I have her in my possession now doesn’t mean I’ll *have* her.

Not in that way.

I suspect sex would complicate not only the mechanics of the relationship, but likely also distract from my overall goal of seizing the Boston underground’s chain of power and exploiting it just to prove that I can.

With that thought, my hands fall away from her, and I move back a single step, putting a sliver of distance between us. The sleeve hangs limp on her shoulder, and she narrows her eyes, turning slowly around on the cushioned stool.

“For how long?” she asks.

I shrug. “As long as it takes. I get Ricci Inc., and you get your alibi whenever someone questions your whereabouts of the night the Tallericos disappeared. The marriage license is backdated, and I’ve got official witness testimony drawn up, confirming our union and subsequent out-of-town honeymoon during the time they went missing. Just in case.”

It all sounds standard boilerplate really, but I’m still not certain she’ll take me up on the offer. Not that she has a choice, but it would be easier to do this if she was willing.

Her knees knock into my shins, and then she pushes into a standing position, keeping her gaze locked on mine. One hand comes up, tugging the pink cotton down more, until she’s able to bend her elbow and slide that arm from the sleeve.

My tongue thickens against the roof of my mouth as she mimics the same movement on the other side, freeing herself from the confines of her costume. I watch, rapt, at the edges of my vision as she slips her thumbs inside the neckline, then begins pulling it down.

The soft, blurry shape of her breasts comes into semi-view next, though still, I don’t dare look for real. Their silhouettes look heavy, rising and

falling with each staccato breath that escapes her, and she doesn't even stop there.

"So... this has nothing to do with it?" she prompts, arching a delicate brow. "This isn't what you want?"

I shake my head, and she makes a little sound of disbelief, bending slightly to continue exposing her body to me. Her stomach is next, the flat expanse of flesh taunting me, and then her hips and the paradise between them, pink and ripe and flushed, like the curve of her cheeks.

An ache spreads like wildfire across my jaw, flames threading in the roots of my teeth as I resist the urge to look.

Ariana's tights and leotard pool at her feet, and she steps out of the pile, pressing herself into me. Her nipples, hard like diamonds, sear through the material of my dress shirt, and she pushes her hair over one shoulder, dropping her chin and fluttering her long lashes at me.

"If this was all you wanted," she says, voice raspy, gripping my wrist in one hand and bringing it up so my fingers graze the underside of her breast, "I'd have given it to you for free."

My fingers don't move, even as she continues the forced exploration. "Is that so?"

She nods, letting out a little gasp when my thumb scrapes over a nipple. My stomach drops, anxiety weaseling its way into my bones.

"You should've followed me that night at the club," she whispers, rising up on her tiptoes so her words ghost over my lips. "I might've let you push me up against the wall outside, slide your big hands under that tiny, tight minidress, and have your way with me."

Jesus Christ. Part of me can almost feel the memory, as if she'd gone back and altered the timeline and replanted the sensation of my cock inside of her in my head instead.

"Ah, but you said you don't cheat."

Something flashes in her hazel eyes—a memory or perhaps that latent fear she refuses to allow to take root inside of her. Whatever the case, it's gone before I can decipher it, and she's spreading my fingers and curling them around her tit.

"I *don't* cheat," she confirms, making me squeeze her tight. Her skin is soft, the tissue heavy, and I'm so fucking tempted to look or give in. "But it's kind of canceled out if you're already being cheated on, don't you think?"

Her words are oddly hollow, and I consider Vitus's remark the night of the auction about Ariana owing him something. His unfaithfulness certainly seems to be no secret to anyone in the underworld, so did she retaliate, and now, he feels they have some sort of score to settle?

Or is it merely a possession thing? He wants Ariana because of what she symbolizes—sex, money, power—and isn't appreciative when someone comes in and takes it from right under his nose.

I suppose that makes us more similar than I care for.

"Besides, if you and I are *practically* already married, sex is expected. Right?" She shifts, shoving her thigh between mine, and I swallow a grunt that erupts in my throat as she presses into my erection. "So, just consider it your exchange, except without having to go through the official channels."

"Your father should've brought you in to broker deals more often. Bet he wouldn't be in prison if you'd offered this to the DA."

She scoffs, trailing her free hand up the front of my suit. "Like I'd use my powers to benefit him."

"Bad blood?"

Her jaw clenches, a shadow forming in her gaze. She forces my hand to squeeze harder, gripping tighter. My fingers buzz, desperate to take over.

"You're really inquisitive, you know that?"

"Well, I'm a lawyer. That's kind of my job."

"And I'm standing here, naked, letting you feel me up. Maybe figure out how to clock out."

When she finally releases me, I let my hand fall to the indent of her waist, smoothing my thumb over a short half-inch section of skin. My pulse throbs, vibrating beneath my fingerprint, and then I suck in a deep breath and move back a step.

Confusion knits her brows together, and alarm flashes briefly across her face. "What are you doing?"

Clearing my throat, I ignore the way my cock presses against my slacks as I bend down, retrieving her discarded clothing. I extend my arm as I stand back up, holding the costume out for her and keeping my eyes trained solely on her face.

"We have things to do," I say, not waiting for her to reach out and take the clothes before I cross my arms over my chest. "An official announcement to send out, legal documents to sign, and a honeymoon to

concoct. Whatever else you're offering for the duration of this arrangement, I'm not interested."

The lie burns as it scrapes through my esophagus and across my tongue, but I force it out anyway.

Truth is, I'm more interested than I want to be, and I have no clue what I would ever do with someone like Ariana.

She's wicked. Sin wrapped in a beautiful, angelic human form that I fear I'd never be quite sated with after one taste.

So, I won't allow indulgence at all.

She catches the clothes before they fall, narrowing her eyes. "You're not interested."

"I'm not."

For several seconds, she just stares at me, unblinking. I can tell that isn't a sentence she's used to hearing, and I'm not sure she fully believes it either, which is concerning. If she put real effort in, I'm certain she would wear down my resistance, and then all of this would have been for nothing.

Finally, her face becomes pensive, and she tilts her head to one side, studying me. "What's in this for me?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Well, you get those things you said—money, power. I don't really know why you want Ricci Inc. since it's kind of a shit show these days, but, hey, maybe you know something I don't." She shrugs. "So, what do I get—besides the alibi I'm not really sure I even need? What's my incentive to cooperate instead of just running again?"

A small, maniacal smirk plays at the corners of my mouth, pushing them up so the curved edges etch into my face. It's the first time I've even sort of smiled in her presence, and I can tell it catches her off guard. She frowns, covering herself with the leotard and stockings.

"Well," I say, cocking a brow, "what do you want?"



YOU WILL NOT GET AWAY with this.

Swiping left, I clear the text from the unknown number on my phone, rolling my eyes at Vitus's dramatics. For someone who cares so much about the end of our relationship, he hasn't even once come to fight for me.

I pause my finger over the message app, tempted to see if one of my sisters has tried to contact me. I haven't heard from Elena or Stella since that night at the club despite seeing Kal twice, and part of me wonders how worried they could actually be without doing anything to quell their fears.

Then again, maybe the tracking is enough. Maybe, so long as my GPS continues moving, they assume I'm fine.

Ignoring the urge to disappoint myself, I go back to the article I was scanning.

Cassius Reed Primrose. Age thirty-one, born the seventh of September in Savannah, Georgia, to real estate mogul Thomas Primrose and 1990 Miss Georgia Runner-Up Erin Farmer-Primrose.

Senior associate with Cupid & Associates, a multinational law firm specializing in the business and environmental fields.

Net worth: unknown.

Blowing out a breath, I minimize the Wikipedia page as the door to the private restroom swings open, not wanting to get caught doing recon.

What you don't know can kill you, and I never want to give anyone that power.

Cash. The irony of his namesake reflecting his supposed interests doesn't escape me. I just wish I'd known it before I agreed to go through with this wedding.

Not that I'm sure it would've changed the outcome. For whatever reason, the man seems hell-bent on dragging me down the aisle, and while I would argue his intentions, the bite of his rejection just twenty-four hours ago still reverberates in my chest.

It isn't something I'm used to, especially when presenting myself on a silver platter for a man or woman's pleasure—I've never had a preference, so long as he or she could make me forget real life for a bit. Now, I'm not really sure how to reconcile Cash's resistance, but I'd be lying if I said it hasn't thrown me off a bit.

"Ariana?"

A tall, slender woman with shimmering brown skin and a head of black curls steps into the room with a dry-cleaning bag draped over one arm. She shuts the door behind her, locking it with a manicured hand, and anxiety pulses in the pit of my stomach.

"Zephyr Corentin," she offers, walking over with her palm out. I glance at it from where I'm sitting at the bathroom sink, and she seems unbothered by my apprehension, giving me a warm smile. "Mr. Primrose's legal assistant. He asked me to make sure you were on schedule for the ceremony."

I take her hand, wrapping mine around it gingerly. "Does he often send you on such personal outings?"

“Well, no. A lot of my time is spent doing research and meeting with clients he doesn’t want to deal with. Which is most of them actually. Cash isn’t really fond of people, nor is he the trusting sort. So, enter me.”

She smiles again, releasing my hand, and annoyance pricks at my fingertips. I’m not sure why, but her answer doesn’t satisfy me, leaving more questions in its wake.

Just how much does he trust this woman?

Do they share secrets?

Does she know our wedding is a farce?

Leaning away from her, I scan the length of her body, noting the business-casual mauve pantsuit and the folder tucked under one arm. Then, my eyes fall on the dry-cleaning bag, and curiosity prevails over stale, misplaced jealousy.

Seeming to notice where my attention has veered, she snaps her fingers and shoves the bag into my arms. “Your dress,” she says, and I crack a grin, lowering the zipper. Her eyes widen as luxurious fabric comes into view. “Oh, wow. Has Cash seen this?”

I shake my head, smoothing my fingers over the material. My one request yesterday when he asked what I wanted was for as traditional a wedding as we could muster. If nothing else, I wanted the party I’d been planning my entire life, the one I would have had to sacrifice parts of to satisfy Vitus’s desires if I’d gone through with our engagement.

Cash acquiesced, but on the condition that it could take no more than half a day to plan. I’m not sure why things with him are so time sensitive, but regardless, all the necessary contacts were already in my phone, and I had no budget limitations.

It’s amazing how much you can accomplish when you shove enough money at a problem.

Putting the finishing touches on my makeup, I follow Zephyr out of the bathroom to St. Leonard’s business office, which I’ve turned into a makeshift dressing room.

“So, you’re a dancer?” she asks, clasping her hands behind her back as I shimmy out of my lounge shorts and tank top.

“I was. Ballet and tap, but mostly the former.”

“Past tense.” Nodding, she purses her lips, glancing around the room. Despite the friendliness she exuded before, now, the girl seems tense, and I

can't help wondering if she's only just realizing who she's standing here with. "What do you do now?"

Part of me wants to correct her notion that ballet is in my past because even if I stopped dancing forever, it would never actually leave me. The seeds of things you care for don't stop sprouting just because you can't water them daily; they're far more resilient than that.

Still, part of my public persona is leaning into the fact that I *officially* retired from ballet when I was eighteen. But I don't have to tell her *why* I left.

Clearing my throat, I pop open the top of a big, square velvet box with an amethyst drop necklace and matching stud earrings inside. I slide the heirloom out, bringing it up to admire the purple stone against my skin in the mirror.

"I'm between things right now," I tell Zephyr, deciding that's the safest option. Not to mention the most honest.

The business degree I got from Boston University two years ago sits somewhere in the attic of my nonna's apartment, collecting dust along with a half-dozen pairs of ruined pointe shoes and the skeletons of my past.

"Just figuring things out?"

"Something like that."

She smiles, and I catch the reflection, letting it thaw the icy edges of my heart for a beat. The jealousy I felt before keeps the rest of the organ warm though, reminding me she could turn at any moment.

I secure the amethyst around my neck, then put in the studs, tucking my hair behind my ears as I angle my face in the mirror. Moving to the dry-cleaning bag, I unzip the garment the rest of the way, and Zephyr shuffles over to assist me in removing it from the plastic, then laying the bejeweled train so it fans in a half-circle around the back of the dress.

Stepping inside, I bend and pull the bodice over my hips, using my arm to cover my breasts as I take off my bra. The sleeveless corset clings to me, tailored for a perfect fit, pushing my boobs up to cradle the amethyst and jutting out at the waist in full ballgown fashion.

Zephyr's fingers are cool, grazing my lower back as she leans in to lace me up. A spark of gratitude flares in my chest, warmth radiating toward her that I want to capitalize on, but the moment's over before I have a chance.

Guilt at my earlier sentiment bubbles inside me like an overflowing cauldron of black emotions, and I watch as she moves away, giving me a

double thumbs-up.

My eyes threaten to narrow, distrust overriding the guilt. No stranger is this kind and inviting. At least, not in my experience. I keep waiting for her to demand something of me, or to take advantage of the fact that no one else is here with me.

“Well, you look...” She trails off, her brown eyes almost reverent as they trace over my form.

I swallow, silently filling the end of the sentence. *Bloated. Pale. Like a prisoner being led to their death.*

It’s been years since I’ve even spoken to the woman, yet I hear Mamma’s insults as if she were standing here, whispering them herself.

Zephyr crouches down, adjusting my train with one hand. “You look beautiful. Cash isn’t going to know what hit him.”

Her compliment sends a blush sprawling across my cheeks, and I bow my head to hide it. A few moments later, she excuses herself to go check on the priest, and I suck in a deep breath to try and calm my nerves.

This is really not that different from what I planned when I was going to marry Vitus, except it won’t be the same groom waiting at the altar. The years I spent getting to know Vitus, learning his quirks and dislikes and figuring out how to manipulate him into doing what I wanted, are now somewhat wasted.

I’ll have to start over with Cash. Figure out what makes him tick.

Something inside of me tenses, afraid that I might not be able to.

Afraid I won’t survive this.

Still, I finish pinning the sheer, hooded veil in my hair and situating each curl particularly on my shoulders, then head for the nave, where the congregation normally gathers for service.

Sparkling black lace covers my shoulders and arms from the veil and spreads out around me with each step I take, like evil bleeding out into the sacred halls. It fills the entirety of my peripheral vision, masking the marble floor and floral wallpapers I grew up between.

The doors to the nave are closed, and I pause just outside of them, gathering my nerves. This isn’t exactly how I imagined this day—didn’t think I’d be getting married all by myself—but I suppose there are worse things in life.

I’m tempted to go back and grab my phone and invite my sisters. They’d be upset, but at least I wouldn’t feel so fucking alone, like someone

stole the important organs from the shell of my body and replaced them with frozen air.

But I don't, reminding myself that they haven't called or texted in weeks. If they wanted to be here, they could've reached out.

And it's not like we actually got to attend Elena's wedding. Or Stella's high school graduation. So, why should they get to be here with me now?

My hand reaches out, just grazing the bronze door handle, before someone grabs my shoulders from behind and shoves me into an alcove to the side.

Papà's dark eyes find mine as he whirls me around, pushing me into the wall.

"What the hell are you *doing* here?" I hiss, glancing over his shoulder to ensure we're still alone. As if he'd ever take that chance.

"What, you think I would miss my own daughter's wedding? I've been dreaming of this day since you were a little girl, Ari."

A scoff of disbelief dies in my throat. "How did you even get out?"

"It's temporary. I only have an hour, and there are two officers just outside, waiting for me." He leans back, lifting the pant of his suit to reveal a clunky monitor wrapped around his ankle. "But I've come to give you my blessing, *cara mia*."

I swallow over the baseball lodged in my throat. "But I'm not marrying Vitus—"

He waves his hand. Reaching into his suit jacket, he plucks out a small bouquet of red roses, violets, and some pink flowers with wide petals that curl up at the ends. Taking my hands in his, he gives me a smile, and it feels so completely foreign, coming from him—so warm and soft, which I've *never* seen him be—that I just stand there, staring for several beats of my heart.

"Your sisters aren't here, right?"

I shake my head, embarrassment staining my cheeks, but he just nods.

"Good, good. They don't need to be. In fact, I want you to keep this from them. At least for a little while. Enjoy the honeymoon phase while you can."

Tucking the bouquet between my fingers, he pushes them into my chest, then cradles the underside of my jaw with rough, callous hands. They're hot to the touch, and I try to pull back, concerned that he has a fever, but he holds tight.

“The ways I have failed you in this life are incalculable,” he says, voice gruff.

Acid burns in my stomach, melting my muscles.

“If I could take you out of this predicament, this monster’s reach, I would.”

I don’t say anything because why *can’t* he take me out of it? The entire reason I’m marrying someone against my will is because he coerced me into a relationship with Vitus in the first place, which gave Cash the opportunity to step in.

If Rafael Ricci wanted to stop all of this, even from prison, he could.

That’s the problem.

He doesn’t really want to. Just wants to ease some of his guilt by giving my pretty words, as if they’ll make up for everything.

So why am I falling for it?

“My father didn’t teach me how to apologize. I’m afraid I wouldn’t know where to begin. All I know is that if I could do it over, I wouldn’t waste a single second of my time with you. Would try more to keep our family together and instill those values in you my mother always wished I had.”

The sincerity in his tone reaches down my throat, uprooting the poisonous flowers planted inside of me by years of neglect and hatred. From growing up in the shadows of my sisters and *la famiglia* and never feeling seen or good enough unless I was onstage.

It dissolves my resentment from giving up ballet, sprinkling the diseased emotion like soft, dewy rain. For a moment in time, I believe my father when he looks at me like he loves me.

I believe there’s regret in his heart for the way our family turned out. For how *I* turned out and the things that had happened to me right under his nose.

Or maybe it’s wishful thinking. Maybe, before I cross this chapter of my life and step into an entirely new one, I just want to believe him.

For once, I want to have the benefit of the doubt and be able to extend it to him.

I’m a child again, standing outside the door to his office while he blows out a rat’s kneecaps, waiting to show Papà the glissade I just learned, knowing it’s the only way I can get his attention. My heart breaks with each muffled shot inside, and the bloodcurdling screams of a wrongly accused

man are what I'll hear each time my foot switches from fifth position for the rest of my life.

Yet I stand there, still waiting, because anything from Papà has to be better than what I get from Mamma.

And now, I'm here, accepting whatever it is he's willing to give even if, deep in my bones, I know he doesn't mean it.

Can't mean it.

He sucks in a deep breath as the organ inside the nave begins, signaling my cue. Bending, he gives me a kiss on each of my cheeks, then pulls back and stuffs his hands into his pockets.

"Take my advice, Ariana. Don't stop to smell the roses," he says, his gaze dipping for a second, his discomfort obvious. "The best seconds of your life pass by while you're enjoying the little moments. Keep your eyes on the bigger picture, if you do nothing else. That's how you'll make it through to the other side."

My brows furrow as he breaks off on some sort of tangent, and the organ music grows louder. More insistent. Clearing my throat, I tighten my fist around the bouquet and leave the alcove, gripping the door handle and pulling it open.

When Papà doesn't make a move to follow, I pause, frowning at him. "You're not coming?"

He shakes his head. "I'm afraid I need to get back."

His eyes slide past mine, and I see Cash at the altar, a dark silhouette against the mural painted on the vaulted ceiling above the pulpit. I don't think he can see Papà in the shadows, but a menacing look stitches itself into his eyebrows anyway.

"Well, I'd better get down there."

Papà doesn't say anything, and when I turn back, I notice he's already disappeared. Pain surrounds my heart, compressing until it feels like it might burst, but I ignore it and begin the solo march down the aisle anyway.

I focus on putting one foot in front of the other, reveling in the ornate beauty of the high, domed ceiling and the intricate gold-and-white archways above the pews. Since I was a little girl, I dreamed of getting married in this church. Back then, my sights were set a bit higher as far as the groom went, but I'll take what I can get for now.

Cash's expression flattens to its usual stoicism as I approach, and while it might make anyone else nervous, I latch on to the normalcy. A priest with

curly gray hair stands just beyond him, an open New American Bible in hand.

He gives an encouraging smile, and Cash moves toward me, removing the sheer black hood from where it obscures half of my face. My heart thumps erratically inside of my chest, and for a split second, I'm worried he might be able to hear it.

His rich, deep brown eyes gaze down at me through the lenses of his glasses as the priest begins his spiel about holy matrimony. I grip my flowers so tight that my hands begin to burn, an itch spreading across my palms that I'm not accustomed to.

My face grows hot under Cash's astute perusal; he doesn't look away for even a second, and I can feel my blood rising, flooding my face.

"What?" I mutter. "Do you not like the dress?"

"It's a bit morbid," he replies, voice just as low.

The priest continues, off in his own little world.

"Felt appropriate to me."

One of his brows arches, and he tilts his head. His gaze dips, searing through me as it sweeps over my form before returning to my face with a tinge of heat that was absent before.

"Wait until you see what's underneath." I smirk, sliding my feet closer to him. Because apparently, I've yet to learn my lesson.

His throat works, and he steals a look at the priest. "What's underneath?"

My smirk widens. "Nothing."

The light-orange rings around his pupils seem to ignite, coming to life with my taunt. It softens the memory of his rejection, proving that no matter what his mouth claims, his body won't deny me.

Not forever anyway.

"I understand you don't have rings to exchange?" the priest prompts, and Cash shakes his head just once. Continuing, the priest turns a page in his Bible, then slams it shut. "Then, I suppose, by the power vested in me by the state of Massachusetts, in the presence of God and the witness of" — he pauses, glancing at the empty room— "the spirit of friends and family, it is my great privilege to pronounce you husband and wife. Cassius, you may kiss your bride."

Nerves buzz across the bow of my lips, and I dart my tongue out to wet them. I feel a little dizzy, my vision swimming as I move forward, eager to

move on to the next step of all of this.

Cash's frown deepens, and a little piece of me deflates inside because I was half-hoping I could get something more from him during the ceremony. Like the lopsided smile I got yesterday, but he seems determined to get through all of this without a shred of outward emotion.

"Could we have a moment?" he asks the priest, who relents with a nod, stepping off the altar and heading toward an exit off the side of the room.

When we're alone, he moves, shifting as he rests his right hand on my left hip, drawing me in. The breath squeaks out of me, heat spreading through me like ivy. My pulse scatters, traveling south as he slides his hand up, tilting my head back.

My lips part on a reflex as my eyes drift close. Waiting.

Inside of my heels, my toes curl against the soles. My breathing grows labored, escaping me in soft, mangled gasps.

He strokes my bottom lip, and I suck in air, tasting the mint of his toothpaste.

Ready for more.

But instead of feeling his mouth crash to mine, he rips the flowers from my fist, tossing them onto the floor beyond us. Startled, my eyes fly open, wide and uncertain. His hand slams down over my lips, the pressure so harsh that my teeth cut into the flesh there, flooding my mouth with the taste of copper.

Our position traps one arm at my side, and I jerk back, trying to get away.

My expression hardens, matching the intensity of his.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" he rasps, grabbing my hand and wrenching it into view.

The valley of skin between my thumb and index finger is red and patchy with almost-translucent pockets bubbling on the surface.

What the hell?

"Poison is cute," Cash says without removing himself from me. "Unoriginal but cute. I'll admit though, I expected more from you, my little nightmare."

The nickname, sudden and unfounded, makes me bristle.

He doesn't let me free to speak, but I try anyway because I'm as confused as he is. "I didn't—"

“Shh,” he coos, and now, my nerves are firing on all cylinders for entirely different reasons.

Alarm trickles into my being, and I pull back, trying to dislodge myself from his grip again.

“Don’t stop to smell the roses,” Papà said.

I didn’t realize he’d meant it literally.



ARIANA SITS on the edge of the hospital exam table, swinging her legs back and forth while a nurse takes her vitals. The swelling in her face has gone down considerably since we left St. Leonard's, though her hands, where direct contact with the oleander was, are still a vicious red and blistered all over.

She looks wildly uncomfortable. Since our arrival at the ER, she's been incapable of sitting still for more than a few seconds, rubbing her fingernails together and looking everywhere but at me.

Guilt, if I've ever seen it.

“Hold still and take several slow, deep breaths,” the nurse says, donning a stethoscope and pressing the diaphragm against her abdomen. “You’re sure you didn’t ingest any of the flowers? *Every* part of oleander is toxic, you know—the stems, the petals, even the sap.”

My little nightmare shakes her head, and a piece of hair falls from where she tucked it behind her ear. “I only touched it.”

The lace material of her dress scratches against the paper on the table as she shifts, leaning forward so the nurse can switch to her back. Our gazes lock with the change, and I study the planes of her face, committing the angles to memory so I can come back and analyze them later.

Lawyers are trained to read people. It helps when it comes to choosing jurors and can be the deciding factor when picking a defensive strategy.

Right now, my instincts are telling me to sweat her out. Ariana’s wound so tight that I don’t think it’ll take very much to wring a confession from her pretty little lips.

My eyes dip, sweeping over her plush mouth. Regret swims through my veins as I wish I’d gotten the chance to kiss her back at the church, if for nothing else than just to say I’d done it.

But one taste wouldn’t have been enough, and I would have compromised my position just to keep her looking at me like she wanted to swallow me whole.

I don’t think I’d mind if she did, and that’s a very big problem.

A nightmare of epic proportions—and not the kind that simply jars you from a light slumber. Ariana’s the kind that yanks you from a deep sleep with sharp talons, and then you spend the rest of your life looking over your shoulder, afraid of its return.

“Well, I’ll leave the official diagnosis to the doctor,” the nurse says, standing up and pocketing her equipment. She turns to look at me, as if I were the one with the ailment. “But your lungs sound great, Mrs. Primrose.”

Mrs. Primrose. Satisfaction pulses in my chest, and I meet Ariana’s glassy gaze with a smirk.

“That’s great news. I’d hate for anything to happen to my bride before we’ve even gone on our honeymoon.”

Ariana rolls her eyes, pressing a palm to the sequined corset of her dress. Doing so draws my attention down, and I grit my teeth as I watch her breasts rise and fall, nearly toppling out of the outfit.

She lifts her head, arching an eyebrow, and I sit up straighter in my chair.

“That would be terrible,” the nurse concurs, taking a soothing tone as she steps toward me, twirling a strand of strawberry-blonde hair around a finger. “Where are you taking her?”

I keep my gaze on the brunette. “It’s a surprise.”

The nurse sighs dreamily. “Ugh, *I* love surprises. Have you ever been to Barbados? It’s lovely this time of—”

Cutting off with a grunt, she snaps her head around, eyes narrowing into slits. Ariana’s leg pulls away from where it just connected with the back of the nurse’s knee, and she lets out a little gasp, feigning shock.

“Sorry,” she says, hand fluttering to her chest. “Leg spasm.”

The nurse jumps back into professional mode as the ER doctor finally makes his way in, and an hour and a half later, Ariana is discharged from the emergency room with bacterial ointment and an antihistamine.

She piles into the front of my BMW with an annoyed huff. I round the driver’s side, settling in against the black leather seat, just as she begins struggling with her dress, trying to rip it from her body.

I watch, silent, as she tries to reach the laced back of the corset, then gives up and does a deep dive beneath the massive skirt, attempting to pull it up over her body. Tears spring to her eyes as her frustration visibly grows, and I lean over the console, shoving her shoulder into the car door with one hand and reaching for the laces with the other.

She doesn’t say a word as I begin undoing the ties. My fingers work deftly, looping through each new level and pulling the silk material loose.

Each tug is punctuated by a short, staccato breath puffing from her lips, the evidence of which paints the inside of the window with condensation.

I yank harder. Her breaths fill the quiet air, labored as I work her free, each one sending a spark of electricity down the length of my spine. My cock kicks in my slacks, very interested in the barely audible sounds she’s making.

A soft moan comes from her throat, and my fingers dig into her shoulder. I get to the last tie, undoing it with a tremor working its way through me, and then I release her suddenly, like she just burst into flames.

Sagging against the door, she presses her forehead on the window. “I hate doctors.”

I don’t reply.

Don't care.

"My brother-in-law is one, and he's the only one I can tolerate. You should've brought me to him."

Amusement catches in my throat, softening the erection I sported mere seconds ago. "Have you told your family about us, Ariana?"

She sits up, chewing on her bottom lip without answering.

Nodding, I reach for the start button on the dash, fastening my seat belt. "I figured as much, since no one was at the church for you today. I'm not sure why you think I'd risk my life, bringing you to a doctor with a reputation for murder. Especially not after your assassination attempt failed."

"I wasn't trying to—" She cuts herself off, gritting her teeth. "Whatever. Believe what you want, *Counselor*."

The way she hurls that title, spitting it like venom she wishes would reach me, stirs up my previous irritation. My hand lashes out as I advance down the road, gripping her chin between two fingers.

"What am I supposed to believe, Little Nightmare?"

"Stop calling me that."

"Then, stop proving me right." I release her, and she growls under her breath, folding her arms across her chest. "Less than twenty-four hours in, and things are pretty grim, wouldn't you say?"

"Why don't you just give me back to Vitus?"

"No."

Her nostrils flare. "You want to stay married to someone you think tried to kill you?"

"I want you to shut up. Unless you're planning on telling me something worthwhile."

A couple of minutes pass, and she settles back in her seat, staring out the windshield as I turn onto a highway, heading for my apartment.

"When will I be able to get my stuff from my place?"

"Already taken care of."

She whips her head toward me. "What? You can't—you went through my shit?"

Glancing over at her, I see what appears to be genuine fear flash in her hazel eyes, which fix on the dashboard. She doesn't blink for a good thirty seconds, and her hands curl into fists in her lap, trembling slightly.

"Do you know if they got everything?"

The shrinking of her voice splits a cavern of concern open in my chest, though I try to ignore it because I refuse to let the performer in her pull one over on me.

“I have no idea. I had your belongings packed and delivered while we were at the church. I didn’t *go through* them. I’m not your father.”

“Aw, you don’t wanna be my daddy, Counselor?” She pushes her bottom lip out. Her mood swings are giving me whiplash. “Don’t wanna spank me? You could punish me for being bad and not feel so guilty about it.”

“I wouldn’t feel guilty.”

“No?” Unbuckling, she re-situates in her seat, propping her elbow on the console between us. Her hand falls to my knee, and she drags it up slowly, pressing the pad of her thumb into the tender muscle of my upper thigh. “Then, why are you holding back?”

“Because I’m not interested in that. In this.”

“Your body suggests otherwise.”

My knuckles whiten on the leather steering wheel, my fingers curling until they’re numb at the tips. She drifts higher, drawing every tendon in my body taut with red-hot liquid desire.

“Ariana.”

Leaning in, she brushes her hair over her shoulder. Her lips are wet, fiery, on the shell of my ear. “It’s okay. You don’t have to fight it. I’m your wife now. This is what I’m supposed to do for you.”

I’m only partially listening to what she says. When she reaches my cock, palming it from the outside, I almost floor the accelerator.

Stopping at the security gate to my building, I type in the code quickly and then make my way to the private parking garage.

We pull into my designated spot, and I shut the vehicle off, pushing her hand away.

“Strip,” I tell her, chest heaving.

Her eyes light up, and she hooks her fingers in the top of her dress, yanking it down. Completely uncaring that we’re in a public space and the potential to get caught is painfully near.

Maybe that’s what makes it so hot. The threat of discovery—of being watched while we sate some of our primal, baser urges—propels the forbidden, sending it cascading over us in imperceptible flames.

My throat tightens when her breasts pop free of the bodice, and I realize she meant what she said earlier about not having anything on underneath. They bounce, perky and round with dark pink peaks I want to feel pucker beneath my fingertips, and then she's arching her back and lifting her hips, letting the skirt fall to the floor.

Yesterday, when she bared herself before me, I didn't allow myself to look. Didn't want to indulge in such sins of the flesh before she was officially mine.

But now, she is.

Mine.

And I'm free to do with my wife as I fucking please.

Even if I don't know the first place to start.

As she kicks free of the lace and satin, she plants one foot on the floor. The skinny black heels and the amethyst necklace stay on, contrasting deeply with the flush of her skin. With the allergy shot she got at the ER, the blistering on her hands has gone down, and her fingers are their normal color again.

She leans back, and I track the movement, letting my gaze fall over her, cataloging every smooth plane, every scar, every freckle until I reach the feminine valley between her thighs. Her pussy glistens in the dull overhead lighting, and she reaches down with a thumb, spreading herself wide for my viewing pleasure.

Petal pink—just like that oleander flower and probably as toxic—and so goddamn perfect, practically begging for me to taste, and touch, and *fuck*. God, that desire rears up inside of me like a powerful storm surge, nearly drowning every ounce of resistance still trying to remain afloat.

"How do you want me?" she rasps, stroking herself slowly.

I watch, noting every motion that draws something from deep within her, committing it to memory. "Just like that."

The corners of her mouth turn down slightly. "You don't want to touch?"

A shiver moves across my skin, but I suppress it. I shake my head. "I want to watch you."

"Watch me?"

"Fuck yourself." I inhale, the scent of her arousal filling the car and sending my blood south. "Keep your hand between your thighs, right on that sweet pussy, and let me see what you look like when you come."

I don't even know what I'm saying, the depravity familiar in my head but foreign on my tongue. Still, she seems to like it, so I make a mental note of that and search inside of my brain for more.

Her lips part, her breaths growing shallow. My hand lifts, turning on another one of the overhead lights so I can see better. Crimson pours into her cheeks, her chest, creating hive shapes down the tops of her breasts.

My fingers ache as hers begin moving quicker, working her clit in small, circular motions.

"Feel good, Little Nightmare?"

She nods, frantic, her head falling back against the window as she lets out a breathy moan. "Incredible."

Arousal spirals through my chest, making it difficult for air to reach my lungs.

Jesus, she's beautiful. Bewitching in a way I didn't anticipate.

In a way that might complicate things.

"Spread wider," I snap, irritation spinning my words.

She obliges, picking up the pace.

"Now, imagine it's me playing with you. Bringing you to the edge of oblivion and refusing to let you fall off."

"Oh God."

"Imagine me kneeling over this console and taking you in my mouth. Letting my tongue explore every sodden, scorching inch of you."

"Oh fuck. Please, Cash, can you—"

"No. Now, slide your fingers inside."

Her eyes pop open, and she looks at me without lifting her head. "Huh?"

My patience wears thin, my control hanging by a loose thread. "*Inside, Ariana.* I want you to *really* fuck yourself. Pretend it's my cock and ride your hand until you're dripping all over it."

She blinks, apparently stunned by the newest command. Looking out the windshield, she seems to consider the fact that the parking garage isn't the most private place for this sort of thing, and I see a brief flicker of hesitation cross her features.

But then she grins, tongue swiping over her bottom lip. Fuck, I wish I'd kissed her at the church.

I wonder if she tastes as ravishing as she looks.

“It might be easier to pretend,” she says, shifting so she’s wide open, “if I got to see you too.”

“Yeah? You want to see my dick, so you can imagine it splitting you open? Fucking you until you’re so sore that you can’t walk or sit or even close your goddamn legs for weeks?”

Her teeth clamp down on her bottom lip, and she nods.

I’m tempted to deny her, but in truth, I want it as much as she does. Undoing the buttons on my slacks, I yank down the zipper and pull myself free. Just as I wrap my fist around the base, feeling it jerk to life with a single glance, she whimpers, pushing two fingers into her pussy.

Gritting my teeth, I tug at my length, timing each stroke with the pumping of her wrist. The lewd, wet sounds of her arousal caress my ears, spurring me on, and a guttural groan catches in my throat as release pounds up my spine, scratching its way into the vertebrae.

“God, I’m close,” she gasps, and I move my hand faster, watching her melt into the sensations like lava spilling down the side of a volcano.

“Yeah?”

“Yes.”

“Gonna come in the front seat of your husband’s car, where anyone might be secretly watching? Where he *is* watching, desperate to see if you scream?”

I lean over, breaking a cardinal rule when my hand snakes out, finding hers and forcing a third finger in with her other two. She sucks in a breath at the intrusion, but I remove myself before she can get used to the sensation, continuing to fist my cock until my head feels like it might explode.

Bringing my other hand up, I smear her arousal over her pretty lips, and she opens, taking the offending digit into her mouth. Sucks and swirls her tongue around it, and now, I’m imagining my dick in the place of her hand. How it’d feel for her to sink down, taking me in her tight, wet heat, and strangle an orgasm out of me.

“Do it, sweet girl. Come for your husband, and I won’t tell anyone just how deviant you are. It can be our little secret.”

“What if I don’t want it to be a secret?” she taunts. “I do like the attention after all, and this certainly gets the most.”

Flashes of her onstage at Anteros, being groped by strangers, spill across my vision, igniting a possession I’m not familiar with.

“I don’t care.”

Removing my finger, I glide down to her jaw, pushing her head so she's pinned against the window and unable to move. She keeps fucking herself, and so do I. I'm afraid this is a strange line I've crossed that we won't come back from, but I can't stop.

Don't want to stop.

"From now on, your filthy sins are mine to enjoy. No one else's."

She mewls, vibrating with pleasure, and my climax races up from the base of my spine, shooting through my limbs.

"Come, sweet girl. Just. Like. That. Soak the seat like you wish you were soaking my face."

She does, letting out a sound that is somewhere between a cry and a moan, uninhibited in the confines of the car. I grunt, spilling into my hand and working through the release as the corners of my vision blur.

Breathing hard, we slump back, and she withdraws with a wince. I reach into the console and pull out a tissue, wiping myself. When she wiggles her fingers for the same, I ignore her, tucking my dick into my pants and shoving open my door.

"Don't clean up."

Walking around to her side, I yank the handle, and she raises a hand to shield herself from the sudden sunlight.

"You want me to walk to your place like this?"

"I want you to remember how good you just came the next time you think about killing me."



CASH'S MOVERS put all of my things in one of the guest bedrooms, so the minute the elevator opens to the penthouse, I scramble through the foyer in search of them.

"You don't even know where you're going," he calls as I disappear down a hall, peeking into every door I come upon.

There are dozens of them, each leading to a room different from the last—a home office and gym, a laundry room, a den lined with heavy wooden bookshelves and a globe-shaped cart with a crystal decanter on top. I pass a few bedrooms, the cream-colored walls throughout the apartment and the

massive floor-to-ceiling windows making everything bigger and brighter than I was expecting.

Given the crummy, ancient penthouse I've been living in because my nonna signed its lease over to me, I suppose this is technically an upgrade. And it's definitely luxurious and put together, as if Cash opened the pages of an *Architectural Digest* and installed the first marble floor and custom gold Italian faucets he landed on.

There's a secluded spiral staircase at the end of a narrow hall in the back, and I disappear up it before my new husband can stop me. My wedding dress swishes at my feet, hastily put back on once I was summoned from the car earlier.

Furious warmth sears my cheeks as I think about what we just did in that parking garage. Not embarrassment exactly since I'm not unaccustomed to such trysts with virtual strangers.

But it was the first time I ever performed like *that* for someone.

And the first time I can ever remember enjoying it so much.

He barely touched me, barely even said anything, and yet the unspoken desire setting his eyes on fire nearly sent me over the edge on their own.

Picking the first door in the hall upstairs, I open and shut myself inside, luckily in what seems to be the correct bedroom. Versace luggage is piled on the white-and-gold furniture, and boxes line the floors.

Anxiety creeps over my skin in the form of goose bumps, and I start digging through the boxes, unsure of where they put things. The problem with letting other people move your stuff before you have time to organize it is, they don't know how to categorize anything, and then you're stuck sifting.

There's a Dyson hair dryer with a dress that should *never* be folded. Thongs and glassware, an old patchwork quilt with recital trophies and ribbons.

Worst of all is a small box sitting on the tufted ottoman at the foot of the bed. I peel off its tape and tuck back the flaps, and a hard knot solidifies in the center of my throat, no longer allowing oxygen to pass.

A few pieces of jewelry are tucked away inside—Nonna's heirloom engagement ring, a pearl necklace Papà got me in secret for my sixteenth birthday, and sapphire earrings I bought myself as a college graduation gift.

The bottom of the box is lined with crumpled pieces of paper though. Sheets that are smudged with red lipstick and black ink, cut into the shapes

of butterflies.

My stomach drops, despair etching itself into the lining. These are the notes I kept hidden behind the toilet at Nonna's, stuffed in a small metal lockbox with two capsules.

They aren't love notes even though I used to think they were. They're scribbled anecdotes of complete and utter hatred, and I don't even have to pick one up to remember Mamma's handwriting spilled across a page, reminding me that I would never ever amount to anything.

She gave me one every night before bed. A new insecurity, new criticism, new way to make me hate myself. Even the nicer ones always wound up sullied when she climbed under the sheets with me, telling me she needed to cleanse me of the evils of the world so, one day, I'd be worthy of our family name.

Bile rises in my throat, and I run my finger over the blue capsules, recalling how I took them from my brother-in-law's house the summer Stella and I stayed with him and Elena. How I planned on finding Mamma and using them, but instead, here they sit, collecting dust.

Poison never would've been satisfying enough an end for her anyway.

It's too casual, too close to a natural expiration. A nice way to watch her suffer over time, but she deserves much worse.

Though it *could* work on Cash. It's easy enough, and the likelihood of me being long gone by the time anyone found him is pretty high. Plus, I'm sure Kal could get rid of the body for me without any issues.

But then I'd have to face my sister. Sweet, docile Elena who believes violence belongs in the bedroom and nowhere else. I don't want or need her to worry more than she already does.

As if worry somehow changes the outcome.

Cash walks into the bedroom without knocking, casting a bland expression around the room before finally coming to rest his attention on me. He smooths up the collar of his shirt, having changed from his tuxedo into a navy button-down, gray dress pants, and his glasses.

A black tie hangs limp around his neck, and I pinch one of the capsules between my fingers, trying to decide my stance on this man.

I'm attracted to him. There's something about those wire-rimmed glasses and that impossibly sharp jaw that make my thighs clench wantonly.

But I also wouldn't mind if Papà had somehow succeeded in poisoning him earlier. Wouldn't mind actually taking a stab at it myself, which is why

I didn't bother explaining about what had really happened at the church.

Best to keep my cards close.

"This isn't your room," he says after a beat, leaving the top two buttons of his shirt undone.

I gesture at the piles of boxes. "Looks like my room."

"It would be" —he pauses, pursing his lips as he folds his sleeves up, revealing the thick, corded veins prominent in his forearms— "untoward for a newly married couple to sleep separately, don't you think?"

I shrug. "I think we'd be the only ones who would know."

"Be that as it may, I cannot have that weighing on my conscience. I want to ensure that both of us are benefitting from this ordeal as much as we can."

My brows lift at the word *benefit*, and he clears his throat, as if only now realizing he said it.

"Of course, I mean, our financial and societal aspirations. Any other ... benefits should probably be avoided."

"Oh good. I was wondering how long it would take you to call that a mistake."

He scowls. "Excuse me?"

Putting my box down and shoving it behind me, I extend my legs on the floor and plant my hands between them, arching my back in a long stretch.

"Some guys have that vibe," I say, rolling my head down and around.

"That vibe?"

"Yep. You know, the kind of guys who like fucking around, especially at a woman's expense, but then things get a little too intense and they back out or try to pretend it never happened." I look up, giving him a slow once-over. "Sorry to say you fit the bill, *Counselor*."

"I have two siblings who would love to hear about this notion of me being some sort of playboy." He takes a step into the room, working his jaw as he glares down at me. "Though I'm not sure I like the impression I seem to have made on you."

Again, I shrug. "I'd have been disappointed if you were different."

"Different." He stops coming toward me, letting his hands fall to his sides.

I feel him study me for several minutes, but I drop my gaze to the floor, wishing he would just leave.

I don't appreciate how it feels as if he's the one disappointed. As if I have any reason to view him differently from men in my life before him when he's only proven to take what they once had in their grasp.

"Right. Well, I've got to get to the office, so I guess just ... make yourself at home." Tapping his left leg, he reconsiders that sentence. "I don't care if you make this your personal space, but know that I want you in my bed this evening."

"Are you going to fuck me in it?"

Guess I just crave the sting of rejection.

He doesn't say anything for a moment, and I don't really know why I even asked.

Guess I just crave the sting of rejection.

"I'm asleep promptly at ten every night. I won't give you a bedtime, so long as you promise not to turn the lights on or bother me if I've made it there before you."

I swallow, ignoring the dig at my maturity. For some reason, the notion that he won't touch me at night fills me with both relief and dread.

On the one hand, it's nice to think sex really isn't why he did this. That all he wants is to control Ricci Inc.

On the other, it's hard to believe. Part of me can't help wondering if he doesn't find me attractive enough to fuck, though what we did in the car earlier would suggest otherwise.

Maybe he's just as unsure about all of this as me.

"If you need anything, feel free to phone my office. I've left emergency contact numbers on the kitchen island downstairs, and a driver will be around to take you anywhere you might need to go."

"I can leave?"

"You can be escorted. I'd prefer if you didn't visit family at this juncture though. The media will have a fucking field day with us when they find out we merged two incredibly powerful and notorious families."

"A top lawyer and a Mafia kid, no less."

"The least of the Primrose scandals, I can assure you."

"Is that why you became a lawyer? To mitigate your family's legal troubles?"

"My father would've loved that, but no. I deal primarily with environmental issues and business law. Honestly, eighty percent of my job is just filing paperwork."

“No wonder you came to the rougher side of town and bought yourself something pretty.” I pull my feet in, hugging my knees to my chest. “Bet it gets pretty boring otherwise, huh?”

“Yes, well.” His eyes harden. “Doesn’t seem like that will be an issue any longer. I’m sure I can trust you to keep things interesting.”

My mind flickers to the capsules, and I stifle a grin.

Pressing my lips together, I mull over the mild freedoms he’s granting me. I still feel like a child that’s been grounded and sent to her room without dinner, but I suppose this is a better deal than I could have scrounged up myself.

Definitely better than the one Papà brokered with Vitus.

“Oh, and, Ariana?” Cash pauses in the doorway, leaning against the frame with one arm.

My fingers twist in the lace of my dress, half-clinging to his words and half-wishing he’d leave already.

“Don’t go looking for *benefits* elsewhere.”



FOR THE FIRST several days as Mrs. Cash Primrose, I do what he tells me to because I'm nothing if not an obedient little housewife.

Starting with his bedroom—our bedroom, I guess—I strip the linens from his white four-poster bed, replacing them with red silk sheets and decorative pillows. If I'm expected to sleep there, I want it to feel as luxurious as it did at Nonna's place.

And I *have* been sleeping there, careful not to wake Cash as I slip onto my side, and then he's gone before the sun rises. The only reason I know he comes at all is because that spicy cologne of his clings to the mattress, surrounding me in warm notes of sandalwood and citrus.

He hasn't even attempted to touch me in the days since our wedding, and hasn't mentioned the attempt on his life either. I find it a bit alarming, but I've decided to be good and bide my time, sure that either Papà will contact me again and explain what the hell he was doing with that poison, or I'll find another way out of this.

It wouldn't be the first time I've taken matters into my own hands. I wouldn't mind getting them a little bloody again, if it meant finally being free of *this*. Even if my new husband was the better option, I still wish I hadn't had to choose at all.

I also make it my mission to explore every inch of the penthouse, and it's pretty obvious which rooms Cash frequents, and which ones he has set up to give the illusion of occupation.

The kitchen and office seem obvious, although the food stocked in his fridge—lots of vegan products that my ancestors would have a coronary over and expensive champagnes—make me question if he does his own grocery shopping.

If so, I need to make a note for the buyer to purchase actual edible foods.

I throw a plush white rug in the living room downstairs, accenting the cream-and-gold antique furniture with a modern touch I don't actually like, but that livens up the place anyway. A few glass ballerina figurines now sit on the black marble fireplace, and I've got several different paintings of pivotal figures like Mikhail Baryshnikov and Anna Pavlova hanging in the foyer and den, adding splashes of color and life where there previously were none.

His bedroom is the main source of existence in the entire place, clearly maintained by a very thorough housekeeper. His suits are all steamed and hung in the walk-in closet, while dozens of pairs of shoes and athletic-wear line the shelves. Different watches, glasses, and wallets adorn the white dresser across from the bed, one spot missing from each, as if waiting for whatever he took with him to return.

The en suite bathroom is next, and I spend a good, long while getting acquainted with the extra-wide shower, hyperaware of every bead of condensation that remains from his use earlier. My mind drifts while I rinse my hair, imagining what he looks like naked and wondering if he lets himself free in here.

I think about his cock, thick and long, even as he held it in his own palm, and the memory of him stroking himself in front of me—to me—has me bowing my head against the black tiles and coming so hard that I almost pass out.

Then, my mind tries to swallow me down into its pit of shame, so I climb out of the stall and find a black leotard and pair of leggings, making my way to the private elevator.

Pushing the down button, I wait a moment, frowning when nothing seems to happen. After a moment, my phone begins to vibrate, and I pull it out, Cash's name showing up on the screen.

"When did you put your contact information in my phone?" I say in lieu of a greeting, immediately annoyed with how refreshing it feels to already be hearing from him.

We've only been apart for a few hours, and I don't even fucking *like* him.

Get your libido in check, Ariana. Jesus.

"When you were getting your hydrocortisone shot," he replies. "Where are you going?"

I frown, glancing behind me. "Why are you assuming I'm going somewhere?"

"I can see you."

My face contorts, and I look up, checking the vaulted ceiling for a camera. Sure enough, a little red light blinks back at me from above the elevator doors, and I roll my eyes at myself for being so stupid.

Of course he's got cameras here. He might not be a part of the same world as me, but at their base, the differences really are imperceptible.

Two sides of the same fucking coin, and I'm an idiot for thinking this would be a change of pace from Vitus.

Even if Cash isn't outwardly aggressive, I've seen too much to believe he doesn't have it in him to be.

Hell, I don't even have any way of confirming whether Cash is actually at his office, or if he's using that as an excuse to go out and sow the oats an attractive, powerful, young man like him would have.

He said I couldn't go looking for benefits anywhere else, but I didn't get the same promise from him. I don't even have any leverage to wield if I *want* that reciprocation. Cash has the official upper hand, and he knows it.

Leaning against the wall, I cross one ankle over the other, pointing at my outfit. “You can’t tell? I’m on my way to get railed by a bunch of seedy politicians at the Governor’s Ball.”

“Is that supposed to be a joke?”

“I thought it was funny.”

His sigh bleeds through the line. “You entered this marriage of your free will, you know. You could’ve been paired off to a Tallerico instead with absolutely no freedom or sense of agency. I’m not sure why you’re acting out.”

My mouth drops open, and I scoff, rage bubbling up in my chest and shoving words from my mouth. “I’m not acting out. I’m just...” Taking a deep breath, I push the annoyance down, aware that fighting with him does me no real good. It’s not like he’s the one who got me into this mess. “Look, I just feel a little trapped, is all. I don’t... I don’t do very well in a cage.

“I’m not trying to keep you, Ariana. You know as well as I do that we have an expiration date; I’m just trying to make sure you make it there in one piece.”

He pauses, and I hear the soft clinking of ice against a glass and have a momentary flash of him not being alone. Of him sitting in his cushy office with his warm little assistant, drinking and lamenting over the sham he’s concocted.

Tears prick the backs of my eyes, and I have no idea why. I shouldn’t care, but the idea of him entertaining someone else while not touching me at all is upsetting.

Pressing my lips together, I shake my head, suddenly exhausted. Instead of answering, I pull the phone away and hang up, sliding it into the front of my duffel bag.

A beat later, the elevator chimes, and the doors slide open, granting me passage.

Sliding my hand into my bag, I feel around the main compartment for the other part of what I kept hidden behind the toilet at my nonna’s. Beneath the pointe shoes, cool metal—sheathed inside a leather guard—presses into my palm, and I suppress a little smile.

It’s a shame how little his movers paid attention to the stuff they brought into Cash’s apartment. And a shame for him, thinking he was

getting a sweet, innocent little girl to keep at his side while he tries to take over the underworld.

My phone rings, and I'm sure it's him calling to tell me not to leave. I'll probably pay for it later, but right now, I don't really care.

I just want to dance.



I'M IRRITATED.

No, that word isn't quite sufficient to describe the way I'm feeling.

My insides are molten, like the wax from an unattended candle, and spilling all over the place. If I wasn't tied up in a hearing with Samuel Armas, I'd be across town, tracking my insolent wife down and dragging her back to the apartment by her hair.

Not only did she hang up earlier and then shut her phone off, but she somehow evaded the protection detail I had waiting for her at the entrance of the parking garage.

I don't know what she thinks is going on here, but I can't stand by and watch her defy me for absolutely no reason. Perhaps if there *was* one, I'd be a bit more lenient, but at this juncture, I feel I've treated her with as much respect as our circumstances allow, and the outright disobedience doesn't sit right with me.

If she's already having issues behaving, how am I expected to introduce her to my family, or take her to important firm functions, or merge Primrose Realty with leftover Ricci accounts and assets without throwing her over my knee and turning her tight little ass black and blue?

It seemed like such a simple request. I didn't say she couldn't leave. I just wanted her to be accompanied by a driver. Primarily so I could keep an eye on her, but also in case Vitus or one of her father's many enemies were lurking around, waiting to get their hands on her.

I'm not sure how she managed before. I suppose she had men assigned to her and likely was keeping in touch with her sisters, but still. The fact that she was mostly unscathed when I got to her doesn't necessarily bode well.

Almost as if someone's been laying low, waiting to seize an opportunity.

Or maybe I'm paranoid. Maybe the rumors are wrong, and people don't give a shit about Ariana, because the only connection she has to her father's business is her last name.

Regardless, when Judge Pottifer adjourns for the day after we've gone through the scheduled witnesses, I leave Samuel at the courthouse and instruct Zephyr to brief him for when we reconvene in the morning. In truth, I haven't been putting my usual oomph into the Citium case, because it's pretty cut and dry—at this point, we're just riding out the trial since Pottifer rejected our plea deal and waiting to see what the jury decides.

I don't really have to do much, except show up and spin some seeds of doubt, so I ignore Samuel's dissatisfaction at my disinterest and meet my brother for lunch at some little seaside diner.

Except, when I get there, he isn't alone.

Tucked away at a small booth in the back, Palmer sits across from our mother, looking out the window at the harbor as she slides a manicured finger down a laminated menu.

Gritting my teeth, I take a step back, intent on leaving the nautical-themed restaurant. A hostess notices me though from behind her black

podium, and she grins, her red ponytail bouncing as she grabs another menu.

“Mr. Primrose! Your party has already been seated.” She nods at the table I’m clearly already focused on, and I bite back a retort that I’d see circulating online in the morning.

“When did my mother get in?”

The hostess frowns, gnawing on her bottom lip. “She showed up just as your brother arrived, sir. Ambushed him as he was coming in. I know you don’t like to be disturbed during these visits, but she threatened to report me to management if I didn’t seat her at the same table.”

I roll my eyes. *Bitch*. Though I’m not sure why I’d expect anything less. Rich and privileged, my mother spent the last three decades under my father’s dirty thumb without a single ounce of power to her name. She couldn’t even get him to leave his children alone, forcing them to endure abuse behind closed doors while she threw fundraising galas down the hall.

Being a raging cunt to service staff has always been her way of reclaiming some of the power he kept from her. At this point, I don’t think she knows any other way.

Taking the menu from the hostess, I tuck it under my arm and make my way to the back corner of the restaurant, ignoring the pull in my chest begging me to just leave.

This is, to my knowledge, the first she’s been back in the state since my father’s death, when she took her bequeathments from the will and hightailed it to Savannah. I should’ve known she’d return though and should’ve recognized the signs today—the sun’s been stuck behind gray clouds all afternoon.

Despite this being a casual place and it being about sixty degrees outside, my mother is wearing a black crocheted sweater with a fur collar and front panels. Always playing a fucking part, and right now, I suppose she wants to pretend she’s a poorly widow in mourning, as if that might garner even an ounce of sympathy from me.

I haven’t been avoiding her calls for a year for no reason.

The pair turns as I approach their table, and Palmer runs a hand through his shoulder-length hair, giving me an apologetic grimace. I wave him off, aware of the lengths this woman will go to in order to get her way.

It would be hypocritical of me to fault him for her presence when I wasn’t any better at evasion.

“Ah, I was beginning to wonder if you’d stood your poor brother up for lunch,” my mother says as I slide into the chair across from the booth they share. “He says you do that often, you know.”

Palmer glares at her. “I said he reschedules a lot because of work—”

“Oh, yes, that blasted work.” Her eyes slide slowly over me, disapproval lining her pinched gaze. “Does your assistant ever give you my messages? You never return my calls, so I have to assume she’s throwing them out.”

“She is.” I lean back in my metal chair, throwing my arm over the back of the one next to me. “I’ve specifically told her to.”

My mother’s lips twist up, and Palmer hides a smirk behind the sleeve of his striped cardigan.

She squints at the polished wooden table, forcing her bottom lip to quiver as she tries to produce a tear. I look at Palmer, who presses his mouth into a firm line, and looks out the window.

“Well, I don’t think that’s any way to treat your mother.”

“And I don’t think you can really call yourself that when you were checked out our entire childhood and then abandoned us when Dad died.”

“Oh, please, Cassius. *Abandoned*? The three of you were adults when I moved back home. You sound just like that ungrateful sister of yours.”

My fingers twitch against the silverware on the table. “I imagine she’d feel a lot more gratitude toward you if you’d believed her when she told you she was sexually assaulted by her ex and his friends.”

The words feel inappropriate as I push them off my tongue. It’s not my accusation to wield, and yet it feels wrong to allow the conversation to continue on without acknowledging why Lenny is the way that she is.

My sister was mistreated and disappointed by everyone she ever trusted a little over a year ago—our parents, her ex, the media. It was why she wound up getting involved with Jonas Wolfe in the first place, because she wanted to get back at our father for choosing business relations over his own blood, and it’s why we all pretend his death was natural.

If not for what she stood to lose if the truth leaked, I don’t think our mother would’ve agreed to the cover-up.

But you don’t get gratitude for doing the bare minimum. Especially when it’s only done for your own personal benefit.

She shifts in the booth seat. “I don’t want to talk about that.”

“Shocker,” Palmer coughs, shaking his head.

We grow quiet as a server comes over, setting a steaming mug in front of Palmer, a champagne flute in front of her, and taking my drink order. When he returns with a lemon water for me, I take a sip, leveling her with my unimpressed gaze.

“What *do* you want to talk about then, Mother? Or do I even want to know?”

“Goodness, can’t a woman ever come out to visit her children?” Palmer and I just stare at her, and she finally groans, dabbing at the corner of her pink-painted mouth with a cloth napkin. “Okay, look, I’m in a sort of... awkward spot. Financially.”

One of Palmer’s eyebrows arches, and he slides his gaze to me.

I recline in my seat, schooling my features. The fact that she’s bringing this up in my brother’s presence is an immediate red flag, though I’m not sure where she’s heading.

“You’ve blown through the money Dad left?”

“That’s millions of dollars,” Palmer adds, and I can tell he’s trying to do the math in his head even though none of us knows exactly how much anyone else got.

“Yes, well, it’s always been important to the public and the Primrose name that I keep up with a certain lifestyle.”

She clasps her fingers together, and I notice that she still wears her engagement and wedding rings. Even after everything my father did to our family, she’s loyal.

Makes me fucking sick.

“Well, I think you’re barking up the wrong tree,” Palmer interjects, leaning on the table with his elbows. “We aren’t going to loan you shit.” He glances at me. “Right?”

I don’t say anything. Instead, I keep my eyes on her, wondering why she’s bringing this up here of all places. She could have just as easily come to my apartment, or even just called and had funds wired over, if it were that big of a deal.

Not that I would’ve obliged her request, but still.

She looks between us. “You wouldn’t help your own mother?”

He shrugs. “Not when she wouldn’t help us, if the situation were reversed.”

My mother clicks her tongue. “Cassius, I didn’t raise you to keep secrets from your siblings.”

“Saying you raised us at all is a bit of a reach, Mother. I remember the au pairs.”

Palmer slams his hands down on the table. “Will someone just fucking tell me what’s going on?”

Smoothing my fingers up the front of my dress shirt, I adjust my glasses and look at him. A grease smudge, likely from the body shop he does detailing at, dots his hairline, and that familiar twinge of guilt presses against my rib cage, reminding me of what a dick I am.

“Did you not explain to your siblings that providing me with a stipend from each payout was one of the provisional clauses?”

The emotion has completely left her tone, and she looks at me with a hint of something I don’t recall being there before—malice. It lights up the color of her irises, giving her an animation I wouldn’t have thought possible before my father’s passing.

But I suppose when one villain fails, there’s another waiting in the shadows to take their place.

Taking a drink of my water, I sit forward and reach for her hands. They’re soft and smooth, proof of the simple, easy life she’s led, in which she never had to ask or work for anything.

My fingers curl around hers, tightening slightly. Just enough to make her uncomfortable.

I feel Palmer’s stare on the side of my head.

“Wait, so you got money, and we got money, but we also have to give you a portion of our money? How is that fair?”

“Your father was anything but fair,” our mother says with a bitter laugh. “Otherwise, why would your brother have gotten so much when we got so little?”

I’d hardly call millions “so little,” but then I see why she showed up to ask for it in the first place. My siblings were cut off from our father’s inheritance while he was still alive, but he still gave them something to avoid it being seized by the state.

They aren’t aware of how much he had in assets and savings, and they definitely aren’t aware of how much I received.

I haven’t wanted to tell them, because the division of money—especially family money—changes things when it isn’t equally disbursed.

Annoyance swims in my bloodstream, and my grip on my mother’s fingers tightens even more. They shift under the weight, trying to create

space for themselves as my hold grows punishing.

Her eyebrows draw in, and she glances down at our joined hands, over the gold band on my left hand that I picked up during lunch, then back at me. Back to detachment and calculation, as if the sliver of bitterness from before never even existed.

“So, it’s true,” she says, scoffing. “You married the spoiled little Ricci girl. I do hope you were smart enough to get tested. They say she’s been with more men than most prostitutes—”

Turning my hands over, I flip her wrists out, pushing the flat of my thumbs against her pulse point. She grimaces, buckling forward as she tries to lean in to the movement to lessen its discomfort.

“You will not speak about her that way.” Pausing, I watch as crimson colors her pale face, a mix of embarrassment and pain radiating through her as a couple of other people turn to gawk at the situation. “And you will not get anything more from me.”

She narrows her eyes. “Are you renegeing on the terms?”

“I’m telling you, I won’t be giving you a goddamn cent you haven’t earned. Do with that information what you will.”

Releasing her, I stand up, avoiding looking at Palmer despite the heat from his gaze boring into my head.

“The estate attorney won’t like that you married her,” my mother says as I turn to leave. “That family is part of the reason your father was in so much hot water at the time of his death. You could lose everything.”

I roll my eyes and head to the front of the restaurant. It’s a threat—an obvious one at that. One she evidently thought would hold more weight if she hurled it in person.

But in order to feel threatened, you have to care about what’s at stake, and my goal here isn’t to give anything *to* the Riccis, but to take it away.

Starting with my little nightmare.

When I get back to the apartment, the rage I felt at my mother’s presence has all but dissipated. Palmer’s called me a couple of times, likely to talk about the bombshell the bitch dropped, but I’m in no mood to discuss it after all the way it was revealed.

I don’t really know what I’d tell him, anyway. I feel bad enough that I got the money—explaining that a quarter billion of it went to purchasing my new wife, rather than either sibling, might not go over so well.

Heading around to the front of my building with one hand massaging the ache in my temple, I turn toward the post office just off the lobby, intending to retrieve my mail when I spot two figures on the sidewalk.

Immediately, I recognize the chestnut hair, braided and hanging off a bare shoulder. She's in a leotard with a sheer pink skirt wrapped around her waist, and her long legs are on display as she tugs at the end of her hair, kicking one foot back.

I *don't* recognize the tall, deeply tanned man before her. He's in a pair of joggers and a muscle tee, leaning with one forearm on the building above her.

Smiling.

At something that does not belong to him.

Rage claws at my chest, making it difficult for me to catch my breath. I curl my hands inside my pockets, nostrils flaring with the urge to go over and drag her away.

But then I remember how she acted out earlier today, blatantly trying to goad me into a reaction like the goddamn brat she is. And I realize that this—flirting with someone right outside our building—is probably more of the same, and she wants my fury.

Something tells me that perhaps she thinks she needs it.

So, instead of indulging the little nightmare in her tantrum, I turn on my heels and head around back, taking the elevator up to the penthouse.

I'll wait for her to repent there.



“So, you know, you should totally come to the wrap party tonight.” Emile flashes his million-dollar smile down at me, likely recalling the things we got up to at the last party we attended together.

Part of my former corps, I’ve known the heartbreaker for at least a decade, though we only occasionally exchanged words outside rehearsals. Partly because it was always difficult for me to get away from prying eyes and ears, but also because I could tell he was far more interested in me than I ever would be in him.

My affection for Emile, like my affection for most people, only lasted as long as autumn herself; in the blink of an eye, as the leaves changed color

and fell from their branches, so did my feelings drift away.

It's easier this way. If I leave first, it's harder for others to hurt me.

I let go of the end of my braid and give him a small grin. "I haven't danced with you all in ages. They wouldn't even let me in."

"Please." Emile rolls his eyes. "You had more talent in your pinkie toe than most dancers can even dream of. They'd let you attend the party and then probably spend the entire night begging you to come back."

His words soothe a repressed ache in the pit of my soul, but I don't let them bounce around my head for too long. I quit for a reason, and the burnout has yet to subside even years later.

Sometimes, I'm afraid it'll never go away, and the only way I'll be able to enjoy ballet like I used to is if I continue on in complete solitude, hiding my passion like some dirty little secret.

But I can't tell Emile that. He wouldn't understand.

Burnout doesn't make sense to people who haven't experienced it.

Instead, I shake my head and move back a step, aware that Cash could come home at any second. After the way I ended our phone call earlier, I don't really want to deal with him thinking I've actually gone and fucked someone in the meantime.

"Maybe next time," I tell him, wrapping my hand around the strap of my bag.

He gives me a look, like he knows I'm full of shit, but doesn't call me on it. Gratitude flashes in my chest like a sudden strike of lightning as I'm reminded of how Emile was always kind to me when no one else was.

I almost feel guilty for using him right now. If not for the ominous text message I received when leaving the theater a half hour ago, which led to me entering a busy coffee shop and bumping into him, I wouldn't have even given him a second thought.

Plus, maybe I liked the idea of Cash coming home and watching me with another man. Maybe I'm more fucked in the head than I realize.

"I'm holding you to that," Emile says, pointing a long finger at me. He flicks beneath my chin, then takes off, jogging to his Vespa parked down the street.

I stare after him for several seconds, then make my way into the building with the key card I swiped from Cash's dresser this morning. In the elevator, I pull my phone out and turn it back on, scanning the screen for messages.

There's one from Elena, saying she saw Vitus out with Vincenza last night, and she wants to know what's going on. I ignore it, moving on to the text below hers that I got as I was leaving the theater.

We know where they're hidden.

Gnawing on the corner of my mouth, I debate on replying, but I don't want the sender to know they're getting under my skin or that they've reached someone on the other end. Better to pretend I'm not seeing their texts and delete the message as I push it from my mind.

Besides, what they're talking about simply isn't possible.

I don't hide. I erase.

The sound of a faucet running drifts through the apartment when I reach the top floor, but I don't think anything of it as I make my way to the powder room off the foyer, rinsing Mikey P.'s blood from underneath my fingernails and watching the brown-stained water circle the drain.

After drying my hands, I toss my bag onto the chaise lounge in the living room and make my way to the kitchen, hoping I might get a second alone with whom I assume is Cash's housekeeper, and probably the person who does his personal shopping.

But it's not a housekeeper I find in the kitchen.

It's *him*.

My pulse swells my throat, momentarily cutting off my oxygen supply.

Cash's broad shoulders stretch the fabric of a thin red sweater, the sleeves rolled partway up, and the veins in his forearms flex as he dices a white onion. The dark jeans he has on highlight his ass in a way I didn't realize I appreciated, but as he continues working with his back to me, I can't help but stare.

It's also the first time I've seen him look so... *domestic*. After growing up in a family that spent every waking second prepared for a fucking photo shoot, the casualwear throws me.

Standing there, I spend a few seconds taking in the slope of his shoulders and the taut tendons in his neck, trying to gauge his level of upset. It's one thing if he's mad because of our phone call, but another entirely if he saw me outside with Emile.

Then again, if I didn't see him come in, maybe he's just been here longer than me and is completely oblivious to the fact that I was talking to another man entirely.

With that flurry of hope in my stomach, I step inside the kitchen. “I didn’t realize you’d gotten back.”

He doesn’t turn toward me, singularly focused on his cutting. “Probably hard to notice your husband’s return when you’re busy making googly eyes at strangers outside.”

Shit.

“Emile isn’t a stranger,” I say, moving to the island bar. I’m not sure why I think that will help my case.

“Ah. A former paramour then. Good to know.” Grunting, he lifts the cutting board and holds it above a stainless steel stock pot, dumping the vegetable in.

Still without looking at me.

Heat scalds my face, creeping slowly down my neck, even though I know I haven’t done anything wrong. I swallow, silently willing him to turn or make some sort of sarcastic remark—something to let me know that his anger is fleeting.

Even if he yelled or lashed out physically, it would be better than silence.

“It’s not like that,” I try again, resting my palm on the white marble countertop. “I mean, it *was*, but... not today. Not anymore. I haven’t even seen him in a few years, so it was just two friends... catching up.” The words spill from my mouth like vomit, singeing the inside of my mouth on their way out.

My hands tremble the longer the silence from him stretches, anxiety clogging my airways.

He nods, starting to chop raw carrots.

Discomfort makes its way to the forefront of my mind, and I grit my teeth against the onslaught. Static sparks in my chest, filling the cavity with broken sound and images, and I slide around the island.

Crossing the room, I lean a hip against the counter on the other side of the stove, watching him. “You can’t seriously be mad.”

“I’m not,” he says, so simply and coolly, like he isn’t practically vibrating with rage. His hands are steady as he adds the carrots to the pot and then turns around to wash his hands in the sink. “I *could* be—and would be well within my rights—but I’m not. If you say nothing was going on, then I believe you.”

“Why?”

“You haven’t given me a reason not to.”

But the voice in the back of my mind tells me he’s just saying that. Probably so he can bring it up later, when I’m not suspecting his anger, and take it out on me then.

I feel like I might vomit. “It wasn’t... look, he might’ve been interested, and he invited me to a wrap party with other dancers tonight, but I said no, and I wasn’t planning on—”

Cash shuts off the faucet with more force than necessary and then whirls on me, closing the distance between us in two quick steps. He cages me in against the counter, planting his hands on either side of my hips, and closes his eyes as he inhales.

“Are you *trying* to make me angry?”

My eyes widen. “What? No, I’m just explaining—”

“I’m not mad about the other man, but I’m also not interested in hearing about the details of your time with him.”

I drop my gaze to his lips, feeling my chest pinch. “But if you aren’t mad, then—”

One hand comes up, sliding over my mouth the same way he did at our wedding. My pulse turns erratic, and I taste it in my throat.

“Why do you care if I am?”

Tilting my chin up, I lift a shoulder, trying to convey with my eyes that I don’t.

Not logically.

But my gut isn’t ruled by logic, and my soul still carries the weight of being an emotional punching bag my whole life.

“Is it because you’d care if the situation was reversed? If you’d caught me giving all my smiles and attention to some girl I had history with, especially after I blew you off all day?”

My jaw clenches, and his gaze hardens as I inch forward, pressing myself into him. He can claim otherwise all he wants, but there’s no denying that he feels *something* about Emile and me.

Lifting my hand, I wrap my fingers around his, dragging it slowly down. He allows me to free my mouth, his brown gaze seeming to warm as his pinkie crests my bottom lip.

“Why would you look elsewhere for something I’m so willing to give you?”

His Adam's apple bobs. Instinctively, like an object caught in his orbit, I push up on my toes, inviting him in. To kiss me, taste me, take me—the way I've wished he would since that first night in the club, when we were just two strangers passing like ships in the night.

“You think this is about fucking?” he taunts, his breath ghosting over my face, caressing my bare skin with its warmth. “It's about *owning*, Little Nightmare. You are my goddamn wife, and every part of you is mine to do with as I please. Not anyone else's.”

“But you don't *want* to do anything to me. You want me to sit around all fucking day and wait for you to come home, like a little trophy. We share a bed at night, but you won't even touch me in it, and you barely speak to me. What else am I supposed to do with my time?”

Cash works his jaw, nostrils flaring. He looks two breaths away from throttling me, and part of me wants him to. *Needs* him to even, because that physical pain would cut less deep than the betrayal on his face.

I know from experience how much easier physical pain is to get over than the emotional sort. It bruises and scabs like a ballerina's feet, and what heals in its place is stronger. Tougher and better to weather other storms.

Emotional pain, the stuff you can't see, never seems to go back the way it was created. Like every memory imprints itself on your brain, scarring where you can't reach to erase.

Cash releases me, stepping away quickly. Cold air sweeps over me, and I wrap my arms around my middle, trying to keep it at bay.

After a moment, he blinks, the rage in his eyes dissolving into that stoic, unbothered state from before. He returns to the stove, adjusting the heat level on the burner, and clears his throat.

“Chicken noodle soup,” he offers, nodding at the pot. “If you're hungry.”

I glance at the pot, then up at him again, trying to meet his eyes. “I didn't know you cooked.”

“Who do you think has been making your meals all this time?”

“A housekeeper, to be honest.”

He huffs out a laugh, but there's no humor in it at all. “I have one, but she's not a great chef. I've been cooking since I was a kid.”

Tears burn behind my eyes at his detached tone, and I wish I knew why. Wish I could comprehend what it is about this virtual stranger that makes

me feel so emotionally unhinged, even when he isn't actually doing anything to me.

In fact, offering me food—food he's cooking—is one of the nicest things anyone has ever done for me, and yet I'm still uncertain. My palms shake as I press them into my legs, watching him add spices and stir with his back once again to me.

“Do you cook?” he asks, poking at the soup with a wooden spoon. I shake my head, and surprise sketches across his face. “An Italian who doesn't cook. Alert the church elders.”

Against my better judgment, a small smile tugs at one corner of my mouth. “Can't speak Italian, either. Outside of a few words I picked up here and there, neither of my parents taught my sisters and I. Guess they didn't want us to feel connected to our heritage, or something.”

Cash nods. “A shame. I'll have to show you some of my grandfather's favorite recipes sometime.”

I stand there, noting how effortless the entire cooking process seems to be for him, like he really has been doing it his whole life. My chest warms, though my unease remains. “I'd like that.”

He doesn't respond, and suddenly I feel awkward having said anything at all, especially when he's probably still angry.

An untieable knot weaves its way into my throat, and I feel a little dizzy.

So, I don't stay for dinner.

I don't eat at all.

I just go right to bed.

And when I lie in bed, alone, after midnight, I feel the tears finally fall as I wonder why I have to punish myself every single fucking time.



FOLDING MY HANDS TOGETHER, I thread my fingers through one another on top of my chest, staring at the ceiling in the dark. Ariana's light snore is the only sound that fills the room, and it's been keeping me up.

That's what I'm trying to convince myself of anyway. That it's her breathing and not the memory of the despair written on her face when she thought I was angry with her.

Gone was the spitfire, the formidable woman I've come to know—the woman I married—and in her place was a terrified nightmare of insecurity.

In truth, I had been pretty pissed off when I saw her with that guy, but it morphed into mild annoyance by the time she returned. I was more upset

about the fact that she'd disappeared on me before all of that, and *that* was what I found her doing.

Rolling onto my side, I study the curve of her hip through the down comforter. Each breath brings the soft rise of her shoulder, bare in a silk sleep top, and I grit my teeth against the urge to reach out and run my hand over her smooth skin.

"We share a bed at night, but you won't even touch me in it," she said, though she couldn't be more fucking wrong.

I've never wanted anything *more*.

My body aches with the need to feel her. I want her invading my blood, replacing it with whatever the hell makes her so beautifully chaotic.

That's the entire problem, and exactly why I told her not to wake me at night, because having her so close makes me want to forget my goals and just sink into her.

Swallowing hard, I lift my hand and let my palm hover over her. My heart beats against my ribs, drowning in desire, as I graze my fingers across her neck, dragging her hair back to the pillow. Exposing her.

My breaths are harsh, labored, as they come from me. I travel lower, still hovering, but enough so the heat from our bodies mingles like two perfect strangers becoming acquainted.

A tremor racks through me, and our skin meets briefly.

Her snoring ceases.

So does my breathing.

Silence stretches between us, as thick as the dead of night.

"Touch me," she whispers, so softly that, for a moment, I fear I imagined her plea.

My chest heaves. I'm frozen, suspended in time as I wait for some sort of confirmation that she's awake.

Her chin moves slightly. As if she's searching for me.

"Please."

The broken desperation dripping from that one word, that single syllable, almost does me in. My mouth dries up, and panic seizes my limbs, immobilizing me.

Ariana turns more fully, and I feel her stare on me. On my hand, still dangerously close to temptation.

"Cash."

I grit my teeth until my jaw aches. Fuck me, I want to. So badly that I think I would combust on the spot if she asked again.

“I’m your wife now,” she said that day in the car. “This is what I’m supposed to do for you.”

And I suppose there’s a kernel of truth there, although our marriage is certainly not traditional in any sense. I’ve barely spent any time with her since uprooting her life and forcing her to sleep in my bed every night, and my entire reasoning for making her mine stems from an insecurity brought on by a dead man.

I have a meeting next week with Ricci Inc. shareholders to discuss financial matters, given that I’m the unofficial figurehead of the operation now. So, technically, that part of my plan is in action, waiting for things to start rolling.

I could indulge a bit. Give myself over to the baser desire within me. The one that wants to see what enamored so many with Ariana Ricci despite the complications she would bring.

Part of me wants to test the lust that reared its head when it saw her. Lust that had been essentially dormant inside of me since puberty, but one look at this woman, and every single ounce of my control unraveled. Almost like I’d never worked at keeping it sewn up to begin with.

Sighing, I roll onto my back, my hand dropping onto the mattress between us. Ariana stays with her head turned for several beats, and I know if the lights were on right now, she’d be glaring at me. Maybe she’d even try to lash out—I certainly haven’t forgotten the oleander at our wedding.

Instead, she lets out a soft, almost-imperceptible scoff. Like she’s unimpressed.

For some inexplicable reason, the sound makes my dick hard, and I twist my fingers in the bedsheets, watching from my peripheral as she re-situates herself on her side.

“Coward,” she mutters, the remnants of her pity party at dinner completely gone.

The normalcy of the insult almost makes me laugh.

When her breathing evens out again, I slip from the bed, change out of my pajamas, and go for a three-mile run. The sun is just starting to peek through the clouds when I get back to the apartment, and Ariana is dead asleep, her angelic face resting on my pillow.

My jaw tightens as I notice the comforter has been pulled down, and her position in the bed tugs at her top, exposing a breast.

When I make my way to the en suite shower, all I can think about is that pretty pink nipple and what it might feel like caught between my lips. I beat off quickly, imagining a different version of myself willing to go out, shove her onto her back, and sink between her silky-smooth thighs.

There's no doubt in my mind that she feels like heaven.

Unfortunately, I'm not destined to experience it.

Only hell is fit for men like me.

Perched on the edge of the bed, I reach into my nightstand, pulling out the cloth and white bottle I stashed there the day she moved in. I haven't used it until now because I've been trying to let her adjust to things at her own pace, but the disappearing act she pulled is unacceptable.

Ariana is an investment—and one with a potentially life-ruining ROI. I can't allow her to go wherever she pleases without telling me or using the car service. Can't risk losing her.

Which means drastic measures have to be taken.

Preparing the cloth, I walk around to her side of the bed and kneel onto it, brushing hair from her face. She mutters something about murder and her mother, but I don't catch exactly what she says.

I pause, waiting for more. Wondering if her subconscious is trying to tell me something.

When nothing else comes, I shift, clasp the cloth over her nose and mouth. She jolts awake, panic sending her limbs sprawling, but I press my weight on top of her, smothering her for several seconds.

She fights hard. I catch an elbow to the face, blood flooding my mouth with the impact, and a knee to the groin before she slumps back on the bed, limp and pliable and unconscious.

Pulling the cloth away, I reach into her nightstand for the syringe tucked away in the very back. I'm not sure how long it will take her to come to, so I work quickly, readying the needle with the microscopic chip.

It breaks the surface of her skin, embedding just below her thumb easily. A bead of blood bubbles at the injection site, and I wipe it away with my index finger, licking it clean so it doesn't get on the sheets.

Now, wherever she goes, I'll be able to keep an eye on her.

Technically, I could use her phone, but this way is more accurate. She can turn her cell off, or leave it someplace else, but the chip will go

everywhere she does.

Maybe I should feel bad about the massive invasion of privacy, but I don't. If she won't be forthcoming with her location, I'm not above taking matters into my own hands. At least until she can prove herself.

Finally, I go to my dresser and slide open the top drawer, retrieving the black velvet box hidden beneath layers of folded socks.

Inside is a vintage Victorian engagement ring with a rose-shaped diamond in the center and an Hermès resting band. The shanks on the band have been modified though by a private jeweler I happened to have as a client once—he'd been arrested for counterfeiting money, though that turned out to be a front for the illegal, medieval-style jewelry he was designing.

I got him acquitted, and he promised me a favor.

The ring slides onto Ariana's finger with ease, big and gaudy and somehow completely natural-looking on her.

But when I go to remove it, the sharpened shanks dig into her skin.

The harder I tug, the deeper they go.

A smile threatens my mouth, and I place her hand back underneath the pillow where it was. The jeweler assured me that he'd cut the band so it wouldn't be uncomfortable to wear, only painful to remove, which is exactly what I wanted.

Let it be a reminder for my bratty little wife, should she think about stepping out on me.

If I won't have her, no one else will either.



TIME IN CASH'S penthouse only creeps by.

The random texts from the unknown number cease, and I continue not speaking to my sisters, though our group chat is suddenly bursting with life again on their end.

Seconds seem to last minutes and minutes, hours, and I spend ninety percent of those wasting away while Cash goes off to work and continues his life like nothing has changed.

Which, in most ways, his hasn't. Other than a legal obligation taking up space in his home, Cash is still the same person he was a month ago. He wakes at the ass crack of dawn to run, showers, and makes breakfast before

I'm even out of bed, and then he leaves for his office by the time I come downstairs.

We've barely interacted outside of small talk since the day I saw Emile. That's the only part of it I choose to remember. The shame spiral and accusations, followed by my begging him to just touch me that night, are instances I'd much rather forget.

Or at least pretend to.

Cash's driver, Ronnie, announces from the front of the town car that we're close to our destination, and I give him a nod, turning away from the window. I didn't want to give in to having Ronnie cart me around, but I figured it'd be easier in the long run.

At least, this way, I'm free to come and go as I please.

My gaze drops to the rose gold ring on my finger, and I run my thumb over the rose-shaped diamond in the center.

As if my coming and going matters with this medieval torture device stuck on me.

I woke up after that night, groggy and with a sick sensation in my gut, and found the vintage piece already on. I didn't mind at first because it's gorgeous. But then, I realized the only way to remove it was to scalp my knuckle because of the shape and modification of the double band.

I'm tempted to have it cut off, but I think Cash would probably find a more sinister way for me to wear it instead.

A shudder racks through me, and my hands drift to my neck as I think about the collar Ermes Barbieri made me wear and the way the prongs dug into my neck.

Having seen me in it, Cash is liable to do the same, especially if he thinks it'll keep me from fucking around on him behind his back.

I suppose he fits in quite well with the men of my world after all.

Ronnie pulls up to a condominium sitting on a corner lot, then glances at me over his shoulder. He's an off-puttingly kind-looking man with a head of white curls and glasses with circular lenses, and he keeps calling me Mrs. Primrose, which stokes a fire in my belly at the same time it rankles me.

Cash filed to have my name changed the day after our wedding, and since he's apparently a favored attorney in the city, the process was expedited.

I like not being a Ricci. For now, that's all I'm sure of.

Concern etches into his fluffy brows as he turns, looking out the window at the residence. We're forty minutes from the city, and I know he probably thinks he's brought me somewhere to have an affair. I can practically feel the wheels in his head turning as he takes in the square building and the ornately designed front entrance.

"Would you like me to escort you inside, Mrs. Primrose?" he asks.

Shaking my head, I unbuckle myself and refasten the belt of my white Marine Serre coat, pushing open the back door. "No, thanks. I'll only be a minute."

He rolls the front passenger window down, leaning over the console. "Where should I tell Mr. Primrose you've gone, if he calls while you're still inside?"

I pause, not realizing there were options. "That depends on why you're asking. You don't think I'm going up there to cheat on him, do you?"

Ronnie blinks. "I've been in this business a long time, Mrs. Primrose. I know what people look like when they're engaging in illicit affairs. You aren't the type."

Warmth blossoms in my chest, and I give him what feels like the first genuine smile I've had since all of this started. "If he asks, tell him he can come find out for himself."

Nodding, Ronnie rolls the window back up, and I turn around, heading inside. Green carpet lines the immediate stairs once I enter the building, and I take them slowly, trying to remember the last time I was here.

Too long ago really.

I'm supposed to be checking in regularly, but the satisfaction of doing so was starting to wear off. Just like why I quit professional ballet—once catharsis stops, it's hard to crawl out of the hole it dug around you.

My whole life, dancing has been my escape. It was how I dealt with my unfortunate reality without letting it bleed onto my sisters or friends.

But at some point, it started to feel like work. Rhythm no longer felt natural in my body, and I had to put more effort than necessary into my routines.

It was the *only* thing that brought me any sort of joy, and that joy soured because of its importance.

It rotted from the inside out.

When I get to the third floor, I knock on unit 3B, clutching my handbag tight against my side. Several minutes pass, and I start to worry that maybe

she isn't home.

Or maybe she's just not able to answer.

Pushing up on my tiptoes, I feel above the exterior light for the spare key she keeps hidden there and let myself in. The scent of tobacco and stale wine clings to the small condo, and I glance around the tight living area and attached dining room, noting the chaos.

Color bursts free, an orange rug and pink patchwork quilt offsetting the sofa covered with a white linen sheet. There are books piled neatly inside the fireplace where the grate would normally be, and several votive candles line the mantel while dead plants are scattered across the room, begging for even a single ray of sunshine.

Peeking into the kitchen, I see that it's also empty, and discomfort wedges itself in my chest.

What if someone else got here before me?

A flushing sound sweeps down the hall, and my body goes rigid. Snaking my hand into my purse, I wrap my fingers around the handle of the dagger sheathed inside, prepared for an onslaught of violence.

Instead, the woman who stumbles into the dining area resembles little more than a shell. She's altered her appearance quite a bit over the years, since hiding in plain sight doesn't offer the same security as distance does.

Platinum-blond hair hangs in a loose bun at the back of her head, which seems disproportionately large in comparison to the rest of her body. She's ghastly, her thin, bony shoulders wrapped in a thick cotton robe that does nothing to hide her sunken, gaunt features.

She's had her nose and jaw altered, and if I hadn't been the one to suggest the changes in the first place, I don't think I'd recognize her at all.

"Well, well," Mamma says, her pinched voice immediately making me feel five years old again, "the prodigal daughter returns."

I roll my eyes. As if I would ever really come back to this woman with my tail tucked between my legs. "It's not easy, making time to visit someone that the entire world thinks is AWOL."

She was initially arrested for some of Papà's lesser crimes, but got out on some sort of technicality the same day they found Papà, who'd fled the state as soon as Elena turned them in. Still, the district attorney's office saw Mamma as unfinished business and has been looking for her ever since, hence the drastic measures she's taken to essentially disappear.

“I’m sure it isn’t for you, *carina*. You never did develop very good time management skills.”

Even in her frail state, she can still manage to be a raging cunt. My fingers twitch, itching for the blade in my purse, desperate to put an end to this parasitic relationship once and for all.

Hobbling over to the couch, she lowers herself onto the cushions, leaning her head on the arm rest and extending her legs across the length. She grabs a rag from the coffee table and folds it over her forehead, then reaches for the glass of red wine sitting near the edge.

“What do you want?” she bites out. “You don’t visit for no reason.”

Learned from the best. “I want Ricci Inc.”

She pauses, glass hovering in front of her mouth. “I don’t believe it’s for sale.”

Gnashing my teeth together, I cross my arms over my chest and take a step toward her. “It’s not for sale, but you have the power to relinquish it. I want it.”

For a moment, she just looks at me, sipping her wine with an unreadable expression. It lasers in, and I know she’s searching for a vulnerability. Something to cut me down and distract me with, like a toddler throwing a tantrum.

But then she sets her glass aside and pushes up into a sitting position, running a hand over her cheek. The gold rings she wears sends a shiver over me, but I ignore it, unwilling to give her the satisfaction of knowing she still gets to me, even after all these years.

“And what exactly are you planning to do with it?” Mamma cocks an eyebrow. “You don’t have the wit to run an organization that deals with moving drugs, illegal gambling, and protection notices, nor do you have the strength to protect yourself from direct involvement. You’d either drive it into the ground or get yourself killed.”

I shrug, moving in the direction of the couch. My hand fishes into my purse, feeling for the knife. “I’m not planning on running it at all. You know *Ermes Barbieri* sold me?”

Her eyes don’t change. No surprise, or even guilt, flashes in her dark irises.

Confirming what I suspected.

“Of course you know. You told him to do it.”

After Papà's arrest and her release, Mamma paid several government and law enforcement officials to help erase her from the map. The only thing she kept ties to, via an offshore account and through a couple of Papà's most reputable men, was Ricci Inc.

She's been running things from the shadows since then, calling the shots and okaying orders. Papà thinks his men have the reins, but in truth, Mamma took over when it seemed they weren't capable of keeping what was left of the company intact.

Which meant it was likely that she knew I was going to the Barbieri auction that night, and that she knew what it meant if I got involved. Odds are, she told them to up the ante and offer marriage to me in the first place, maybe so I'd be less of a problem for her.

As if I would ever be anything less.

Not when it comes to this woman.

Not even if I went out of my way to do exactly what she wanted and said at all times. My existence will always be troublesome for her because I'm who she wanted to be.

I'm who she'd have been if she had even a shred of decency.

"Do you know who bought me?" I ask, watching her gaze dip to the ring on my finger. "It wasn't one of our guys, or even Vitus. It was a *lawyer*. And he's been trying to have Ricci Inc. sorted and shifted into his name since I'm technically the blood heir, but some of Papà's men have been making it rather difficult."

She scoffs. "Well, he must not be a very good lawyer if he can't get through unofficial red tape."

"He's getting there, but I figured why make him go through all the work when I could come here" —pausing, I pull the knife from my bag and slide it from the leather sheath; the silver blade glints in the overhead lighting, and her eyes widen— "and cut it from the source entirely?"

"Please," she says, laughing under her breath.

The sound grates, like nails on a chalkboard. It's the same tone she'd use when I said I didn't think her mouth should be that close to my chest or when I asked why the other moms at Mass didn't leave bruises on their kids.

"Just because you can't see them doesn't mean they aren't there," she'd say, shaking her head and patting mine, like I was just being a dumb child.

Like I would never know better—know that the marks parents leave on their children weren't usually scars.

Love isn't supposed to hurt.

“You're not going to kill me,” she says after a beat of us just staring at each other. “What would the media think? How would you get away with it? Still such a naive little girl, whose pants are much too big for her, I think. That husband of yours must be plying you with lies, because I don't remember your ego being too large to fit in the apartment.”

I snort, digging into my purse again for the keepsakes tucked away in the inside pocket. A silk handkerchief, engraved with a name at one corner, and a rare drop pearl necklace I remember every woman in Mamma's circles being envious of.

Tossing them into her lap, I raise an eyebrow, waiting as she inspects the items.

She lifts her head, clutching the handkerchief. “What have you done, Ariana?”

Shrugging, I think back to the night I met Cash briefly at that club outside the city. How upset I was when I received the text from Vitus meant for one of his mistresses and then planned to enact my revenge on the people who had brought him into this world.

“Nothing short of what I'll do to you, if you don't give me what I'm asking for.” I brandish the knife again, noting the slight shake in my wrist. “No one even knows you're here, and it's not like anyone would miss you. Plus, I know someone who wouldn't mind helping me get rid of the body.”

Hatred ignites in her gaze, and she clenches her jaw. Under normal circumstances, she probably wouldn't even think twice about refusing me, but her body is weak, and her mind is working at half capacity, so eventually, she acquiesces.

Not like she has much of a choice.

Before I leave, I get her written statement about account transfers, and she promises to call a meeting with The Elders, confirming the switch of ownership to Cash. I go to the kitchen while she makes a few phone calls and make her a cup of coffee, scooping from the glass sugar bowl I brought her a couple of years back and adding it in.

I watch her drink it the same way I have for years, and it's seconds before she's running to the bathroom to puke, unaware of why I stayed to make sure she drained the entire cup.

Outside, I'm completely unsurprised to find Cash leaning against the passenger side of his black BMW, wearing a gray suit with his arms folded over his chest. His face is expressionless, and my stomach does a little somersault as I realize how close he is right now to my biggest secrets.

"Thought you had court," I say, approaching him.

Every day before he leaves our apartment, he tells me what he has going on at the office, though I sometimes wonder if it's just to give himself an alibi.

Cash lifts one shoulder. "Reached a settlement, so we won't go to trial."

I tuck my hair behind my ear as I stop a foot in front of him. "Where's Ronnie?"

"Lunch break." He runs his gaze over me, lingering for a moment on the ring, as if looking for fingerprints. "Thought I'd come see what kind of errands my wife was running this far outside of town."

"Oh, you know me. I wait every day for you to go to work just so I can fuck whatever transients I find on the streets."

He glances over my shoulder at the condominium. "Perhaps I should go inside and meet these lovers."

My hands whip out as he takes a step in that direction, pushing against his chest. His brows arch, and the breath thickens in my lungs at the feel of his hard body under me.

"That's, um... probably not a good idea."

Cocking his head to one side, he looks down at my hands, then back up, pausing at my lips briefly. "Well, if they get the full spread, I should at least be able to sample the goods, right?"

Furrowing my brow, I open my mouth to ask what he means, but then he's grabbing my hands and moving, shoving my front into the side of the car. He presses himself fully into my back, twisting my arms so my wrists are locked in his grip above my ass, and his harsh breaths assault the side of my head, making me dizzy.

The blood in my veins hums, my body delighting at the sudden contact.

His free hand grazes the bare skin of my outer thigh, and my nerves draw in, tightening to the point of pain. I feel a breeze between my legs, brushing against the lace panties I have on, as he pushes up the skirt of my coat and the gold wrap dress underneath.

He frees one of my hands, guiding it around my hip so it's in front of me. "Let me see what you let others do," he rasps, his voice strained. The

sound sends a spiral of arousal up my spine, embedding itself in the tissue.

“Why can’t you just *touch* me?” I whine, shifting my hips and rubbing against the hard length of him.

Releasing my hand, he threads his fingers into my hair, tugging my head back and fitting his cheek against mine. “Because I want to see how good you can make yourself feel. I want to know if you need external stimulation or if it’s enough just to know I’m standing here, deliriously turned on and losing my fucking mind because of you.”

His hips rock into mine, meeting my backward thrust.

“Show me,” he commands, and my hand obeys, snaking its way between my thighs. “I can think of nothing I want more than to watch you come.”

My fingers work slowly, carefully, rubbing in tight, concentric circles over my clit. I’m wet, embarrassingly so, but I don’t have the forethought to consider that fact. I just focus on the feel of Cash behind me and the way his breathing grows strained the faster I work.

He leans back, keeping one hand at my waist to hold up my clothes. I don’t even care that we’re in public, or that my own mother could be watching from the building behind me, if she happened to look out.

Part of me hopes that she is, only because I know it’d make her furious to see me enjoying myself.

Dropping my forehead to the car, I let out a little moan as Cash lets go of my wrist, dragging his free hand down over the curve of my ass.

“That’s touching,” I say, breathless, my stomach tensing.

“I know. God forgive me, because it’s not even a fraction of what I wish I could be doing to you right now.”

The dark, ominous threat catches me off guard, considering this is the man who’s spent the last month virtually ignoring me and explaining at every opportunity how he can’t be with me like this.

Then again, I’ve been lying to myself every time I’ve said I don’t like him, so clearly, neither of us has a history of honesty.

Grunting, I reach behind me and take his hand, pulling it around and molding my fingers over his. I skate down across my belly, making it twitch, and then lower.

I feel him tense behind me.

“Ariana,” he says, starting to retreat.

Gritting my teeth, I guide our fingers down, spreading my thighs and inching inward. Our middle fingers slide in together, a tight fit that I feel right in my throat, and my pussy spasms around the sudden invasion.

If he won't give in of his own accord, I'll give him a little push.

His forearm comes up, slamming into the frame of the car as he curls himself over me. "Little Nightmare," he whispers harshly, like he's struggling to maintain control. "You're being very bad."

"I can't help it," I reply, pumping slowly, my mouth refusing to close as desire sweeps through me. My body buzzes, on fire with the feel of him around me and inside of me. "I needed some assistance, and technically, you aren't doing it. My hand is outside of yours, so we aren't breaking any rules."

He lets me continue, apparently married to his convictions.

I add our ring fingers, swallowing as the stretch creates a delicious burning sensation.

"Fuck," Cash mutters, turning his face into my shoulder.

I feel him shift behind me, and the sound of a zipper reverberates around us.

"Do you feel that?" I ask, thrusting in and out faster, my muscles clinging to us. "My pussy is *dripping*, Counselor, and it's just for you."

"Just for your *husband*," he corrects. "You're a needy little thing, aren't you? Just want to be filled and fucked, right?"

My fingers tingle, anticipation clawing its way through my chest. I fully expect him to push into me, and the image has me unraveling like loose thread, coming around our fingers with the volatility of a volcanic eruption.

He withdraws immediately, proving that my hold on him wasn't stopping him from pulling away, and then he's spinning me around, pushing down on my shoulders.

His chest heaves as I crouch, my ankles protesting the change in position. I look up, lips parting as he fists his thick, veiny cock in front of my face, tugging like he's pissed off at his erection.

Sweeping my tongue across the seam of my mouth, I open wider, my own cum sticky between my legs. I reach down, swirling it around my clit, enraptured by the look on his face as his orgasm draws near.

"I should fuck your mouth and come down your throat," he says, the tendons in his neck bulging out. "Make you taste me the rest of the night."

My nod is immediate, desperate, and a malicious grin spreads over his mouth.

“But I think you’d like that too much.”

A tiny whimper escapes me as he lets out a low, slow groan, tilting his head back. His jaw tenses, and then he’s coming, pointing purposefully away from my mouth. Warm, thick ropes of semen jet across my forehead and chin, and another climax washes over me with the sensation.

My eyes drift closed as euphoria traces paths along my body, like the ghost of fingertips on goose bumps. When I open them again, Cash stares down at me, his cock tucked away already, but his eyes are frozen in some cross between awe and utter confusion.

I lift my hands, swiping my fingers through the cum on my face, and lick them clean.

He bends, grabbing me under the arms, and hauls me up. His thumb brushes the corner of my mouth, and he pushes the tip in. I close my lips around it, sucking until my cheeks hollow out, the musky taste of him ripe and lingering.

“Let’s go home,” he says after a beat, straightening my skirt. His fingers wrap around the diamond ring on mine. “I have something to show you.”



THE LOOK on Ariana's face tells me I've been going about this marriage all wrong.

Regardless of the fact that I was a much better option than her piece-of-shit ex, I can't expect to win affection merely by default. And while her defiance might make my dick hard for inexplicable reasons, her compliance is necessary to my success in this relationship and in seizing the underground's source of power.

Maybe I can stand to be a bit more attentive. It's clear that Ariana thrives in the spotlight, and perhaps my unwillingness to be with her physically is adding to her despondency.

Not causing it, since I can tell she has more demons than she even seems to realize, but I'm certainly not helping.

She cries in her sleep, and it's a sound I wouldn't mind vanquishing.

Chin tilted, Ariana stares up at the little one-story white brick building in front of us. "Did you bring me here to kill me?"

"That would be much easier to do at home." Taking her hand, I turn it over and press a little gold key into the center of her palm.

She cocks her head to the side, blinking at me. "How would you do it?"

"Why? Looking for ideas?" I give her a small half-grin, trying to dispel the way her attention ties my stomach into knots. When she doesn't reply, I curl her fingers around the key and shrug. "How would I *kill* you? I'm a bit offended you think I'd have an answer ready."

"Don't pretend you're an innocent, upstanding man." She wiggles her ring finger, and I wonder if she's noticed the microchip beneath her thumb yet. "We both know better."

I trace the outline of the diamond. "Well, clearly, your go-to is poison."

"Nope."

One of my brows arches. "No?"

Shaking her head, she pulls her hand away. "I *told* you, I had nothing to do with the flowers. I wouldn't poison *you*."

Unease creeps up my back, lifting the hairs on my neck. "You say that like you have a plan to not poison me."

The corners of her perfect mouth turn up. "Less of a plan and more of an escape route."

"You're not even a prisoner."

A hint of sadness softens her features. "I am not your prisoner, Cash, but I am not free."

With that, she slips past me and heads for the glass door, leaving me standing in place, trying to remember if that is the first time she's used my name in conversation.

And wondering why it makes me so uncomfortable that she did, more so than her telling me she wants to murder me.

Then again, would she ever come out and admit that, or was she fishing for my own intentions?

She *did* ask me first.

Shaking it off, I follow into the building after her and find her standing just inside the threshold. The room is probably smaller than what she's used

to rehearsing in, but it's a standard size for most modern dance corps and better than the run-down theater she's been using.

Mirrors line the entire back wall, and there's a hall leading to a restroom, changing area, and storage. The pink floral wallpaper is chipped in some corners, and there are a few spots on the ceiling with obvious water damage, but overall, it's not a bad setup.

At least, *I* don't think it is. The look on Ariana's face has me questioning my decision though.

"A dance studio?"

Adjusting my glasses, I hook my hands into my pants pockets and rock back on my heels. "Why not? It's quiet, secluded. Across the street from my office."

Her brows shoot to her hairline, and she twists around, looking out the front windows. Turning back toward me, she glances down at the key in her hand. "I don't... I don't understand why you're showing me this. What's wrong with the theater?"

Accusation drips off her words, and I tread carefully, aware that her defensive walls sliding into place are the exact opposite of what I need right now.

"There's nothing *wrong* with it. But it's not well equipped for a dancer of your caliber."

"How would you know what kind of a dancer I am?"

I frown. "I *saw* you. You're..."

Incredible. Unfathomable. Mesmerizing.

The adjectives form on the tip of my tongue, but when I try to voice them, it's like they have been glued on and refuse to move.

Ariana shakes her head. "I'm rusty and out of practice. That wasn't the real me. I'm... I quit because of an injury, remember?"

"Well, if that's true, then I think it's clear you've healed. Still, out of practice or not, you're far too talented to be hiding your passion in some eroding building."

She swallows, staring at her reflection in the mirror. "So, what? You bought this so I'd be a good little wife and do whatever you tell me to do?"

A chuckle catches in my throat, and I shrug. "Unless I bought a muzzle and tied you to my bed, I would never expect you to be *good*. Even then, I'm sure you'd draw blood. I think you get off on being deviant."

Her eyes cut to mine, narrowing.

My patience fades quickly, her immediate distrust rubbing me the wrong way. Not an ounce of fucking gratitude bleeds from her, and considering the lengths I've gone to up to this point to make this marriage palatable for her, I find her disdain obnoxious.

"Look," I say, gesturing with outstretched arms at the room, "I don't give a shit what you do with it. Teach classes, dance, host fucking tea parties. I didn't purchase this so you'd do my bidding. If I wanted a doll to dress up and play with, I'm sure I wouldn't have had to pay nearly as much as I did for you."

"Then, what—"

"You're not a prisoner, and you're not some empty vessel I keep around to stick my dick in." I smother a grimace at the term since I haven't even done that. "As my wife, you're my partner, and I want to see you doing something with your time that doesn't involve sneaking around and lying to me."

"I'm not a little kid," she snaps, her eyes darkening. "You don't have to talk to me like I'm in trouble."

"Oh, but you *are*, Little Nightmare." I take three steps, closing the distance between us, and grab her wrist, pulling her hand up so it's caught in our line of sight. Pinching the ring, I start to pull it off, relishing in the way she sucks in a gasp of air as the band slices into her skin. "You're in trouble, and if you want to be spoken to like an adult, maybe you should try acting like one."

She yanks away, shoving at my chest. Murder ignites in her gaze, and I want to reach out and draw her to me because *this* is the woman I married. The one with fire raging in her soul, ready to burn down anything that stands in her way.

Not the bored, complacent girl who's been taking up residence in my bed every night.

This feels like the first normal day we've had in weeks.

I give her a tight smile, feigning nonchalance even though every muscle in my body is screaming at me to take her in my arms. To push her against the mirrored wall and eat her until my tongue and fingers are numb and make *her* watch while I do it.

She'd probably try to kill me if I did that right now.

Fuck me, for some reason, that makes the illusion even hotter.

Clearing my throat, I drop her and turn away, heading for the door. My hands grasp the push bar, and as I open it up, I hear her soft voice drift in from behind me.

The softest, “Thank you.”
And then I walk out.



“CASSIUS PRIMROSE. To what do I owe this pleasure?”

“To whom actually.” Holding my tie to my stomach as I take my seat in the metal chair across from Rafael Ricci, I meet his flat gaze, taking in the dark red jumpsuit and his bloodshot eyes. Prison clearly does not agree with him. “I’m surprised you know who I am though, to be honest.”

“Powerful men make it a point to know other powerful men. Especially when their fathers are shady, spineless motherfuckers.”

I almost smirk. “Like does recognize like, doesn’t it?”

“Shame you don’t seem to be as easy to get rid of.” His forehead creases with a scowl, all formal pretenses dropping.

I almost ask what he means by that, but then it dawns on me—the oleander at the wedding.

For fuck’s sake. Of course he was behind that. I can’t believe I didn’t think of it in the first place.

If Ariana wanted me dead, she would’ve probably done it behind closed doors, where she’d have time to clean up a body. Not in a public place with potential witnesses.

Confusion worms its way through my mind. But she was affected by the poison, like he hadn’t even let her in on his plan beforehand.

Had he tried to kill her too?

Rafael clears his throat, vying for my attention. “In any case, what are you doing here? My daughter not keeping you satisfied enough, so you have to come bother her old man?”

“Ariana is actually why I’m here.” Unlatching the lock on my briefcase, I pull out a couple of forms, stacking them and sliding them across the table.

“A search warrant?”

“It’s not been signed by a judge, so as it stands right now, the filing officer needs to have it amended before he can execute the right to search.”

Rafael gives me an odd look. “Okay, so... what’s the problem? Why are you showing me this?”

Inhaling slowly, I pinch my nose just beneath the bridge of my glasses.

I *despise* when people play dumb.

Irritation swarms my chest like a flock of vultures, and I lean forward, pointing to the signature of the officer who signed off on the document. “Is this not someone on your payroll?”

“How should I know which pigs are corrupt?” He runs a hand through his hair, shifting in his seat. “Besides, they’re not mine anymore anyway. Not sure if you’ve noticed, but I’m in prison, son.”

Pulling the documents back, I shuffle them on the table, rage boiling my blood. I got the serving papers at my office, so I haven’t even told Ariana about them, choosing instead to clean up the mess before it blows out of proportion, since our marriage was supposed to be a cover for this exact thing.

An investigation into whatever the hell she was doing before our union is not something I feel like dealing with right now. Especially when it would inevitably drag me and my underhanded dealings into question, threatening everything I’ve been building.

Normally, I would make the warrant go away on my own. It’s easy enough to bribe officials, and I’m certain no judge in the area would go against my motion to have the request thrown out.

But the nature of the document, the probable cause listed, bothers me.

“I find it alarming how unconcerned you seem with your daughter’s welfare,” I say, crossing my ankles. “You haven’t asked about her, and I know she hasn’t been visiting you, so it’s not like you’re keeping tabs on her.”

“Ah, but clearly, you are.” His lips curve up. “If there’s a warrant out to search her, it means they’ve found something. Vitus wouldn’t risk involving officials unless he’s trying to get an arrest. Otherwise, he’d just steal her away from you. He still wants her, you know. Or wants her name anyway. I’m surprised he hasn’t intervened yet.”

Anger throbs behind my eyes. *I should’ve put a bullet in him outside the club.*

Rafael continues, “She’s slippery, that girl. Unpredictable. You never know how she’s going to react or what she’ll do when she’s upset.”

“You don’t give her enough credit.”

“Credit is given where credit is due, Mr. Primrose. Ariana is hardly a beacon of emotional stability.” He presses his palms into the table, sighing. “Then again, sometimes, I think she’s lucky she turned out the way she did, given the mother she was cursed with.”

The comment strikes me as odd, because in all the research I’ve done on the Ricci family over the years, strained relationships within the immediate five were never touched upon. In fact, it was always widely assumed by the media that Rafael, his wife, and his daughters were incredibly tight-knit, as families in the underground tend to be.

They rely on their connectedness for discretion and networking.

But I suppose they’d think the same thing about my family, and that couldn’t be further from the truth.

“And what of her father?” I ask, rejoining the conversation.

When he meets my gaze again, there’s an almost-thoughtful glint in his eyes. But when he blinks, it’s gone, and I think his daughter is far more like him than he lets on.

“He couldn’t save her from her mother,” he says, looking past me at the wall.

Tapping the table, I wait for him to elaborate, but nothing ever comes. It’s like he’s checked out, stuck reliving his mistakes. I gather my papers and stuff them back into my briefcase, then stand up, dusting off my jacket. The electronic security system bleats from a speaker above the door, and then it opens up, and a guard steps in to retrieve the prisoner.

I nod at him in passing, silently acknowledging my thanks for letting me in. Normally, prisoners of Rafael’s status aren’t allowed one-on-one meetings like this, but clearly, the man has more pull than he’s willing to admit.

A throat clears, making me pause just as I’m crossing through the door.

“Ariana is not what she seems,” Rafael says. “She is a deeply broken girl and not the kind of broken you can repair. She’s shattered glass that slices deep before you even realize what you’ve stepped on.”

Halting in place, I step back inside, requesting five more minutes as my interest piques. I’m surprised he seems so attuned to his daughter, given the dismissive way he acts toward her.

The officer grumbles under his breath, but slams the door shut behind him anyway, leaving us in semi-private.

I stop in front of the table. “Tell me more about her.”

Rafael drums his fingers on the metal. “She likes roses and expensive jewelry. Stuff her nonna had and would gift to her, because her mother would refuse to buy it outright, and I was hardly around to realize what a bitch Carmen was to her. I remember she used to take bubble baths nightly in high school, soaking her feet and muscles after rehearsal. Her feet were always purple, and always bloody.”

“And Ricci Inc.? How did she feel about that?”

Did she care if it went under?

Or would the burning of this empire set her free?

He shrugs, giving me an odd look. “She wasn’t into it. Said the politics and drug running were boring. Frankly, how anyone can say something is boring while they spend their time spinning in a tutu is beyond me—”

I hold my hand up, effectively cutting him off as my mind begins weaving thoughts together, figuring out a way to free Ariana from the clutches of her demons.

“Okay,” I tell him, unsure of whether he’ll agree or not, but still willing to try. “What happens if the company no longer exists?”



DIPPING a roller into the tray of paint, I don't bother turning around as the bell above the studio door dings.

I don't need to look to know who it is.

He comes at the same time every day, as if checking to make sure I haven't burned the place to the ground yet.

Like I would ever harm the best gift anyone has ever given me.

Since Cash told me the building was mine to do with as I pleased, I've been coming each morning after he leaves for the office and doing small renovations. First, it was just peeling the torn, outdated wallpaper and

furnishing the place with padded benches and freestanding barres for optimal stretching.

Now, I'm working on slathering the interior in a fresh coat of paint, so at least it feels more like a place I'd dance—even if I never get around to it.

Footsteps approach, but I still don't turn my head as I glide the roller against the plaster.

"They have professionals you can hire to do this, you know," Cash says, his deep voice making the muscles in my shoulders tighten.

Pressing my lips together, I just shrug, not saying anything.

I guess I'm still a little bitter about him calling me a child the other day even if it was warranted. My ability to hold a grudge—including the unfounded ones—is truly a disease sometimes.

"Ah, the silent treatment." He chuckles, bending down and grabbing one of the extra rollers. "Very mature."

My arm continues working as he joins in, painting in columns beside mine and going over spots that need an extra coat.

Every act of kindness is not an attack, I remind myself because my body feels fraught with tension, constantly expecting the worst. It's like staring at a dormant geyser, waiting for it to burst because you've built your life around the hope that it won't.

I'm used to the eruptions. The fake-outs, where people say one thing and do the opposite.

Maybe that's what's so unsettling about Cash; when you're comfortable in chaos, peace feels like a threat.

Swallowing over the hard knot lodged in my throat, I nod my chin at his handiwork, forcing myself to engage. "Not too shabby there, Counselor."

"Three summers of Habitat for Humanity in high school. Plus, my sister is an interior designer and artist, so painting is kind of in my blood."

I can't stop the soft smile that spreads over my lips. "Are you close with her?"

"Lenny's a difficult person to be close to."

Glancing at him from the corner of my eye, I raise a brow. "Sounds a little like projection."

His roller pauses. "Are you suggesting I'm hard to get to know?"

"I'm just saying, that sounded like something *I* would say about my sisters. And neither of them is the difficult one."

Cash hums, dipping back into the tray of paint, and slides down the wall to start on a wider patch. We work in silence for a few minutes, and I realize belatedly that this is the first time I can remember being with a man and not feeling the need to put on some kind of performance.

I can just sit and paint without worrying what I look like, or what I'm doing, or what he's planning.

"So, you never told me what your plan to kill me is," he says after a while, shucking out of his suit jacket.

I watch, mouth dry, as he rolls up the sleeves of his black button-down, then removes his glasses, wiping them on the collar of his shirt.

His eyes crinkle at the corners when he catches me staring. Clearing my throat, I go back to my roller, switching out the old pad for a newer one.

"You're way too casual about that threat."

"Well, I hadn't pegged you as the *black widow* type, but I'm more than happy to admit when I'm wrong."

Squeegeeing the excess paint from the roller, I turn my wrist and work slowly near the baseboard of the wall, considering how to answer the question.

It feels like a trap. Like he knows something he isn't letting on about.

My gut instinct is to retreat. To clam up and refuse him entry to the deepest, scarred parts of me.

The dark parts I don't let anyone see.

But my tongue has other ideas.

"Drowning."

A surprised sound comes from him. "That is... not what I was expecting."

Moving the roller up and over, I turn my head. "Guns are too loud and too messy. Same with knives. Poison, well, it depends on the type you're using, but that's more of a long game. I wouldn't want to watch you suffer."

"How sweet."

"Drowning is clean, and there's not a large margin of error. No one can hold their breath forever, and empty vessels fill with whatever liquid they're thrust into." I purse my lips, nodding to myself. "If there's a strength disadvantage, the water sort of evens the playing field."

My mind drifts, letting the image play out. I watched my father's men a lot as a kid, observing their behaviors and preferred mechanisms of body

dumping when they didn't think anyone was looking. It was easy to blend in when no one knew I was around in the first place.

It's also something I've grilled my brother-in-law about extensively.

Cash looks genuinely interested, a strange expression on his face. "How would you get rid of the body? Cement shoes?"

I shake my head. "Decomposition would cause the body to detach from the ankles, so that wouldn't work. It'd be better to weigh the chest cavity down with stones, or *maybe* cement, and sew some sort of heavy cloth around it to keep the body together."

"Jesus Christ."

Placing his roller on the ground, Cash pushes to his feet, and for a second, I think he's leaving. Instead, he stalks over and grabs my bicep, pulling me up and dusting me off. His thumbs sweep beneath my eyes, the gesture so unwittingly tender that I have to look away before I do something stupid.

"You're beautiful," he says, fitting his pinkies beneath my jaw and forcing me to meet his gaze again. "I don't think I've ever told you that."

Warmth clouds my cheeks. "Don't make this weird."

"It's weird to tell my wife she's beautiful?"

"Your fake wife."

"Didn't feel fake the other day when I had my fingers inside of you. Or when you let me paint your sweet face with my cum."

My pussy throbs at the memory, and I push his hands away. "You don't get to use that until you *really* touch me. Until then, this relationship exists on paper only."

He retrieves his jacket from the floor, shrugging back into it. "Fair enough. Am I allowed to take you places still?"

"If I say no, are you going to just throw me over your shoulder and drag me out anyway?"

"No comment."



KAL GIVES ME A FLAT, unimpressed look as he pushes his lemon tea back from the edge of the table. Unbothered, I take a sip of my latte, glancing out the café window at the ocean lapping against the beach.

Thick pine trees and gorgeous cobblestone streets decorate the downtown area, almost making it look more like the recreational islands surrounding it. But a sinister presence lingers in the salty air, as if the eyes of the criminals who run the city are always lurking, waiting for someone to challenge them.

It's beautiful, and when Stella and I came to live with Elena on the south side of the island after Papà's arrest, I didn't much mind the evil bleeding from its pores.

Felt like coming home.

Being back for the first time in years though feels a bit odd, especially since I'm not currently speaking to one of the two people I know here. As soon as the ferry docked today, Kal called, as if he had staff at the marina keeping him updated on who came and went off the island.

Not that I'd be shocked if that were the case. He does own half the land and most of its people.

"You're giving your family business... to Cash Primrose?"

Wiping residue from my lip, I set my mug down and nod. "Yep."

He continues staring, eyes blank. "Why?"

"Because he wants it."

"Since when do you just give people what they want? I can't even get you to call your goddamn sister and let her know you're alive every few days, but a stranger tells you he wants access to your family's criminal empire, and you're just willing to hand it over?"

I lift one shoulder, shrugging as I take another drink. My hand shifts, pushing my ring finger to the front of the mug, and Kal glances at it for a millisecond.

Pausing, he looks down at the table, then back up at my finger.

His nostrils flare, and his broad shoulders stiffen. "You didn't."

"Marry Vitus?" I grin. "No, I most certainly did not."

Sighing deeply, Kal leans back in his booth seat, scrubbing his hands over his face. The black band of his own wedding ring is a stark contrast against his tanned skin, and I find it amusing that he's so distraught over my situation when his and Elena's didn't start so differently.

He stole my sister away from her fiancé, married her, and took her from her family, and she used her freedom to turn Papà into the Feds. So, really, the shift of everything in our lives over the last six years can be traced back to the Andersons, and it's a bit irritating that my actions are being perceived as wild and erratic rather than as a natural chain of events.

What the fuck did everyone think was going to happen? That I'd be okay with continuing business as usual, being my parents' little gopher and keeping a tenuous grasp on the tattered remains of the Ricci empire?

Elena was supposed to be the one who took over if Papà ever became indisposed. Not me.

All I ever, *ever* wanted was to do ballet, but no one ever gave a shit about that.

Why would I want to keep something that only ever ruined me?

"And what does your father have to say about this?"

I shrug. "Don't know. Haven't told him."

"Well, surely, you don't think he'll let it go without a fight? He might be incarcerated, but that doesn't mean anything for men like him. If he wants to keep ownership, he'll make it happen."

My heart squeezes in my chest, and I place my mug on the table, wrapping my palms around the warm ceramic. "He doesn't get a choice. It's already done. You and I both know Papà might have some semblance of power still, but he isn't running the show. The Tallericos and the Barbieris aren't even as in charge as they believe."

Kal's jaw clenches, a dimple forming in his right cheek. "Who is?"

Pain lances my chest, like a spear piercing right through the cavity. I glance down at my mug, toying with my ring, focusing on the shanks as they catch on my knuckle, threatening to break the skin.

When I look up again, he meets my stare head-on, resignation lining his dark eyes.

He knows without me even saying it.

"Ah." He tugs at the collar of his shirt. "So, she *is* around."

"Doesn't seem like you've been trying that hard to find her."

"No, because I chose to move on with my life. I want to enjoy the sliver of happiness the universe has finally afforded me and spend time with my wife and daughters while I'm able to. Your mother is of no consequence to me, Ariana."

“She called you a homewrecker because she wanted to ruin your marriage,” I point out, recalling how Mamma tried to come between him and Elena, spewing her jealous vitriol every chance she got and revealing to my sister the nature of their past relationship.

But she left out the important details, like the fact that Kal was a child when the majority of it occurred.

That he, like me, was a victim.

“And she failed to do so,” he replies. “I’ve made my peace with what happened. What I don’t understand is why you seem to have more of an issue with her than me.”

Sitting here, looking at him all calm and collected, I’m inclined to believe he has moved on. He seems completely unbothered by the fact that the woman who abused him is still breathing on this planet despite the fact that she deserves to be rotting six feet under.

Jealousy skates along the lining of my stomach, poisoning my insides as it passes through. For a second, it’s jealousy over the fact that he’s okay, because I’m clearly not, and I have no idea how to get to that point.

How do you begin to fix what’s broken when you aren’t even sure you still have all the pieces?

But the longer I sit with the green monster, letting it fester until my heart is little more than a vacant hole that bleeds continuously. The bleeding never stops, no matter how many times I’ve tried filling the void.

It just weeps ceaselessly, and I feel like maybe *I’m* drowning, and maybe it’s not as quick and easy as I told Cash it was.

Maybe drowning on the inside—where nothing is holding you down, except insurmountable agony—is the most painful way to go of all.

Picking at a chip in the wooden table, I fold my lips together. “When did it stop?”

“What?”

“The... relationship with my mom. The abuse.” I swallow, and it feels like drinking bleach. “How old were you when you got away?”

He frowns, clearly unsure of why I’m asking and how to respond. Silence settles in the booth between us, and I feel him studying me like I’m his patient and he’s desperate for a diagnosis.

Finally, he answers, “Nineteen.”

Tears burn behind my eyes, their fire spreading to my sinuses as he confirms my suspicions.

I always wondered if there was any overlap or if she'd taken a break in between her victims. But the fourteen-year difference between Kal and me adds up, and I realize she must have just picked up where she'd left off with him.

"Was it always... just the sexual stuff?"

Something flashes in his gaze, but it's gone before I can really process it. "No. Not always. She played with my emotions, too. I think she wanted me to love her so the other stuff didn't feel so wrong."

My chest feels like it's been ripped to shreds.

Yeah, I think. That's exactly what she did.

Made us love her so we tolerated everything else.

Blinking rapidly, I soak the tears back in, swallowing them down before they can spill over. Kal remains silent, and for once I'm grateful that he isn't big on conversation because I'm not really sure what else there is to say.

I think he gets it, the unspoken reason behind my question, and no words will change the facts.

The damage is done, and it's not reversible.

It won't ever just go away, no matter how many people I try to punish instead of her.

And even if Kal says he's fine, I don't believe him.

But I'll get his vengeance too.

I won't stop trying to heal us.

"You can't tell Elena," I say, and one of his dark brows quirks up, as if to say *Tell her what?* "About Cash, I mean. Well... I guess I'd prefer you kept this entire meeting on the DL actually."

"I'm not going to lie to her."

I don't know why, but it feels like a threat. "Oh, so did you tell her about the Tallericos? Or Mikey P.?"

His eyes narrow. I've barely had time to think about the announcer and what his guts looked like on the outside of his body, especially since so much else happened after.

"That's what I thought." Grabbing my mug again, I bring it back to my lips, taking a long drink and letting its warmth blossom inside of me. "So, let's just pretend this afternoon didn't happen. Okay?"

"Is that why you're doing this?" he asks, ignoring my question. "Because of..." He trails off, leaving dead air space in his wake.

Interrogation used to be his specialty, and it was what my father kept him around for outside of clinical tasks, but he can't exactly use his old methods on his sister-in-law. Plus, asking for more information implies that he cares, and Kal works hard at maintaining his distance.

It's the reason I knew I would be able to trust him with all of this in the first place. When he leaves here, he probably will try to forget everything, if only because he doesn't want the extra emotional complications.

"I don't want her to have it. Cash is interested, and I don't care if the entire underground world goes bankrupt or gets outed to the government, so long as it means my mother no longer has anything."



MAMMA'S HANDS were always cold. Like she wasn't human, but instead a creature from some other world who didn't understand how to process mortal emotions, and therefore couldn't help what she did to me.

That explanation made things bearable. I could pass off the feel of her between my legs and her fist against the back of my head as her not knowing any better.

The emotional abuse—the insults, the gaslighting, the obsessive control—was harder to write off though. It cut deeper than her nails ever could, slicing open parts of my soul that would never heal. She made sure each

incision was jagged, shaped perfectly so it would scar and leave me in pieces for the rest of eternity.

I know my sisters got some of it, but I think I must have been an easier target.

I was desperate. A little girl who just wanted her mom, no matter what she had to endure to have her.

Even now, I can feel her wrapping her hands around my neck and pushing me down. The pressure is intense, splitting my focus as I claw at her, trying to break free. I can't breathe, and my vision is swimming away fast—though not fast enough.

The image of her crouched over me, dark hair askew and eyes wild, feral, burns itself into my retinas.

When I was younger, I didn't know how to fight back. Didn't know I could.

Now, I kick, and thrash, and scream until the phantom releases her grip on me, cursing as she throws herself aside.

Sucking in a gasp, my hands fly to my throat as my eyes pop open, staring into the darkened room. A single sliver of moonlight peeks through the small gap in the curtains, but other than that, it's silent and still.

My stomach twists into knots, the fear from before still coursing through me, setting me on edge. Every muscle, every nerve ending, feels fraught with ire, and the energy dances its way through my body, uncertain of where to go now that I'm awake.

Cash lays on his side, breathing evenly. I watch his shoulder rise and fall with each passing second, finding myself mesmerized by the motion. Pushing myself into a sitting position, I pull my knees to my chest beneath the comforter and just study him, letting the tranquility of his rest bring me back to some sort of safe harbor.

I lean in, trying to pick up on the woodsy soap he uses before bed, remembering his warning about not waking him in the middle of the night. Keeping my distance nose a few inches away from his neck, I inhale deeply, soaking in the grounding scent.

All my life, chaos was the single constant variable outside of dancing. It's kind of nice having someone around who exudes calmness, even if it's mostly when he's unconscious.

Even if he's temporary.

A bead of sweat leftover from the nightmare rolls down my cheek, slipping from my chin and landing on his elbow. In an instant, a growl rips through the air, and Cash is flipping over, shoving me back against the mattress, and pinning my hands beside my head.

He sighs as he blinks sleep from his eyes. “Goddamnit, Ariana. What did I tell you?”

My fingers are clammy, still clinging to the effects of the dream, even as his warmth begins seeping in and distracting me. “I didn’t mean to. I was having a nightmare, and—”

“A nightmare?” He’s quiet for a few moments, our breaths mingling. “Are you... okay now?”

“I’d probably be better if you weren’t actively still trying to restrain me.”

Scowling, he moves more firmly on top of me, pressing his pelvis into my groin, but just barely. Just enough that I feel the loss when he scales back. “Can’t take any chances with you.”

My chest heaves as I roll my lower half, squirming to give us a tighter fit. The fabric of his boxers pushes at the silk of my sleep shorts, making them ride high until I can feel air between my thighs.

“What happened to Fiero and Cosetta Tallerico?”

I freeze, searching for his gaze in the dark. “I don’t know,” I respond carefully, narrowing my eyes.

“Vitus seemed to think you had something to do with their disappearance.”

“Yeah, well, Vitus also thinks the earth is flat and that he could take as many extra lovers as he wanted, but if I even breathed the same air as another man, he’d try to bash my skull in.” I wiggle against Cash’s hold, gritting my teeth as he bears down harder on me, our fronts lining up and his grip on my wrists turning punishing.

“He hurt you?”

A bitter, surprised laugh comes from my mouth. “Not as badly as I hurt him.”

Blinking down at me, Cash raises his eyebrows. “You really are a bit of a nightmare, aren’t you?”

Snaking one of my legs out from under him, I glide my foot up the back of his calf, hooking it around his waist and forcing us closer together. My top slips down slightly, revealing the top of one of my nipples, and I arch

into him, reveling in the bite of friction against my sensitive flesh. He grunts, his ensuing swallow audible, and I wonder if he can feel how hard my heart is racing.

“I *feel* like a dream though,” I tell him in a husky voice, fluttering my lashes.

His lips brush mine, the softest, most ethereal of touches. “Is that so?”

I nod, my body growing warm and wet the longer he lies still on top of me. He grips my wrists like iron, shackling me in and refusing to let go.

“Kiss me,” I whisper when his eyes dip, and I can feel his stare on my lips. It’s raw and intense, and I need to feel it in other places. “Please.”

For a second, I think he’ll reject me again, and I’m caught somewhere between craving the feel of his mouth on mine and also wanting to keep up the charade of not being able to stand him.

If he rejects me, I can keep on pretending.

If he rejects me, I’m not sure my ego will be able to weather the insult.

“It is a crime that I haven’t before now,” he says after a beat, igniting something forlorn in my chest, lighting it up like a starry night sky.

He releases me and skims his fingers up the side of my jaw. My tongue feels thick, sticking to the roof of my mouth as I slide my hand over his chest and around the back of his head, threading my fingers in his soft hair.

“We can discuss your punishment later,” I say, lifting myself off the mattress, straining for him.

Maybe I should be embarrassed—it’s just a fucking kiss, for Christ’s sake—but I’ve never felt like this before. Like this kiss might be the last breath of fresh air I get before an angry sea takes me asunder.

I want Cash to kiss me more than I have ever wanted anything. More than I want my mother dead, or my father’s respect, or my life to stop feeling like the season finale of a bad soap opera no one is sure will be back.

He tilts my head back, angling it as he leans in. Warmth spreads through me, pooling between my thighs as his lips graze mine—

A knock on the closed bedroom door causes us to freeze. His head whips to the side, staring as he tenses.

My pulse grows erratic, beating against my rib cage as a dozen different possibilities floods my mind about who could be on the other side. Vitus, the police, one of the Barbieri men. I’m not sure how much time we’d have if it’s someone who means harm, but I dart my gaze to the nightstand

anyway, trying to plan a way to extract myself from Cash's human barricade to grab the dagger inside.

I start to move, and he comes down harder on me, grabbing my hands and shoving them to my sides.

"No." He wrenches my head forward. "Whatever you're thinking, do not do it."

"I'm not going to sit here and not be able to defend myself."

Scoffing, Cash pushes off me, slipping from the bed as the knocking begins again. He strides over to the dresser across the room, reaching into the top drawer and pulling out a 9 millimeter. Checking the magazine, he shoves the clip back in and walks to the door, tossing me an indignant look.

"Not a very convenient spot for it," I say under my breath, scrambling up and retrieving my knife anyway.

When I come up behind him, he scowls. "Get your ass back in that bed, Ariana."

I snort. "Make me, Counselor."

His eyes glow, warm in the shifting moonlight, but he doesn't say more. Instead, he grips the doorknob and steps so he's partially shielding me from whatever's on the other side.

The knife is heavy in my palm, and I press the side into my thigh, bracing myself with steely breaths.

Cash pulls the door open slowly, then raises his gun and points as the dark figure is revealed.

"Mr. Primrose."

I blow out a breath, my body sagging forward as Ronnie's voice filters through the air.

"Jesus fucking Christ, Ronnie. What the hell are you doing here this late?" Cash exhales long and slow, lowering his arm.

"I apologize, sir." A light in the bedroom flickers on, and Ronnie takes a step toward us, an uncertain look marring his features. He glances at me, worry evident in his gaze, and my stomach drops in anticipation. "But it's, uh... Mrs. Primrose's father."

My brows arch, and I open my mouth to speak, but nothing comes out. It suddenly feels like I've been swallowed up by a vacuum, and the words sound garbled and distant.

Cash casts a sidelong look at me, then refocuses on Ronnie. "What about him?"

Again, Ronnie's eyes find mine, and for the first time, I find myself despising the kindness within them. I wish I could scoop them out. Keep them from ever staring at me like this in the future.

"I'm afraid he's dead."



MY WIFE BECOMES a robot approximately thirty seconds after she learns of Rafael's death.

She doesn't change out of her pajamas, braving the cool temperatures in a pair of sherpa slippers and the little pink shorts I was ready to tear off her minutes ago. I follow her in silence as she heads down the stairs behind Ronnie, staring straight ahead with an unfocused glint in her eyes.

Grabbing her purse from the living room, I tell Ronnie to take her down to the car and that I'll catch up with them. When the elevator doors close, I head into my home office, dialing Zephyr's number and getting her on the second ring.

“You’re up early,” she says, and I glance at the clock on my computer, noting that it’s just past two. She probably hasn’t even gone to sleep yet.

“Rafael Ricci is dead,” I reply, bypassing any sort of greeting. “At least, according to the call Ronnie just got from the prison.”

Silence.

Then, “Why would they call your driver and not his daughter?”

“My thoughts exactly.” I don’t know what’s going on, but something feels off with all of this. Inmates die and are assaulted all the time, and correctional facilities are notorious for fucking up protocol, but still. They were supposed to contact Ariana. “Look into it for me.”

“On it.”

She hangs up, and I slip back into the bedroom to pull on a suit, grabbing one of my coats from the closet and the pistol from my dresser before heading downstairs. Ariana stands at the back door of a limousine, holding her arms against her chest, as if waiting for me to join her.

When I approach, I drape the coat over her shoulders, not really sure what else to do at this point. Something tells me any sort of comfort I attempt will only be rejected, and that’s never really been my strong suit anyway.

She gives me a little lopsided grin, clutching the lapels against her collarbone. “People will know we’re together.”

“Good.”

If the general public isn’t aware by now, then whoever finds out this way deserves to. There are far more important things on my mind than what they’ll think, and even more, I want the entire fucking world to know who Ariana Ricci belongs to.

We get to the police department in record time, and Ronnie explains that there was some sort of mix-up in the communications office, which is why he was contacted instead of either of us. He says he had to give his information when he took me to visit Rafael earlier this week, and somehow, the phone numbers got switched.

I’m not entirely sure I buy it, but upon entering the building, we’re led to a cold waiting room off the holding cell block, and I don’t have time to think about it too much. Ariana keeps her gaze straight ahead at all times, scarcely blinking, even when an officer comes in to ask if she’d like to claim the body.

“He’s been taken to the medical examiner’s office to undergo an autopsy, but if you’d like for him to be taken to a specific funeral home, we can take care of that here.”

“An autopsy?” Ariana finally checks in, her spine straightening. “Don’t you usually only do those for, like, criminal investigations?”

Discomfort flashes behind the black-haired officer’s eyes. “It’s standard procedure to send bodies for report, especially when we suspect unnatural causes might have contributed to their deaths.” He looks at me, then back at Ariana. “Since we just did our annual physicals, we have no real reason to believe your father was sick or in failing health.”

“Was he—” She cuts herself off, crossing her ankles. “Did you see something that makes you think foul play was involved?”

“Ms. Ricci, we really can’t—”

“Primrose.”

The officer blinks. “Sorry?”

“It’s *Primrose*, and you should be,” Ariana snaps, and I lean back in my chair, studying her as she grows increasingly agitated. Her hands ball into fists in her lap, and she leans forward, shooting daggers at the man. “You fucked up notifying his next of kin, didn’t ask my permission to perform an autopsy, and now, you can’t even get my name right. Are you all stupid? Is that why my father is sitting on some icy slab of metal at a facility across town—because you people are completely inept?”

He glances at me, like he’s expecting some sort of intervention.

I throw my arm over the back of her chair and keep my mouth shut.

“Can I refuse an autopsy?” she asks, turning toward me.

Meeting her glassy gaze, I cock an eyebrow. “Are you sure you *want* to?”

She nods just once, and I feel like maybe I should question her on it. Explain to her that in the event that someone murdered her dad, an investigation might be useful, especially in keeping the underground quiet, as I’m sure once news of his death breaks loose, so will hell.

But then I think about my sister and our father’s death and how no one wanted a report on record for him either. The longer I stare at Ariana, the more I think she might have in common with Lenny, and I can’t help wondering what she isn’t telling me.

Maybe she’s just a girl grieving a great loss, but maybe...

Maybe there’s more to it.

“Well, you heard her,” I tell the officer. “Rafael’s next of kin is formally objecting to the autopsy.”

Sighing, the officer shakes his head, pulling his file from the metal table. “I’ll send the request to the intake department, but I can’t make any promises. If they reject your stance, you’ll have to take it up with them.”

“Fine.”

Again, the officer looks to me for assistance, but still, I offer none. The worst part of being a lawyer is interacting with the police, and I don’t really appreciate the attempt to undermine Ariana’s importance here.

Tapping a pen on the edge of the table, he clears his throat. “What parlor would you like to have the body shipped to?”

Ariana’s mouth forms a thin line. “I don’t know.”

“Well, there’s—”

“I mean, I don’t know if I want to claim the body,” she interjects sharply. “I’ll... I need to call my sisters. See what they want to do.”

The officer nods, zipping the leather binder he brought in with the documents inside as he stands up. He leaves us there, throwing a, “Take as long as you need,” over his shoulder on his way out, and then there’s just silence.

I watch Ariana’s shoulders deflate slightly when the audience is gone, and she runs her thumb over the diamond on her ring finger.

“If there’s no autopsy,” I say, mulling over how to proceed with her, “they won’t be able to determine the cause of death.”

She lifts her head, cutting her eyes to me. “I know that.”

“Are you positive you can move on without finding out what happened?”

Pursing her lips, she seems to consider this for a long time, staring off at the wall with a faraway look on her face.

Folding her hands together, she presses them into her lap and turns in her chair, facing me. “I think that whatever happened to him here is exactly what he deserved.”

When we leave ten minutes later, I’m only mildly surprised to find Elena Anderson standing on the curb outside, hands stuffed in the pockets of the black fur coat she has on. Her dark brown hair hangs loose under a knit cap, catching in the slight breeze that picks up, and her hazel eyes widen to the size of saucers when she sees me walking behind her sister, hand on her lower back.

“What the hell?” Her gaze volleys between us, betrayal burning bright in her pink cheeks. “What are you doing here, Cash?”

My hand falls to my side. “Nice to see you again, Elena.”

“Again?” Ariana looks up at me. “You know my sister?”

“We’ve had brunch together a few times,” I explain. Ariana’s brows arch, and I shake my head. “With *my* sister. They weren’t dates or anything.”

“Yeah, just a busybody lawyer butting his nose into my friendship.” Elena eyes me with a casual disdain, her face pinched as she gives me a once-over. “What are you, making your rounds through my family? Did I not give you enough dirt on the Riccis that you had to go find answers elsewhere?”

Annoyance at her biting tone drives into my chest, burrowing into my heart. I grit my teeth, swallowing down a scathing reply, if only because I don’t really want to head down that road with Ariana standing here.

My interest in the Riccis extends beyond an obvious attraction to the middle daughter; in fact, when I learned last year that Lenny and Elena had become friends because of proxy in company and location, I made it a point to crash every one of their outings together as I attempted to learn more about Ricci Inc.

I wanted to know the ins and outs of the company before I inevitably went for its throat.

Elena seemed to think my fixation was one of genuine curiosity or perhaps even some sort of legal study. And since she was the reason the company went under and her father was arrested in the first place, she wasn’t unwilling to spill some of its secrets.

Still, I didn’t really care for Ariana to find out about our shared history, if only because it makes me seem shady. Even though I’ve been pretty clear from the get-go what it is I want in this relationship.

The problem is, I’m starting to think the power isn’t *all* I want.

“I thought it might be nice to have my husband come with me to identify Papà’s body,” Ariana says, jutting her chin at her sister with a glare.

“Your husband? Good one.” Elena laughs, her breath puffing visibly in the air. When no one says anything, she laughs again and again, blinking rapidly before doubling over, cradling her stomach as she breaks into hysterics.

Ariana rolls her eyes, and I shift my weight on my feet, discomfort spreading through my abdomen.

Straightening out, Elena drags her index finger beneath one eye, like she's wiping away a tear. She licks her lips, waiting for her sister to say something.

"It wasn't a joke." Ariana shrugs, pulling my coat closed tighter around her neck.

"Are you... are you serious?" Elena's face contorts. "You're fucking *married*, and you didn't think to tell anyone?"

"Don't you think it's weird that you're more concerned about that than you are about Papà's death?"

"No!" Elena shouts, stomping over so she's just a couple of feet away from her sister. "Honestly, Ari, what the fuck? Papà was a given—I'm surprised I didn't get a phone call about him sooner. But you? The last thing I knew was you were engaged to Vitus, and then I kept seeing him with these other girls, but you never answered my texts about it..."

Trailing off, she blows out a long breath, dropping her head.

When she looks back up, there are tears in her eyes, reflecting off the streetlights.

"What is going on with you?" she asks, lowering her voice so it's little more than a soft breath of worry. "You didn't used to be like this. You... you told me things."

"People change, E. I'm sorry I can't manage your expectations."

Elena's mouth falls open. "Well, you don't have to be a bitch about it."

"Fine, then don't be a hypocrite. When you and Kal got married, you didn't warn anyone beforehand. You just took off, and I had to learn from our parents, and at that point, there was no changing anything. You were in love, and you weren't coming back for me."

Ariana blinks, seeming to only just realize what she said.

What she revealed.

Even if I don't know what they're talking about, I feel a strange sense of protectiveness rear up inside of me, like a bubble expanding and sucking Ariana into it. I inch closer to her, willing to block out negativity from her sister if need be.

"I would've come back for you," Elena says. "Every time. I just hadn't —"

Waving her off, Ariana loops her arm through mine. “Well, now, you don’t have to.”

My throat constricts, and I have no fucking idea why.

Sadness overtakes Elena’s features, flushing her cheeks, but she seems to catch herself and remember why we’re all here. “So, Papà’s gone? Like, really gone?”

Ariana nods, digging her fingers into my arm.

Humming, Elena smacks her lips together. “Good riddance.”

My phone rings, and I take off to the side to pick it up, watching them interact without me. Their heads bend inward, not quite touching, and a conspiratorial smile lights up my wife’s face for the first time since all of this unfolded.

Argument and secrets forgotten, I watch them turn around and head back into the station, signaling to me that they’ll be right back.

Pressing my phone to my ear, I listen to Zephyr explain what she’s found out—which essentially amounts to nothing.

“You’re letting her refuse the autopsy?”

I make a face. “I’m not *letting* her do anything, Zephyr. She’s a grown woman, and she’s capable of making that decision for herself.”

“No one’s even been able to confirm whether or not Rafael is actually down at the ME’s office,” she says. “The pathologist they usually send people to is retired, and I can’t get ahold of anyone else there. I think, at the very least, she should go and make sure they have him and aren’t just trying to lure her into some trap.”

“What kind of trap would they be...”

My sentence falls off as I turn, staring at the entrance of the police station, waiting for Ariana and Elena to come back out of the front doors.

But no one exits.

There aren’t even any shadows appearing inside, and I think back to what the officer from before looked like, what his badge number was.

His name.

Nico Butera.

The same officer who signed off on the incomplete search warrant.



“I’M PRETTY SURE this is illegal.”

The short, stocky officer from before runs a hand over his greasy hair, leaning back in his chair as his partner cuffs me to the table I was just at for completely different reasons.

Upon going back inside with Elena so she could tell them what funeral home to send Papà to, they grabbed me for questioning and then took my coat, tried to rip off my ring, and dragged me into what must be their only interrogation room.

Elena tried to get them to let her in too, but they shut the door in her face.

Blood smears the tops of my thighs and stains my pink shorts, and I curl my mutilated finger inward just to make sure it's not broken underneath the torn flesh. Unsurprisingly, they've also refused to give me any sort of medical attention or even a rag to stop the bleeding.

I haven't even had a chance to really process anything that's happened tonight, and even now, my brain seems to be primarily functioning on autopilot, carrying me through the bullshit until I can get home, where I'm safe.

My insides are wound a little tight, and anxiety percolates in my chest as I try to think what of what they might want to question me about.

Air grazes the back of my neck from the vent in the ceiling, and I wonder what my sister is doing outside or if she's gone to find Cash.

I can't believe they *know* each other, but then again, I guess I haven't really paid much attention to Cash's relationships outside of the people I've seen him with.

And since I haven't been speaking to Elena at all, I suppose it shouldn't come as such a surprise that there would be aspects of her life I'm in the dark with.

Guilt throbs in my chest. I shouldn't have spoken to her like that outside, but I couldn't stop the hurt and anger from spilling over. Every container filled must eventually be released, and I guess, paired with everything else that's happened tonight, my breaking point was her showing up.

The thing is, she's right. I used to tell her everything. Well, everything that wouldn't make her look at me differently, like some sort of cat with three legs and a bum eye. Outside of the general shared abuse from our parents, I kept the really dark stuff to myself, afraid that if she knew, she'd make a big deal out of things.

And I was scared that if she made a big deal, Mamma would start taking things away from me rather than just making me miserable while doing them. I knew ballet was always just one wrong move from being torn out from under me, and so I kept quiet because I wanted to keep it.

Eventually, I guess the internalization led to resentment, and I stopped telling Elena anything.

Part of me just expected her to get it. To maybe even see past what I was showing the rest of the world and realize that the wounds inside of me were festering.

But she didn't, and I just got worse.

"A real stickler of the law, huh?" the officer who's locking me in place taunts, moving around to the other side once he's sure I'm not going anywhere. "Are you aware that murder is also illegal, Mrs. Primrose?"

"Wow, really? That's actually brand-new information."

The new, lanky officer puts his hands on his belt, leaning against the back wall. "So, at least one rumor about you is true then. You *are* a bitch."

Irritation threads through my bones. "If this is how you conduct all of your interrogations, I'm not surprised that your solved case rate is so low."

"Costs the chief money to solve cases that are usually products of people like your dad," the officer from before says, removing the radio from the band on his bicep. "Why take the risk?"

I tug my wrists against the handcuffs, testing to see how difficult it would be to wriggle out of them. Wouldn't be the first time I've had to, but these are a bit snugger than the others I've been in.

"Now," the lanky one says, "you can choose to be cooperative, or you can keep playin' dumb. But that isn't gonna change the fact that your father's dead body is sittin' uptown with more holes in it than a slice of Swiss cheese, so if you're thinkin' of protecting him, there's no reason to —"

The door to the room bursts open, knocking down a few pictures as the handle lodges into the wall.

Cash's tall frame fills the doorway, his jaw clenched so tight that dimples form in his cheeks. His eyes flare behind his glasses with a murderous rage, and he scans the room, chest heaving when he settles on me.

Excitement flourishes in my veins, like tiny fireworks exploding in my stomach.

"Don't say another word," he snarls, stalking toward me. "This is *highly* unethical. I should have your badges for this."

"We have a warrant—"

"Your warrant is bullshit, and you know it. That's why you waited for Ariana to be alone before you accosted her. If Judge Pottifer wasn't on a cruise right now, I'd have a countersuit already in motion for the unlawful detainment of my wife."

Heat floods between my thighs, and I press them together in an attempt to quell the sudden ache there.

“We’re only asking her a few questions.”

“On what grounds, Butera?”

The stocky one—who must be Butera—tugs at his collar. “We aren’t at liberty to discuss that—”

Cash laughs, but the sound is hollow and maniacal as it wrenches from his throat. “Then, you’re done asking questions.” His hand comes around my bicep, and he tries to yank me from the seat, but the cuffs prevent mobility.

The air shifts as Cash’s chin turns down, and he takes in the fact that I’m half-naked in my pajamas and bound to the spot. It thins out, like the pressure is escaping to make room for hot, electric wrath. I press my lips together, mentally preparing myself for an onslaught of anger. I’m conditioned to expect violence, so my body tenses up, priming itself for the throwing of fists or chairs.

It doesn’t come, of course, because Cash isn’t like that.

His fury is quiet and instantaneous, giving its victims no time to prepare for the storm.

“Uncuff her,” he snaps, voice low. When neither officer makes a move, his foot lashes out, kicking one of the metal table legs. “Now.”

Butera finally gets up, though he’s still moving rather slowly for my liking. He sneers down at me as he fishes the key from the breast pocket of his uniform, then slowly inserts it into the metal, maintaining eye contact as he does so.

I don’t look away, if only because I’m sure that’s what he wants.

He grunts as the cuffs release, and I pull my lip back in disgust, pushing to my feet. Butera doesn’t take a step back, forcing me to knock into him as I stand, and Cash shoves the chair out of the way, creating room for me.

“Her coat,” he snaps, and the nameless one slips out of the room, coming back seconds later with the tan cashmere coat Cash grabbed for me before we left the apartment earlier.

Draping the coat over my shoulders, his hand finds my lower back, and he ushers me out of the room, fingers hot where they press into me. Once I’ve crossed the threshold, I see Elena standing there with a look of utter irritation on her face, and I grimace for a moment, thinking it’s directed at me.

She walks over and wraps her arms around me, her grip tight. “They wouldn’t let me go in,” she says into my hair. When she pulls back, she

cups my cheeks, inspecting me with wide eyes.

“I’m fine, *Mom*,” I tease, extracting myself from her hold.

Elena snorts. “Yeah, right. More like Nonna.”

Cash disappears down the halls, coming back a few minutes later with a wet washcloth and a first aid kit as well as an administrative-looking woman in a navy pantsuit. He guides me to a bench against the wall and stuffs the kit into Elena’s hands.

“Get her cleaned up.” He’s barely even looking at either of us, instead solely focused on the room the officers still haven’t come out of.

“I can give first aid to myself, you know,” I tell him, but he isn’t listening.

When he swings his gaze to Elena, I see a darkness in his stare that has only been there a couple of times before. The night he purchased me and *Ermes* didn’t want to release me and again when he thought I was trying to poison him at our wedding.

Something tells me it takes a lot to draw Cash Primrose’s darkness out, but when it’s there, the only way to taper it is to indulge.

It shouldn’t be attractive, but arousal spins a web through my abdomen anyway, catching every bite of tension and sharp breath as they emit from me.

“Don’t let her out of your sight.” Still, he speaks only to my sister and then strides back across the hall, slamming the door behind him as he closes himself in with the officers.

Elena’s dark brows arch, and she folds her mouth in as she snaps open the kit. “He seems like he’ll be a lot of fun at Christmas.”

The administrator comes over to ask me a few questions about the two officers—*Butera* and *Jones*, apparently—and I take over cleaning my finger when I realize Elena doesn’t know about the ring. She leans back against the wall when the other woman finally leaves with my statement, and I grit my teeth as I wipe off the blood, ignoring the pain from the spikes as they grate into raw, broken skin.

“I’m sorry,” Elena says after a couple of minutes, turning to look at me. “I shouldn’t... be so hard on you, just because *I’m* worried. It’s just that, since I became a mom myself, I have so many issues with how ours was growing up, and... I don’t know. I want to be better than that with my girls. I guess I’ve been using you as practice, and clearly, I have no clue what I’m doing.”

The flecks of brown in her irises and the severe tone of her hair, like burnt umber, remind me so much of Mamma that it takes me a second to look back.

But I give her a small smile anyway, reminding myself that our mother is barely more than a dried-out husk right now. “Well, I’m not an easy test subject.”

“You know your worth.” She shrugs. “I can’t fault you for making people work for your trust and affection.”

Sadness clutches at my heart like it’s a life raft, and I stare at the linoleum floor, wondering if it’s that easy to just forgive someone their flaws or if Elena’s soul is just wired differently than mine.

Maybe forgiveness is harder to come by when you know what it feels like to need it.

“So,” she says after a prolonged silence, swinging her legs on the bench, “Cash Primrose?”

A blush crawls up my neck, heating my face. “It’s complicated.”

She snorts. “It always is.” Sighing, she toys with the solitaire diamond on her left hand and the gold band beneath it. “Are we gonna talk about Papà?”

I lift a shoulder. “Only if you want to.”

Her relationship with him was as convoluted as mine, though maybe even more so, given that she was the one he wanted to one day run Ricci Inc. But when she turned him in and shattered the world we knew, he didn’t have much of a choice.

That was always my biggest fear with him—that our relationship existed only out of necessity. Like a default setting because he didn’t have anyone else to turn to. I want to believe he loved me, even in his own messed up way, but it never stopped feeling like an incomplete chore either.

And no matter what, the business would always have been more important anyway. It’s why I went to Anteros to salvage things with Vitus and Ermes and why I ended up on Cash’s radar instead.

Everything Papà did seemed to be a catalyst to everything wrong in our lives.

And I don’t feel bad that he’s gone.



CASH FINALLY COMES out of the interrogation room a half hour later, but he doesn't look any less livid. His glasses hang from the neckline of his shirt while his face is rigid and appearing as if he aged about ten years.

I swallow, guilt bouncing around my chest like a flyaway balloon even though, technically, I didn't do anything wrong.

Well, not *here* anyway.

Elena leaves us outside the station, heading back to the ferry before it takes off without her. Cash stays several steps ahead of me, seeming to refuse to make eye contact with me as I scramble to keep up, gripping the lapels of his coat in my fists.

Ronnie's waiting up the street, and he opens the back door of the limo, his face sullen. Without looking over his shoulder to make sure I'm coming, Cash climbs in and slides all the way over, making room for me.

I don't follow after him.

Hands in the pockets of the coat, I rock back on the heels of my slippers, waiting. Unease splits Ronnie's focus, and he glances quickly at the interior of the car before down at me.

"Everything okay, Mrs. Primrose?"

"I think he's angry."

"Yes, I believe you might be right."

"How would you deal with him in this situation?"

Ronnie gives me a dumbfounded look. "I've never seen him like this before, to be quite honest. I'd say you're in uncharted waters, my dear."

Fantastic.

Popping my lips to try and stimulate blood flow back to them since it's fairly chilly this early in the morning, I continue standing on the side of the road, considering what I might do.

My throat feels tight with shame, and once again, the sensation that he's angry with me takes hold. I run through a dozen different scenarios in my head, all things I could've done differently that would've helped me avoid being taken in by those two officers.

The longer I stand here, thinking about it, the less inclined I am to get into the car with him, where I'll be trapped with his rage and have nowhere to run.

I didn't even bring my knife or anything else I could use to defend myself.

Though it kind of feels like I've missed the boat on murdering him at this point.

The door on the other side of the vehicle opens, and I watch, waiting to see if Cash gets out.

"Ariana." His voice, low and dangerous, somehow carries over to me. "What are you doing?"

"Admiring Ronnie."

Horror strikes Ronnie's face, and he shuffles back a step. "Sir, I'm—"

"Get in the car, Ariana."

A couple of people pass us by, looking hurriedly away when they hear Cash speak, like he's some troll under a bridge they're trying to avoid. I slide my foot backward, toward the curb and away from him, watching through the open door as his jaw jumps with a tic.

"I can probably walk back."

Cash pinches his nose, removing the glasses he's wearing again. He folds them slowly, tucking them into the door, and my heart kicks violently against my ribs as he exits. His head pops up first and then his torso, and he turns to look at me with a bland, blank expression on his face that truly does little to veil his choler.

Leaning his forearms on the roof, he stares at me.

My body yearns to go to him, to soothe, but my stupid fucking pride doesn't let me. I'm stuck between wanting this nightmare to be over and needing to fuel it because it's better than facing reality.

"You want to walk back?" he asks, completely devoid of any emotion. "I wouldn't anticipate getting there in one piece. This side of town clearly isn't very receptive to Riccis."

Tucking my hair behind my ears, I beam a smile at him. "Good thing I'm a Primrose then."

"Yeah?"

He rounds the limo on that one word, moving slowly toward me. I glance over my shoulder as my heels slip past the curb into the street, making sure there are no other cars veering down the road.

“You think your name will protect you? Those officers inside didn’t give a shit that I was *here*. Anyone who wants to abuse you is going to find a way to do it.”

No shit. For some reason, his comment zaps any playfulness from me, ripping it directly from my soul. The heaviness of everything culminates all at once, bearing down on me in full force, and aggravation makes me stop in the middle of the road.

I’m practically vibrating with the sudden turn of emotional turmoil, and my hands ball into fists at my side. “Wow, my father’s been gone for less than a few hours, and you’re already stepping into the role of *daddy* with your life lessons. How lucky of me to have married such a versatile man.”

“Shut your impudent little mouth and get in the goddamn car.”

My hands come up to my cheeks, and I feign surprise. “Such *language*. Maybe I should spank *you*—”

I cut off abruptly when he pulls a handgun from the back of his waistband, lifting and aiming it directly at me. Our eyes meet, and for a moment, I barely recognize the brown hues staring back at me, wild and unkempt in their fury.

Fear creeps up my sternum with its ghastly fingers, wrapping tight around my windpipe. I didn’t think he was *actually* mad at me, but now, I’m not so sure.

Last time, he was quick to reassure me.

Now, it’s all threat.

We stand there in silence for several harsh beats of my heart, both of us seemingly unwilling to acknowledge yet another shift in our relationship.

I’m not sure this is the sort of thing couples come back from. Even fake ones.

“You aren’t going to shoot me,” I say, trying again to test his restraint or his follow-through—I’m not really sure. I don’t exactly know what I’m doing, and I’m a bit afraid I’m close to fucking all of this up.

Papà would not be impressed.

Mamma would laugh at the inevitable and then probably shoot me herself.

“Ariana,” he repeats, sounding tired.

I wonder what happened in that interrogation room, but I don’t feel like now is the time to ask.

“Get. In. The. Car.”

“Ask nicely.”

His jaw shifts, clenching and unclenching as his stare hardens. Swiping his thumb over the safety, he unlocks the gun and cocks an eyebrow.

Slowly, I cross my arms over my chest, committed to the bit. Apprehension courses through my veins, setting my bloodstream afire, but I don't budge, certain still that he's bluffing.

The sudden, short popping sound echoes through the air, bouncing off the buildings surrounding us, and I squeeze my eyes shut to brace myself for pain.

It doesn't come though.

And the scream that pierces the night sky doesn't erupt from my throat.



RONNIE COLLAPSES against the side of the limo, clutching at his bicep as a guttural sound escapes his throat. Ariana’s eyes flash open, widening when they land on the driver, and then she looks at me with complete disgust.

“Oh my God!” She rushes over to him, grabbing his arm and lowering him into a sitting position on the ground.

Sweat pours down the older man’s face, and his breaths come unevenly as he glares up at me through gritted teeth.

I watch the two of them, blind, inescapable anger still pumping directly into my heart. My hand shakes, and I switch the safety of the gun back on, pressing it into my thigh.

“Who shoots an innocent bystander?” Ariana asks in a high-pitched voice, more genuine emotion bleeding through than I’ve ever heard from her before.

So, she does care about people other than herself. Good to know, I suppose, though it’s clear she doesn’t give a shit about *me*. Otherwise, we’d be almost back at the penthouse by now, and I wouldn’t be close to heading inside the police station for a third time and finishing those officers off the way I really want to.

They deserve more than a simple tongue-lashing and administrative leave for harming something that belongs to me, but I left after their immediate punishment because I can wait.

Ariana is still crouched down, fretting over Ronnie. She shakes off my coat, using it to apply pressure to the wound as it continues spewing blood.

“He’s fine,” I say, approaching them. “It was barely a graze.”

Her head whips around, fury sketched across her face. It feels much less threatening when her tits are practically falling out of her pajama top though.

“How do you know that?”

“This isn’t my first rodeo, Little Nightmare.” I shrug, sliding the gun back into my waistband. “There’s a first aid kit in the glove compartment. He can patch himself up.”

She gapes, mouth wide, and looks to him for confirmation. Through labored breaths, he nods, tossing me a dirty look, and I reach down to grab under her arm, hauling her up. Whirling on me, Ariana shoves at my chest, her anger nearly matching my own.

“I’m not going home with you now!”

“Either get in or I shoot him a second time.” Glancing down at the man I’ve employed for six years, I raise my brows. “Maybe this time, I’ll aim a little lower. Take out a kneecap.”

“He didn’t even *do* anything to you.”

Like a thin rubber band finally reaching its breaking point, my patience snaps, and I yank Ariana into me, wrapping my arms around her middle and pitching us forward. We fall into the doorway of the backseat, and she screams, struggling like hell to get away from me.

Wiggling an arm through, she manages to drive her elbow into my eye, but I wrestle her into the seat. She kicks, losing a slipper in the process, and flips onto her back as I reach to pull the door shut behind us.

The childproof locks latch as soon as we're closed in, and it seems to renew her sense of rebellion. We roll to the floor, and I cover her again as she breaks an arm free, raising her hand, and then her palm connects with my cheek with a loud, resounding *crack*.

We both freeze, and after the initial sting of the assault subsides, a honeyed heat drizzles over my skin like warm wax. It travels down the length of my spine, collecting at the base and sending blood straight to my dick.

I blink down at her as she tenses, clearly expecting some sort of retaliation. But it's like the slap cleared the broken, raging portion of my brain and replaced it with liquid arousal.

My chest heaves. Her skin glows effervescent in the streetlights, and she looks like a fucking dream—not a nightmare, not this time.

A dream.

My dream.

Running the risk of whiplash from my shift in emotions, I blow out a surprised breath and let my weight fall on her.

All of it.

My pelvis grinds into her groin, the motion bending her left knee and pushing it slightly off the seat. She sucks a gasp through her teeth, nostrils flaring as the hard length of me lines up with the softness of her.

“Again,” I breathe, the single word harsh as it pushes past my lips. “Do that again.”

She hesitates, unsure. A scowl draws her delicate features in, setting them on fire. Then, she lifts her left hand, swallows audibly, and repeats the action on my opposite cheek.

The band of the diamond ring is sharp as it connects with my skin, and I feel it tear at my flesh, but the same sensation washes through me. Pain, acute and concentrated, immediately followed by a rush of warmth unlike anything I've ever felt before.

“What the hell is happening—”

I grab the underside of her jaw, shoving her head back, and cut her off by sealing my mouth to hers.

The kiss crackles with aggression and lust, weeks of pent-up sexual tension relieving itself in the act. Her lips yield, allowing me to take charge, even as her body fights for dominance. A hand tangles in my hair, tugging

at the roots, while her other comes up around the back of my neck, holding me as close as she can get.

As if relinquishing, even a little, might cause me to drift away.

I don't think I could be dragged from her at this point.

She licks my bottom lip, then pulls it into her mouth and bites down.

"*Jesus Christ,*" I say into her mouth, wishing there were a way to make our breath into one.

She tastes like divinity, like blood on the cross, come to cleanse me of my sins.

We pause at the same time, her thumb sweeping over my cheekbone.

"You're bleeding," she says, showing me the pad of her finger.

Must be from where her ring sliced me open. I didn't realize she'd broken skin, but I suppose I also didn't care.

She could sever the beating heart from my warm body, and I wouldn't stop her right now.

Shifting, I roll my hips into hers, pushing her thighs apart so I can feel the imprint of her sweet pussy through the layers of fabric between us. When she gasps at the increased friction, I recapture her mouth, driving my tongue inside.

My hands snake up her sides, reaching for the pajama top she has on and yanking it down over her tits. They're flushed in the streetlights, and I imagine that if I reached for the interior lights of the limo, I'd find her painted a bright pink.

I bet the color is everywhere.

Rocking into me, she chases the pressure, and I slide my hands to cradle the back of her head, angling her so I can dive deeper, taste more thoroughly. When this is all over, I want no parts of her left undiscovered.

She breaks away, and I dip my head to her neck, kissing and sucking my way along the column.

"I thought you were angry with me," she whispers, tilting to give me more access.

"Never," I mutter against her skin, inhaling her floral, citrus scent. Ghosting over her collarbone, I press my teeth into the hollow at the base of her throat, then move to cover one breast with my mouth.

"Why were you so upset with them?"

"Because you're my wife and no one is allowed to hurt you."

"Except you?"

Her back arches as my lips circle around her nipple, pulling the taut flesh between them. As I consider her question, my tongue laves over the hardened peak, and I keep my eyes on her face as I flick back and forth, gauging her reactions and memorizing what motions steal her breath away.

“Yes,” I decide, blowing a puff of cool air over the puckered peak, watching it stiffen even more. “Because there are no lengths I wouldn’t go to in order to earn your forgiveness.”

Seeming to accept that answer or maybe incapable of fully processing it, she thrashes her head back and forth. “Ronnie’s right outside,” she breathes, alarm making her go stiff as I slide my hand across her stomach.

“Actually, he’s probably in the front,” I say, lapping my way to her other breast, reveling in the feel of her soft skin against the roughness of my chin. “But the partition is up, and it’s soundproof.”

“Oh.”

Ariana yelps when my teeth nip at her, and I give her a lopsided grin, feeling slightly delirious as I explore her.

“If I didn’t know better,” I say, continuing my descent until my tongue skates around her belly button and then over the exposed skin above the waist of her sleep shorts, “I’d say you’re disappointed.”

She doesn’t respond, but her breathing grows shallow when I hook my fingers into the elastic, tugging slowly.

“Don’t know why I’m surprised,” I murmur, leaving the black lace panties as I free her from the shorts. “You are a performer through and through, aren’t you, Little Nightmare?”

“I don’t want *him* watching.” Her hands fall to the floor, nails digging in as my tongue sweeps out, licking her through the lace. “But I like when you do.”

“I know you do, sweet girl. And I could watch you rub your hot pussy against my mouth for the rest of my life and never get enough.”

My palms glide up the outsides of her thighs, and she lets them fall open. Pressing my mouth against her, I run my tongue along her seam, pausing at the top to suck on her clit over the material.

A small whimper falls from her lips, and I move one hand in, two fingers following the path my tongue makes. My thumb rubs in harsh strokes, repeating the motions I’ve seen her do for me before, and then I’m pushing the lace aside and burying my face in her pussy.

“Oh God,” she moans, bucking her hips, chasing my tongue as it spears into her. “Keep going.”

Eyes on her face, I massage in and out of her, relishing in the musky tang of her sensitive, swollen flesh. It’s like nothing I’ve ever tasted before, addictive and primal, and I realize this must be what heaven is made of. Bursts of wild, intoxicating flavor that I want to sink into and never find my way out of.

Arousal blazes down my spine, pooling in my balls, and I grind my teeth together to try and stave off my own release. It pounds through me like a raging rapid, desperate to unleash itself on the woman who’s been driving me fucking crazy the last several weeks.

Pressing down on her lower stomach, I use my free hand to push two fingers inside of her, curling up with short, quick flicks of my wrist, the same way she did that day outside the city when she was guiding me. My mouth finds her clit again, and I time the lashings of my tongue so they match the rhythm of my fingers.

“Goddamnit,” I grit out between ministrations, my dick throbbing so hard that I can barely think straight. “You’re incredible, Little Nightmare. So warm and wet, sucking me right in. Bet you wish you could have my cock right now, huh?”

“I do,” she whines.

“Yeah?” The word is a single rush of air from my chest. “How hard would you come for me if I slid my dick right into your snug pussy? It’d be a tight fit, maybe a little uncomfortable at first, but you’d open up for me, wouldn’t you, sweet girl? You’d take it all, because that’s what wives are made for, isn’t it? You’d do that for me?”

Chanting to herself, she tightens around me, pulsing beneath my touch, and I know she’s close.

Adding a third finger, I increase the speed, the heel of my hand slapping brutally against her hot flesh. Hers thread into my hair and hold fast as she writhes to meet each thrust, her moans filling the air around us.

“God, I’m such a bad person,” she laments, throwing an arm over her face.

“Yeah, you are,” I agree, driving harder when the words make her clamp down around me even more. My beautiful little nightmare likes a little degradation with her praise. “Just watched your friend get shot, and you’re in here, riding the face and hand of the man who did it. Such a wicked girl.”

“You—you’re worse for shooting him.”

“Never said I wasn’t. Now, stop talking.”

Her eyes flutter closed, and I bite down on the inside of her thigh, making her jump.

“Eyes open. Keep them on the ceiling and watch me make a meal of you until you’re a dripping, delirious mess.”

Confusion twists her features for a brief moment, and then she lets her head rest on the floor, staring up. I see her brows shoot to her hairline, as if she’s just noticing the mirror above us for the first time.

Seconds later, while she watches me attempt to suffocate myself between her legs, she begins unraveling. Her inner walls spasm around me, and I can’t stop the groan that comes from deep within my chest, imagining my fingers are my cock that she’s coming on instead.

Her arousal coats my lips and entire hand, and as I pull back, I wipe my chin on the inside of her thigh and then drag my tongue through it, cleaning up. She trembles with the aftershocks of release, letting out a small sigh when I’ve untangled myself from her.

Pushing up onto her elbows, Ariana combs through her disheveled hair, blinking like she can’t believe what just happened. Frankly, I’m a little taken aback too.

Normally, when someone assaults me, I don’t make them come right after.

Nor do I get close myself.

Never mind the fact that it just goes against my entire plight about not touching her or crossing that line, and yet here we are. The other times, I let myself off the hook because it was her doing all of the heavy lifting, but there’s no denying the way her scent clings to my skin or how her taste has embedded itself in the back of my throat.

This can certainly complicate things, but right now, I’m too drugged up on her to give a shit. The higher she makes me feel, the less I recall everything that happened at the police station, and the fact that I came very close to making a public scene I might not have been able to walk away from.

Would’ve been worth it though.

With a grunt of discomfort, I move toward the backseat of the limo, stretching my back to work through the kinks. The limousine is more

comfortable than a car would have been, but still not the most practical place to devour a woman.

I see her lean forward in my peripheral, but the blood is still primarily in my engorged cock, so it takes a second for my brain to catch up. By the time it does and I swivel around to knock her away, Ariana's already slipped the gun from my waistband and scrambles onto my lap, pressing the barrel against my temple.

The sudden impact knocks the wind from me, and I hold up my hands as she shifts, pressing our groins together. I'm not sure if she does it on purpose, so I clench my jaw, trying to distract myself from how perfectly we fit together.

Shit, shit, shit. I'm going to bust in my pants like a thirteen-year-old.

With her tits in my face and her barely covered pussy grinding into me, I'm mere seconds from losing my fucking mind and embarrassing myself in a way I know she'll never let me live down.

I've never been more turned on in my life, and even though I could probably easily disarm her, part of me wants to see how this pans out. What her goal is or if she's just flying by the seat of her pants with no forethought, the way she seems to coast through life in general.

"I wasn't done," she says, and I raise my eyebrows.

"Pretty sure you came."

"I want more." She slides the gun down, using the barrel to push my chin up. "I'm tired of only getting pieces of you, Cash. Give me everything or stop asking me for the whole picture."

Frowning, I let my hands fall. "You're one to talk. How many secrets exactly are you keeping from me?"

Hesitation clouds her features, and she swallows. Hard. "The only things you asked of me were that I use your car service and don't fuck anyone else. I've been keeping up my side of the bargain."

"Well, I've just changed my mind. If you want more, so do I." Toying with the hem of her top, I knead her soft hips, losing myself in the plush feel of her body. "Why didn't you want an autopsy done on your father?"

She shrugs. "I just didn't."

Liar. I know there's more to it. There *has* to be. She barely even reacted when they told her he was dead, and while I know every journey of grief is different, this one didn't line up with Ariana's personality at all. She was

more upset when I shot Ronnie, whom she's known a month, than she was about Rafael.

Then again, he did say he knew she wouldn't care.

But I don't press, unwilling to scare her off when I have her this close.

"The Tallericos?"

Those beautiful hazel eyes narrow just slightly. "No clue."

My thumbs dig into her hips, and she squirms, trying to dislodge them. All it does is grind her pussy down harder against my cock, and the air constricts in my lungs, making me dizzy.

I try my third question, ending the trifecta of mystery surrounding my stunning, possibly clinically insane wife as she continues holding my own gun beneath my chin.

"And your mother?"

"Why are you so obsessed with her?" She cocks her head, her gaze hardening. "You're too old for her, you know. Not really her type."

My eyebrows draw in. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"If you're interested in my mother the way you're interested in me, she won't be able to reciprocate. She likes them young. *Really* young and emotionally vulnerable."

I don't respond, searching Ariana's face for a modicum of understanding. The gun is on the back burner now, and I try to remember the conversation about her that I had with Rafael Ricci, attempting to piece together a puzzle that I don't even have a picture of to go on.

"Sometimes, I think she's lucky she turned out the way she did, given the mother she was cursed with."

"Ariana is not what she seems."

"...couldn't save her from her mother."

Chest tight, I meet Ariana's stare head-on, and for a second, she lets that guard down. A flash of heavy, burdensome emotion flares like lightning, revealing the bitter, broken girl hidden beneath the performer.

When she blinks, it's gone, replaced once again by flames of stubbornness.

Her free hand falls to my lap, feeling around for the fly.

"I'm done talking," she says, somehow undoing the zipper with a limited range of motion, keeping the gun on me. "Either fuck me or I'll pull the trigger."

A thin smile tugs at the corners of my lips. *How the tables have quickly turned.*

Again, I acknowledge the fact that she weighs nothing compared to me, and it would be insanely simple to shove her off. I'd have the clip unloaded and her pinned back on the floor before she could say another bratty thing, and we could go home. Put this entire shit night behind us and start new in the morning.

But she needs more, and I no longer want to be the one who denies her what makes her happy.

Even if it's something I'm not sure how to give her.



“YOU WANT MY COCK, LITTLE NIGHTMARE?” My husband’s deep voice rumbles like shredded velvet through my chest, setting my skin on fire. “Take it out then. Get me good and hard and ready for that tight pink pussy of yours.”

Butterflies take flight in my stomach as I slide back to his knees, using my free hand to undo his pants. My breaths come in quick, short gusts, and my heart races like I’m afraid he might change his mind.

The gun is heavy in my palm, and it slips as I lose focus while pulling his cock from behind his zipper. I push the barrel into his chest, attempting

to maintain a shred of the threat until he's fully inside of me and I can be sure he isn't going to withhold.

Outside, the sky is starting to turn a deep shade of pink, and part of me wonders what happened to Ronnie. I'm sure he's okay, because we'd likely have heard from him if not, but I'm also not sure what to make of the fact that Cash actually shot him.

Even if it was just a graze. Here, I didn't think the man I married had a truly violent bone in his body, sadistic jewelry aside, but it seems as though I've completely underestimated him.

Any other night, I could probably deal with the teasing and questions, but after everything that's happened, I just don't want to right now.

I want to feel, not think.

Wrapping my fist around his base, I let out a long breath, reveling in the sheer size of him. I've gotten a couple of looks at it before, but holding it is an entirely different ball game. My thumb and pinkie just barely touch, and I push against the purple vein running up the curved underside, my insides coiling like hot metal as I think about pushing it all inside of me.

Cash's thumb comes up, swiping at the corner of my mouth. Blood from where my ring connected with him earlier is still smeared across his cheek, and I'm tempted to lick it off, if only to remind myself that he's human.

"Someone's hungry. Been a while?"

"Well, you haven't been fucking me. My hand and a dildo can only do so much."

"Toys?" His eyes gleam, like he's a kid in a candy shop. "Interesting."

"You say that a lot."

"I'm easily fascinated."

Humming, I dip my head and press the flat of my tongue under the crown, pumping slowly with my hand. Cash hisses through locked teeth, and when I take the head between my lips, he snatches the gun away.

"Hey!" I complain, pulling back.

"I will do anything you want," he breathes, double-checking that the safety is on before tossing the gun to the floor and grabbing a fistful of my hair. "Just put me back in your mouth."

Desperation laces his voice, making him sound needy and strained, and my core clenches hard. Desire flushes through me, heating my skin, and I suck on the insides of my cheeks to collect my saliva before letting it pool out over his tip and my fingers.

Gripping tight, I keep my eyes on his as I dive back in, using my spit to glide my hand more easily. I press a couple of kisses along the crown, then close my lips around him, swirling and sucking until he's yanking on my hair and struggling for composure.

Pre-cum explodes on my taste buds, salty and distinctly him, and I push my head farther, breaching the back of my throat with his length. Breathing deep, I concentrate on how good it feels to be doing this, how good *he* feels, and let out a little moan as my pussy pulses wantonly.

"Fuck," Cash bites out, dropping his head back on the seat. His eyes remain open as I bob up and down, massaging his shaft with my tongue, and I realize he must be watching from the mirror on the ceiling. "Take it all, sweet girl. Swallow me down."

His hand pushes slightly, starting to guide my movements, and I redouble my efforts, unwilling to let him take charge of this right now. If he does, I'll lose my agency. I'll start to think about everything—Papà, my fight with Elena, and the fact that it's clear someone knows what happened to the Tallericos—and I can't deal with any of that at the moment.

I don't want to.

I just want this. Me on my knees, making my husband come.

"So good," he grunts, and I notice his hips are moving a little, rising to meet my strokes. One of his hands comes under me, kneading the soft flesh of my breast. "You look radiant on your knees, barely able to squeeze my cock into your tight little throat. Who knew my wife would have such a glorious mouth?"

Popping off of him, I take my free hand and cup his balls, rolling them in my palm. "Quite a few people actually—"

His chin snaps down, and he digs his fingers into the back of my skull, shoving his cock all the way to the back of my throat. Moisture dampens the insides of my thighs, and I can't hold in the moan that reverberates through my chest with the rough treatment.

"Let's table the *past lovers* conversation," he says dryly, pushing so my lips are flush with his pelvis.

I breathe slowly through my nostrils, though the act grows more difficult, the longer he keeps me there.

"I don't have time to go around, shooting everyone who's ever touched you."

The possession in his voice and grip on my hair send sparks of liquid ecstasy through me, tangling my nerves into tiny, impenetrable knots. Cash's authority feels different from the other people I've been with in my life; with them, I was a simple piece of property. Something to use as collateral, or bargaining, or when they needed to get off.

But with Cash, it's just... different. Maybe because I've known from the start that he just wanted Ricci Inc., and we're only now beginning to delve into that carnal place, but still. There's something about the effort of resistance and watching someone's defenses crumble when they realize they want you too.

And after tonight, fake marriage or not, there's no denying Cash Primrose wants me.

Even if he isn't supposed to.

Dragging me up, Cash removes himself from my mouth, allowing me a second of reprieve. He takes his cock in his hand, smearing my spit and his arousal around my lips before slapping my cheek with the side of it.

I feel dizzy, vibrating with my own lust, and he pushes my head back into his lap.

After another session where he holds me to him, stealing the breath from my lungs, I feel him tense up above me.

"Shit." He starts to pull me away again, but I brush his hands off, picking up the pace. "Ariana, stop, I'm—"

Warm, thick ropes of cum jet into my throat before he finishes his sentence, and a groan that is half-man, half-beast fills the limo, so loud that I feel its rumble in my bones. I'm caught off guard by the sudden impact, and he manages to wrestle free while his orgasm continues, splashing against my lips as he pumps himself dry with my hand beneath his.

His chest rises and falls rapidly, and his head lolls back. I swallow, struggling to catch my breath, and lean back on my knees, watching him.

The corners of his eyes crinkle, and his mouth turns down.

He looks... disappointed.

My heart slices in two.

Wiping my mouth with the back of my wrist, I pull my top up and focus on steadying my pulse. The dejection smarts, but I've certainly survived worse.

"Look, I'm—"

Pressing my lips together, I hold up a palm and shake my head quickly, cutting him off. “God, please do not apologize or say this was a mistake. I might actually kill you.”

I’m met with silence, and after a moment, Cash sighs and roughly tucks himself back into his pants, doing them up without meeting my eyes. When he’s done, he slides to the end of the seat and knocks on the window; a second later, the locks unlatch, and he climbs out, shutting the door behind him.

I sit on the floor, staring at the space he just occupied. There’s a heaviness crushing my ribs, like a boulder that was incorrectly placed and promptly forgotten.

No thoughts even plague my mind as I’m left in my solitude. I just space out, a stream of absolutely nothing looping across my vision, taking me out of the moment. Protecting me, the same way it used to when Mamma did really awful things, like make me reciprocate lewd acts or have someone from Mass join in.

For some reason, those were worse than the beatings or the malicious comments about my appearance and intelligence, because the other stuff didn’t always hurt. It wasn’t always pain, and for a few moments, it was like Mamma and I were on the same playing field.

She loved me during those times, and I only felt sick after.

And then the sickness stuck around, like a plague I would seemingly never recover from, devouring my soul until it was as black and broken as hers.

It’s been a while since I felt the need to go there. My heart’s hardened over the years, producing a shell of its own that is typically pretty impervious to attacks.

But I think the problem is that I don’t feel about Cash the way I’ve felt about people before.

Which means everything that goes wrong is only going to hurt more.



BLOOD SPLATTERS across the chest of my T-shirt as I flick my wrist, bringing the sledgehammer down in a perfect arc. The sound of metal colliding with thick bone is drowned out by a horrific scream, and I watch a crimson wave explode from where Officer Butera's kneecap used to be.

Now, it's mostly a mess of torn, mutilated flesh, the front portion of the patella scattered in pieces across the hardwood floor. For once, I'm grateful that no one in my apartment building ever bothers going to the small, dilapidated basement underneath it, because this would be difficult to explain.

On the surface, it could be presumed that because of my profession, I'm keen to sit back and let justice prevail. And when it comes to strangers, most of the time, I am because I'm no vigilante, and I would have no work if I took a more hands-on approach to getting government officials to review carbon reduction proposals and helping businesses regulate their greenhouse gas emissions.

None of that has potential for immediate ramifications anyway, so I don't see an issue with allowing the system to play out the way it was created.

But too often, in cases where swift action is needed, victims are let down. Justice isn't served, and monsters are free to walk the earth as though they haven't made it worse just by existing.

Administrative leave with pay was simply not enough of a reprimand for the officers who dared to put their hands on Ariana. They tiptoed around the legal system, bypassed protocols, and then accosted her when they thought they'd be able to get away with it.

I tug on the leather belt between Butera's teeth, reveling in the vicious grunt he huffs at me.

And while, normally, I wouldn't care to resort to such violence, I meant what I told Ariana the other night. No one hurts her but me—and only then because I'm capable of making up for it.

Sort of.

The memory of the shameful look on her face the other night plays on a loop in my mind, suggesting that maybe I don't know what to do to repent. Expensive flowers and dinners and jewelry haven't made her budge, and I feel like we've taken a million steps backward.

I've never *been* embarrassed. I didn't realize it felt like sludge, surrounding you until everything but your eyes, nose, and ears were left out, allowing you to bask in paralysis when all you wanted was for it to consume you.

I should've just flipped her over and eaten her until I was ready to go again, but the instant mortification pissed me off. As if there's something wrong with my wife being so goddamn hot that all it takes is a few seconds in her sweet mouth before I'm blowing my load.

She hasn't spoken to me in days. I've taken to just watching her dance in the studio during my lunch breaks at the office, wishing I could just explain what my issue is—the fear of disappointing her.

Instead, I stare at her lithe form on my computer all day, sometimes fucking my fist if she heads home and gets in the shower early. And while I think I might be content to simply exist in a world where she's the only viewing pleasure, her refusal to engage with me is starting to grate on my nerves.

As if I'm being punished because she believes I don't want her when that couldn't be further from the truth.

Still, I can't deny that stringing her along seems to have curbed her desire to stray. If hurting Ariana is what's necessary, I'll do whatever it takes to keep her in my possession.

"Let's try this one more time." Crouching down, I brace one hand on my knee, using the other to tilt Officer Butera's chin up with the sledgehammer handle. "You couldn't get a judge to sign off on the search warrant for Ariana Ricci because they failed to see proof of probable cause in her involvement in the Tallericos' disappearance. But you still chose to pursue her as a suspect."

One of Butera's eyes cracks open slowly. The other is purple and swollen shut from the impact of my fist earlier. "Captain wanted answers."

"And he didn't care that your process wasn't, in any way, legal?"

He scoffs. "Why do *you* care? Clearly, you're not such a stickler about the law."

"I give a shit about the law when I'm paid to do so." Tapping the wooden handle against his jaw once, then twice with more pressure, I watch with a sick sense of satisfaction in my lungs as he grimaces, turning away from the onslaught. "What I care about is that you put your hands on my wife. Tried to intimidate her. Cuffed her to a table like some common criminal. As if you didn't think it would matter."

"We didn't think it would," he rushes out. "Everyone on the force knows you bought the girl."

The handle pushes harder against his chin, indenting the skin. "Yes, I did, and I paid *handsomely* too. Paid to give her my last name, to fuck her, and for no one else to touch her ever again."

"Please," he says, trying to squirm away. "I have kids at home. Just let me go. I'm sorry we took your girl in, but like I said, we *had* to. Someone is determined to find out what happened to Fiero and Cosetta, and I think it has to do with Ricci Inc. going under."

“What do you mean?” I ask, uncomfortable with the underground acknowledgment.

He doesn't immediately give me an answer, which I find irritating. Standing up to my full height, I blow out a breath, swinging the sledgehammer; it arcs in a perfect crescent shape, colliding with his other intact knee.

Bone splits, and Butera chokes on his saliva, crying out to God.

Sighing, I walk to his side and grip the short hair at the nape of his neck, wrenching his head back. “If you weren't such a bad boy, maybe he wouldn't have forsaken you.”

Some of the hair begins to pull from its roots, and Butera lets out a sob. “*Fucking* hell, Primrose. I don't know anything else, I swear. Just that the company is disappearing, and Ricci's men have been getting snatched from the streets. Witness protection, murder, you name it. Things are awry.”

I frown, processing that bit of information. I've already had the company's on-book assets liquidated and started the process of transferring the funds into Primrose Realty's accounts instead. That way, when I file a forfeiture complaint, I can base it on the viability of the business that developed a good portion of the East Coast.

But none of this is supposed to be happening yet.

Looking down at Butera's bruised, bloodied face, I know why.

Vitus.

He's probably going behind my back and trying to get rid of things before I can take over.

Blowing out a breath, I pull my phone out and pull up the tracking app, checking Ariana's location. Unsurprisingly, she's at the studio, and I exhale slowly with relief. The tracking device stays online so long as she has a pulse.

Crouching down, I re-pocket my phone and tilt my head at the officer. His head hangs forward, chin touching his chest, and he whimpers as I reach out, pushing his face up.

“Stop drawing it out,” he says, pinching his eyes shut. “Just kill me.”

I stifle a smile, patting his cheek. “In good time. Now, tell me what you know about the Tallericos.”



BEADS OF SWEAT pour down my face as I pass my apartment building for the fourth time this morning. My gray T-shirt is drenched, rivulets of exertion running down the length of my spine and abdomen.

I haven't been keeping track, but I'm certain I've surpassed the ten-mile mark since rolling out of bed an hour and a half ago. The me from two months prior would probably be impressed with that speed or at least feel a little refreshed, but my entire body is just slogged down with pure disgust.

Not to mention exhaustion since I've been doing the same route over and over every morning this week.

"Hey, man."

Lifting my head, I see a tall, wiry man approaching with a yellow envelope tucked beneath his arm. He runs a hand over his blond crew cut, then wipes it on his black turtleneck before extending it to me. His presence feels vaguely familiar, but I can't put my finger on why.

"Any chance you could let me in?" He nods his dimpled chin at the gate behind me. "I've got something I want to drop off to a resident."

"The mail office has a drop-off right over there," I say, pointing to the blue box across the street.

Turning his head, the man looks at it, then back at me. "Yeah, but this is kind of important. I'd rather hand it to her directly."

"Ah, love letters to your forbidden paramour?" I chuckle, stretching my legs, and then pause as I recall the last time I used that word. My eyes slowly take him in, trepidation suddenly swirling inside of my gut, pressing against the lining. "What did you say her name was?"

A delicate blush sinks into his pale cherub cheeks. "Ariana Ricci."

Of course. Clearing my throat, I reach for the envelope. "I can take it to her actually."

The man hesitates, pulling away slightly, but I'm quick to snatch it from him. "Uh, actually, I think I—"

"Have to inspect it first," I interrupt, sliding my index finger under the glued flap and opening it up. Shaking out a piece of white card stock paper

with gold foil edges, I read the first few lines and click my tongue in disapproval. “Oh, well I’m sorry to say she likely won’t be attending this.”

His eyes widen. “But she’s been dreaming of going to the Boston Dance Association Awards since she was a little girl.”

My jaw tightens, annoyance embedding in my molars. *Just how well does this fucker know her?*

“Well, as I’m sure you’re aware, Ariana has retired from dancing professionally. I’m not sure a ceremony where she’ll have to watch former friends and colleagues receive awards for something she no longer participates in is such a great idea.”

Closing his mouth, the man takes a step back, unease loosening his facial features. “Right... maybe I’ll just text her.”

Slipping the card and envelope into the waistband of my sweatpants, I nod. “Do that.”

I’ll just block your number from her phone.

After he leaves, I head back to town and I break my own rule of giving her space, marching into the studio while she’s got one leg propped up on a barre, toes pointed out as she pushes up on the floor with her other foot. She catches my gaze in the mirror on the back wall, not pausing as she watches me come up behind her.

I’ve showered and changed into a suit now, and I slip the envelope out from the inside pocket of my jacket, holding it out for her.

“This came for you,” I mutter, practically shoving it into her hand. “Special delivery from one Emile Dupont, the current preferred soloist at the Boston Ballet School and apparently a former lover of yours who might be interested in rekindling the flames between you two.”

“You met Emile?” She keeps her leg up but drops the arch of her foot, tearing into the envelope. “Did he call himself my lover, or are you making that up?”

My nostrils flare. “I’m not making up the way he looked when he talked about you.”

Pursing her lips, she lets the card fall to the floor and bends at the waist, curling her upper half over her leg where it’s still stretched out. Swallowing, I follow the length of her body, landing on the heart-shaped curve of her ass, perfectly showcased in her pink leotard and the sheer black skirt knotted at her hip.

The surface of my skin is hot to the touch, and when I finally drag myself away from the paradise I would give anything to tear into, I meet her hazel eyes in the mirror. Her glossy lips curve up at the corners.

“Well, if he looked anything like *that*,” she says, arching her back slightly, “then I understand the issue.”

Adjusting my glasses, I stuff my hands into my pockets. “Are you going to go?”

“Maybe. I used to dream about being invited by the BDA. Their award ceremony is extremely exclusive, and only the best dancers, or those with enough money to buy a spot on the guest list, get in.”

“Well... maybe I’ll join you.”

She opens her mouth and twists her torso around, as if to protest, but I slink out the front door before she has a chance.

I wouldn’t mind if she attended a party with every single person she’d ever been remotely intimate with. So long as I could be at her side, reminding them of the reason she no longer was.



WE DON'T THROW Papà a funeral, but for some reason, Ermes Barbieri insists on having a memorial anyway.

Seems to me like the kind of thing that should be left up to the family, but I suppose, in some ways, Papà was more like family to his men than he ever was to his blood.

They didn't have to grow up, wondering if he cared about them when loyalty was written into their business ventures. If you couldn't be trusted, you weren't involved in Ricci Inc.

I don't particularly want to go to the memorial, but Cash insists. I'm sure he thinks I need the closure or that it will warm me up to him again if

he does this for me, but in truth, I simply don't think it's a good idea.

Everything Ernes does is rife with malicious intent, and I'm pretty confident that this will be no different.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I scowl deeply at the man I'm legally bound to as he casually reclines in his desk chair. I don't know what I was expecting his office to look like, but the minimalist style and lack of personal effects feel very fitting.

"I'm just saying, I think it's a mistake."

He slides a pen behind his ear, shrugging. "He was your father, Ariana. Up until we married, you were visiting him weekly."

I scrunch my nose up, annoyed by the fact that he knows what I was doing before I even knew he existed. "I wasn't... they weren't, like, social visits."

His brows rise, and I smooth my fingers over the satin fabric of the short dress I have on, trying to decide how much I can tell him.

"You're not very trusting, are you?"

"No." I lift a shoulder. "People are selfish, and they take your trust and use it to torment you."

"Love cannot exist without trust."

My face contorts. "Who said anything about love?"

He shrugs, waiting patiently. As if it's so easy to recover from an observation like that out of nowhere.

Still, I get the gist of what he's saying, even as I remove the first part of the equation. *This* doesn't work without trust, and it's not fair of me to ask him for his when I'm unwilling to give any in return.

And outside of the basic mechanics of our marriage in general, I suppose he really hasn't done anything. Even if the illogical side of me wants to poke holes in this, I can't deny that, as far as emotions and partnerships go, Cash has been committed to the bit from the beginning.

Even at the police station the other day, he let me handle things, as if believing me fully capable. I sat through that meeting with my hands clenched, waiting for him to bulldoze me and take over, doing whatever he wanted.

I didn't realize until now how glad I had been when he didn't.

Sucking in a slow, deep breath, I meet his gaze. "I mostly would just visit my father to keep him updated on Ricci Inc. He didn't care about what was going on with me unless it was something that directly affected the

business. I used to think he kept me close *because* he trusted me, but really, it was the exact opposite, and he was just waiting for some massive screwup that would cost him everything.”

Like signing ownership over to someone outside the family.

Oops.

“Anyway, the last time I saw him was the day of our wedding. At the church.” I keep my eyes locked with his, wishing I could drown my insecurities in those rich irises. “The oleander was from him, not me.”

“I know.”

The intercom on his office phone cuts in, interrupting us. “Sir?” Zephyr’s voice comes, no hesitation. “County Attorney Smith is on line three for you.”

Cash doesn’t move to answer it.

I take a step in his direction. “What do you mean, you know?”

Stretching his arms back above his head, Cash lets out a low groan, and I can imagine the relief popping in his joints. The position causes the hem of his wine-red cashmere sweater to ride up, exposing the hard plane of his stomach just above his belt.

I swallow, my pulse growing thick.

“Before he died, I might have paid him a visit of my own.”

“Why?”

“Because the general public thinks my wife murdered two people and I wanted to know his thoughts on it.”

My heart thuds inside of my chest, beating like a bird locked in a cage. Papà wouldn’t have told him anything, but still. It’s unnerving, not knowing what Cash thinks I’m capable of doing.

His gaze doesn’t falter, and I force myself to keep looking, to not be the first to break.

“And what do you think?”

He doesn’t say anything for a moment. Just folds his hands on the desk, leaning in. Then, “I think animals in captivity act differently than those who were born free. And I think you once told me you weren’t *my* prisoner.”

Anxiety swells in my stomach, making it cramp. I wait for more, some sort of reaction, as my body silently prepares itself for war. The muscles in my legs tighten, ready to spring into action if needed, but he doesn’t move.

Just stares at me, stone-faced. As if the reality of what he just said, what he just confessed, doesn’t make me a monster.

“Aren’t you... mad?”

Even just asking makes me feel like I might die.

“Jesus, Ariana, you must not think very highly of me if every time we have a discussion, you think I’m angry. I’m *not*. Regardless of what happened at our wedding, and regardless of the number of times you’ve made it clear you have a detailed idea of how you would like to kill me, I’m not upset. It would take much more than a failed assassination attempt to ruffle me.”

My shoulders deflate, and I stare back at him, wondering how long it took for him to become this way. Detached from emotions, so they don’t drive you to do or say immature things.

Finally, he shrugs. “In any case, if you really don’t want to go to the memorial, then I suppose I can’t make you.”

I snort, function barely returning to my organs as he redirects the subject. “Oh, are you suddenly above using force?”

“Not above it. But making you go to a memorial service feels a bit like adding insult to injury, and I don’t feel like dealing with the repercussions at the moment.”

It’s hard not to feel like he means dealing with *me*, but I ignore the desire to self-deprecate and read between lines that don’t exist. Cash Primrose is not a man of many words, and if I’ve learned anything in our time together, it’s that he doesn’t say things he doesn’t mean.

Telling myself that is much easier than making my body believe it though.

Baby steps, Ariana. Fully functioning adults aren’t built in a day.

“Okay.” I clasp my hands together, suddenly feeling very small in the bare, large room.

An uncomfortable silence passes between us, one of many we’ve had in the days since the limo incident. Which I guess is mostly my fault since Cash has been trying incredibly hard to make up for the humiliation.

It’s just that rejection stings a lot less when you’re able to turn around and do the same.

Pushing his glasses up with his middle finger, Cash scoots in closer to his desk, his attention falling to a stack of papers before him. He scans it for a few seconds, his finger hovering over a button on his phone, but then seems to notice that I haven’t budged and glances up without moving his head.

“Did you need something else?”

A knot lodges in my throat, and I shake my head, turning to leave. “I’ll see you at home.”

He nods, barely paying me any mind. “Text me if you want me to pick up dinner. I can stop by that Thai place again on Fifth Street and grab some of the pineapple curry you liked the other night.”

Warmth fills my chest at the observation and the domesticity of the sentence itself. I walk to the door, where my fingers wrap around the silver handle, and I start to pull it open when the intercom clicks on again.

“Hillary,” Cash says, his voice low and smooth. “Long time, no chat.”

A woman’s voice comes over the line, laughing lightly. “You are not an easy man to get ahold of.”

Pausing, I turn my head, watching as the tension seems to leave Cash’s body, like melting snow. Envy pricks at my heart, locking me in place. His lips turn up, and his eyes brighten, and even though I can’t see the woman he’s speaking to, it’s clear they have a rapport that goes way back.

“...said you’d advised speaking to an accountant before filing bankruptcy,” the woman says, making him grin.

“Well, I’m not a financial attorney, and John was under the impression that bankruptcy grants immunity from tax crimes. Finding out that is not the case was certainly a tough blow for him.”

My feet ache, as I’m desperate to escape their reminiscence, but I can’t make them move. The air in my lungs becomes concrete, impenetrable, and I grip the door handle tighter to keep myself upright.

“Considering the sheer magnitude of your net worth, I think his head was in the right space,” the woman—Hillary, I guess—continues.

His smile widens, and the wound in my heart grows tenfold. “They have people who are definitely better suited.”

My gaze drifts to the floor, jealousy ripping open old scabs I thought had healed. I wish I knew what they were talking about. A rush of regret stabs at my skull, making me feel like a bitch for never asking what was going on in Cash’s world.

Part of me assumed he wouldn’t be able to discuss it, or maybe I was afraid the answer would be *this*. Flirting with women who make him smile.

I’ve not seen him smile like that with me.

When I look back up, Cash’s intense stare greets me. His eyes have darkened back to their usual state as he keeps on with his conversation,

though I've given up listening at this point.

A small, startled breath puffs from my lips when he lifts a hand, crooking his index finger and curling it inward. Beckoning me.

I don't know why, but the air seems to shift, suddenly electric and charged, and I can't resist Cash's pull.

His expression remains completely neutral as I release the handle and make my way over to him. Slowly.

So slowly that by the time I'm standing beside his desk, he pushes away from it and nods his head at the center.

"Well, look, Cash, I don't want to waste your time. Basically, the firm here is obviously little more than a start-up, at best, and we've got this case that's sort of beyond our scope of expertise. We were hoping to maybe bring you on as a consult to our current counsel."

Perching my ass on the edge of the desk, I sit and wait for further instruction. Cash is a foot away, and he strokes his chin, raking his gaze down over me like hot coals.

"It's possible I could be convinced," he says to the other woman, though he doesn't look away. "But what's in it for me?"

My eyes narrow, the suggestion in his tone burning a hole in my stomach. It's obviously for me, but I hate that he's letting her hear it at all.

Tossing my hair over one shoulder, I lean back on my palms and let my legs fall open a bit. The dress, a tight little white number, inches up my thighs, and I push my tongue against my cheek as his attention dips.

Cool air sweeps in, brushing the lacy pink fabric of my thong, and goose bumps collect on my skin as a chill skates over me.

Behind Cash, the windows overlooking downtown Boston are wide open. We're several floors up, but anyone in an adjacent building at the same level might be able to see.

Not to mention, the entire interior of his office, with the exception of one wall, is made of glass, and Zephyr, or another attorney, or even the firm's managing partner could walk past anytime.

The acknowledgment of that sends a little thrill through me, and I swallow the sensation, pushing my thighs farther apart.

His jaw thumps with a tic, and he rolls his chair forward a little.

"We're willing to negotiate commission rates," Hillary tells him. "Though, like I said, we're still in our start-up phase, so we don't exactly have the same overhead as Cupid does."

I slide a hand down the front of my neck, dropping my head back and relishing in the stretch. Gliding down, I rove over my breasts, giving a light squeeze that draws a small, breathless sound from my throat. My nipples harden beneath the motion, and I feel Cash's palms come down on the desk, just outside of me.

Close enough so that I feel his warmth, but not enough to touch.

Not yet anyway.

"Ah, you know me, Hil," he says, so close now that I feel his words ricochet in my chest. "Commissions sometimes take a bit to come in anyway, as external legal fees and such are settled after court. If your case goes to trial, it could be years before I see anything from this. Besides, I have money. I don't need yours."

My hand continues its descent, sliding over my thighs, before slipping between them.

Cash's gulp is audible.

"What compensation would you prefer then?"

"That's a good question."

His breath is warm against my chest, and I tilt my head up, looking down at him through hooded eyes as my fingers begin stroking. I start slow, lightly circling my clit as my entire body coils tight, like a giant spring, caught under his utter rapture.

"I enjoy immediate gratification," he says, his thumbs grazing my skin with a featherlight gentility. "Perhaps you can promise something that will give me more satisfaction in the present time."

Swallowing, I push one of my fingers beneath the lace, swiping up my center.

Our breath catches at the same time as the lewd sound of my arousal fills the air. My clit pulses, desperate for friction, and I can't help wondering if the prolonged pause on the phone is happening because the woman is thinking or listening.

Sparks rain down my back at the thought of it being the latter.

"Fuck me," he bites out, reaching down to rub his palm over the erection growing beneath his slacks.

"Uh... what?"

Cash's brows arch at the woman's voice, and he freezes, evidently just realizing that he vocalized his lust. "Sorry, caught my thumb on a stapler. You were saying?"

I smirk, spreading my legs even wider to give him a better view, then push one finger inside.

He brings his fist to his mouth, driving his teeth into it. For some reason, the wedding band flashing above his nose spurs me on, and I push into the knuckle, the slight pressure drawing my muscles taut.

Good God, I'm close. I'm not sure how it's possible to be this turned on by someone, that just him watching me do something so frenetic and primal has me coming undone already.

But I'm not ready to finish yet.

Withdrawing, I slip from the edge of the desk and walk into him. His hands immediately fall to my hips, gripping tight, and I reach up, tracing the outline of his mouth with my glistening finger. When I push, he opens, taking it in and wrapping his tongue around it.

He sucks *hard*, and wetness pools between my legs.

"...thinking we could hire you on a more permanent basis? Like, as a long-term consult? That way, you'd be guaranteed a stipend, and you wouldn't have to wait."

"Hmm," Cash hums, considering her offer as I move back and reach behind me.

The zipper unlatches slowly, each tooth unhooking and revealing my skin to the air. Goose bumps percolate along my arms, across my chest, and down my thighs, cropping up as more and more of me becomes visible.

When the dress pools at my feet, surrounding my strappy red Versace heels, I think he stops breathing.

The look on his face—one of pure, unadulterated desire—reaches into my soul and tugs up the desperate, broken pieces.

"I like the idea of permanence," he says to the woman who's beginning to feel like an intruder at this point, but I ignore it because it adds to the excitement. "Something bound so irrevocably tight that there's no way you can ever escape it."

His fingers circle around my diamond ring, pushing its spiky band into my skin. I hiss and use my free hand to push him back against the chair.

"Uh, yeah... I guess." Hillary sounds confused, and I press my lips together to keep from laughing. "So, did you have something in mind? You're giving a lot of specifics, but not actually saying anything there, Primrose."

Planting my knee outside of his hip, I straddle him in his chair, rolling us into the window. He grunts as we forcibly come to a stop and grips the leather armrests as I tug at his belt.

“There’s always partnership,” he grits through clenched teeth, keeping his head back as he watches me.

“Partnership? You want partner at a firm you don’t even work for?”

“Look, Hillary, I want something worth my time. If I’m taking on an investment,” He pauses as I yank him free, giving the long, heavy weight of him a rough stroke. His Adam’s apple jumps beneath his skin, and I rise up onto my knees, swirling the beads of pre-cum around his crown.

“If you’re taking on an investment?” Hillary repeats, clearly growing impatient even though she’s the one asking him for a favor.

His grip on the armrests tightens, his knuckles bleaching as I line myself up with his tip, rubbing it between my sensitive flesh and coating it in my arousal.

I’m trembling, impossibly wound with desire for him that I can barely see straight. I don’t bother taking off my heels or my ring, and I don’t even stop to let him undress first. Don’t care that anyone might pass by or try to come in and see me buck naked on his lap, about to swallow him whole.

He nudges against me, and I suck my bottom lip into my mouth, sinking down a fraction of an inch.

Oh fuck.

The stretch is uncomfortable—he must be the biggest I’ve had, and my pussy is seriously out of practice.

Hands claw at my hips, indenting the skin as I drop down another inch, coaxing him in. My heart lurches into my throat, and I grab on to his shoulders, steadying myself against the onslaught of intense pressure.

I fall forward, moving my hips to continue working him inside of me, pulling up and then going lower, accepting more. At the halfway point, it feels so fucking good that I think I might faint, so I lean forward and press my face into his neck, pacing myself.

His pulse is erratic, alarming and frenzied, and I stare at it while it throbs beneath the surface of his skin.

“If I’m taking on an investment,” he finally manages, speaking again to the woman on the phone, startling me momentarily, “I want to make sure I’m getting my effort’s worth. It doesn’t really matter where my exact

loyalties lie, so long as we're both certain that, at least in the moment, I would rather not be anywhere else."

And when he pushes his pelvis up from the chair, driving into me the rest of the way and obliterating every thought in my mind, my mouth falls open, and my teeth sink into him, catching the moan that shreds my throat apart.



I'M FUCKED.

So unbelievably, irrevocably fucked.

I had no idea it would feel like this. Like being overtaken by inescapable flames and at the same time continuing to pour kerosene on yourself so that you don't ever stop burning.

Happily, I realize. This is the kind of fire you don't mind. The kind you'd sit with for the rest of eternity, if only you could keep remembering how incredible it first felt.

Ariana's mouth has an iron grip on my neck, and it takes every ounce of strength I can muster not to blow the second I feel her bear down on me.

The feel of her exquisitely sopping pussy wrapped tight around my cock is indescribable, and mixed with the bite of pain as she scores her teeth into my skin, I think this *must* be what heaven feels like.

I can't imagine it being anything less. Why else then would so many be willing to die in its honor?

Hillary Smith babbles away, trying to make some sense out of my response to her question about compensation. I've already forgotten what she wanted in the first place.

All the blood rushes to my dick, which is so swollen that I think any movement might set me off. Ariana rocks her hips, trying to get me to do something, but I can't budge on account of how deliriously good it all feels.

I will not have a repeat of the night in the limo.

"Jesus, Cash," she whispers, finally releasing me. "You're huge."

Squeezing her hip, I turn my chin up to the ceiling, my control hanging on by a measly thread. "Has to match the personality."

She leans back, flipping her hair over her shoulder, and I take a second to admire the absolute perfection that is her body. Taut stomach and hard muscle from a lifetime of ballet, full breasts that I want to leave bite marks all over, and ass I want to bury myself in.

Then, there's the heels.

I don't know why the heels add to the eroticism of what we're doing, but for some reason, they do. It's as if she was overcome with passion and need that there was simply no time to do something as basic as kick off her shoes.

Ariana isn't an easy person to impress, so the idea that she wanted me that badly is incredibly appealing.

"Cash? Did I lose you?"

Hillary's voice breaks the fog of lust, and I blink, trying to remember what it is she just said.

Clearing my throat, I slide one palm up Ariana's back, outlining her spine with my fingertips as I scoot closer to the desk. "Yeah, sorry about that. Sometimes, the reception here is—"

Sharp arousal lances my abdomen as Ariana rocks herself slowly, bringing my tip to the very edge of her before sliding back down with a harsh thump. Our skin slaps together, her ass hitting the tops of my thighs, and she does it again, locking her hands behind my neck.

I gasp out a ragged breath, my eyes drifting to where I disappear inside of her. The connection is intimate, wholly unique, and I could watch it for hours.

Lazily, I drag my thumb down her hip, finding her clit as she fucks me. Her pussy clamps around me the second I graze that bundle of nerves, and I press gently, teasing while she grinds.

“More,” she pleads, extending her fingers and tangling them in my hair. She wrenches my face back, lifting so I’m barely inside of her, then covers my mouth with hers as she slams all the way home. “Fuck me, Cash, *please.*”

The sound that comes out of me is inhuman, some cross between carnality and utter despair. My hips move, beginning to thrust in time with hers, and the chair creaks beneath the weight, banging into the glass behind us.

“Whose pussy is this?” I ask, pounding up with so much force that the window rattles.

“*Yours,*” she rings out between the gnashing of our lips. “All yours, Cash, just please don’t stop. Keep going just like that.”

My name falling from her lips, like she can’t stop saying it, is the sweetest symphony.

The kiss is ferocious, all teeth and fluid and exploration, and I never want to stop.

Our tongues meet, lashing and tasting, and I wonder if anyone from the finance building diagonally across the street is watching. They keep their windows wide open, just like me, and I’m certain it would take no effort at all to make out our writhing bodies if someone there just looked.

They’d see Ariana’s perfect ass bouncing off me as I start to fall into it, absorbing her thrusts; she rotates the motion of her hips, switching from figure eights to straight up and down to slow grinds, where her clit rubs against my pelvis each time I push back in, making her so tight that I see stars.

“Fuck, sweet girl, you feel so goddamn good,” I moan, breaking away from her mouth. “Do you have any idea what you’re doing to me?”

She doesn’t answer, too busy increasing her speed and force, like she needs me to fall over the edge before she goes. Her focus is unilateral, her gaze falling to our laps, studying like she’s afraid she might fail.

Her breathing is strangled, but the movement grows a little mechanical, and I brace my palm on her lower back, sitting up and crushing her tits into my chest. My free hand cups the back of her head, twisting in her soft hair and forcing her to slow down.

Her mouth falls open, likely to protest, but I just shake my head and grip her hip, guiding her movements.

In and out, as simple as breathing.

Shit.

Nausea churns in the back of my throat as she tips her chin up, wielding those big hazel eyes at me like a fucking weapon.

As simple as breathing? Where the fuck did that come from?

As if anything with this woman has been *easy* and not like performing open heart surgery without having any knowledge on how to do so.

But I don't care about the work, so long as my end result is *this*—having her in my arms, tucked in close, where I'm the only one who can reach her.

I'm pretty certain she's never had anyone in her life that's ever just wanted to be with her. To exist as a planet in her orbit, and for the life of me, I can't understand why.

Ignoring the thoughts racing through my mind, I redirect my attention instead to her. The thrusts grow slow and languid, and she lets out a string of moans that send white-hot electricity ripping up my spine.

Gritting my teeth as release pounds inside of me, threatening like the tide brushing against the shore before a tsunami, I sweep my fingers through her hair, and she arches into me, silently asking for more.

I'm not going to last much longer.

Ariana exhales, taking back over, rolling her hips. I glance down, sliding my hands over her ass, and notice the state of my pants for the first time. She leans in, pressing her lips against my ear.

“Do it,” she rasps, our skin slapping together like thunder. “Come inside me, Cash, so you can watch it drip out of me after.”

When she bites down on my earlobe, I let out a strangled noise that scalds my throat on its way out. The image and sudden jolt of pain are too much, sending waves of intense pleasure through me, and I unravel in seconds, every single thread of control within me disintegrating into dust.

I don't have time to warn her or to push her off of me. In fact, my body doesn't seem capable of removing her from me at all. I take her hips in my

hand as a groan pushes out of my chest, slamming her down over and over until she starts spasming around me too.

With one last thrust, I seat myself fully inside of her and come, painting the inside of her pussy like one of those canvases she hung up in the apartment. She tilts her head back, pulsing around me, and her fingers dig into my neck as she joins me in tumbling completely over the cliff of oblivion.

Our breaths fill the room, harsh and rapid, as we sit there, trying to regain conscious thought. It feels like my soul has just been sucked directly from my body, and there's no way I'll ever get it back.

I don't even think I want it anymore.

"Uh... Cash? I think... maybe I should call you back later."

We both freeze, our eyes popping wide open as the call clicks off, a dial tone suddenly ringing out. I forgot Hillary was on the fucking phone, too caught up in how phenomenal fucking Ariana felt, and Hillary's continued presence means she just sat there the whole time, listening to us fuck.

Something about the image makes the entire ordeal that much more enthralling, and I can feel myself becoming interested again while still shoved inside Ariana.

Rolling us closer to the desk, I slam my thumb down on the phone base, hanging up.

"Holy shit," she mutters, dropping her head against my neck. "I can't believe she heard all of that."

Laughter shakes her shoulders, and I fold my lips into a thin line, trying to ignore the way joy makes her pussy squeeze.

Or maybe it's the smile in her voice, the one I can feel pressing into my sweaty skin. Something I've only gotten from her on rare occasions, so having it now feels like some sort of gift.

She sits back, and I marvel over her body again, taking my time now to touch every inch of her naked skin. The curve of her breasts, the freckles scattered beneath her collarbone, the tiny, faded circular scar on her ribs.

I've clearly given up any hope of not being with her physically, so I might as well go all in.

"Will you get in trouble?" she asks, pulling me from my reverie. "I mean, isn't this technically public indecency?"

"Not technically, no. It is, plain and simple." I pinch a nipple between two fingers, my chest tightening as it puckers under me. "But I'll be fine.

I'm not the one who's naked anyway."

Her mouth falls open, indignation lining her pupils. "You'd let me take the fall—"

Swooping in, I press a brutal kiss to her lips, cutting her off. They part, allowing me entry, and I dip my tongue in, seeking hers, wanting more.

Always wanting more.

I think that's the fucking problem.

Greed has always been the main driving force in my life. My singular motivation to get out of bed every day because anyone who says money doesn't buy happiness is wrong.

You can buy happiness. You can buy *anything* if you know its value.

But my greed extends beyond that little green monster and blends into feelings I have for Ariana.

I don't want to let her go.

When I pull back, she looks a little dazed, and I smirk. "Everything okay?"

She nods, silent, staring at me like, suddenly, she barely recognizes the man before her. One of her fingers comes up, touching the scar on the corner of my mouth. "How'd you get this?"

I push my thumb into the scar on her side. "You first."

A swallow, and she stiffens in my arms. I don't think she'll tell me, content to keep her little secrets, but then she says, "My mother. She isn't my biggest fan. She, ah, liked to take out a lot of things on me. Sometimes it was just emotional chess, other times it was physical, and sometimes..." Pausing, she looks down at me chin, then exhales slowly. "Let's just say that five-years-old is a really early age to have to grow up."

My heart cracks in half, fury pulsing through me at the thought of her mother putting her hands on her in repulsive ways. No wonder Ariana is the way she is.

I'm surprised she isn't worse.

"Boating incident," I tell her, taking the ensuing silence as her request to not continue. Frankly, I'm surprised I got that much out of her, and I don't think pushing her is the right move at the moment. "My dad took me to a yacht party one year, and we got into it. His wedding band busted my lip wide open, and I never went to another outing with him again."

In fact, my hatred for the man only grew tenfold. So much so that, when he died, I was more than a little bit satisfied with the resolution.

Clearing my throat, I trail my fingers along her collarbone, relishing the way my touch seems to ignite something in her. It's like those times I've watched her come alive when she dances, twisting and molding her body to fit into choreography as if it's the most natural thing in the world.

"I thought you didn't want anything to do with me," she murmurs after a moment, her eyes turned down as she tracks my movements. "You said so many times that you didn't want to touch me—"

Cradling the underside of her jaw, I tilt her head back. "I also told you it wasn't like that. I've wanted nothing more than to have my hands all over you since the moment our eyes met in that club weeks ago. If I'd had my way, I would've taken you to the back and feasted on you, even knowing your fiancé was off somewhere, waiting for you to get home."

Bracing my feet on the floor, I release her jaw and slide my hands beneath her thighs, hauling her into my arms as I stand up. The chair rolls out from under me, crashing into the window, and I drop her naked ass onto my desk.

She lets out a surprised yelp, catching herself on her palms, and I roll her onto her stomach and tear her underwear off with a snap.

My eyes fall immediately to her pussy, swollen and red from the pounding it just got. Cum leaks from between her lips, sticking to her thighs, and I slip my phone from my pocket, snapping a quick photo for later.

Then, I reach down, smearing myself all over her flesh.

Grunting, she pushes back into my hand, sliding her arms up so she can grip the edge of the desk.

"This is the only thing I've wanted to do since I claimed you at Anteros. Even when I thought you were trying to kill me, I wanted to bend you over and make that priest blush."

With my free hand, I tug at the tie around my neck, loosening it and shrugging out of my jacket. The button-down is next, discarded quickly, and then I'm shoving at my dress pants and kicking out of them, my cock stiffening already, just from the silken feel of her wet, abused pussy.

I should probably close the retractable blinds every window in my office has, but I kind of like the idea of someone like Jay or Zephyr walking by and watching me claim my wife. Immortalizing it in a way that can't be done when it's just the two of us.

A sigh of content comes from her. “Why didn’t you? I thought... maybe you weren’t attracted to me.”

There’s vulnerability laced in her tone, and it’s my undoing.

She is my undoing.

“Fuck, Little Nightmare. I’m so goddamn into you that, sometimes, it physically hurts. When I watch you dance, I want to hold you in my arms and keep a piece of that passion for myself.” I breathe deep, stroking myself as I slide two fingers into her, pumping lazily. “I just didn’t know *how* to touch you.”

She seems to consider my sentiment, and I wonder if she understands exactly what I’m saying.

That I’m admitting things I’ve never told anyone, just so she’s more comfortable.

“There’s no wrong way,” she says finally, arching her back so her ass juts up into the air. “I want whatever you’re willing to give me.”

I let out an uneven breath. “Well, just remember, you asked for it.”

Fisting my cock, I withdraw my fingers and push the head against her lips. It goes in slowly, inch by painstaking inch, and already, I think I would like to die like this.

Brutally wrapped up in her chaos.

Palming her ass, I spread her cheeks apart, shunting myself even deeper than before. She sucks me right in, her pussy clinging to every ridge of my shaft, milking it for her own pleasure.

I retreat, leaving just the very tip in, and she lets out a pained whimper.

My fingers sneak around her front, pinching her clit, and as she exhales, I plunge all the way back in, bottoming out inside of her.

“Oh God,” she moans, pressing her forehead into the wooden surface.

“Does this feel like church to you?” I bring my hand down on her ass, and she tightens around me. “Save your prayers for Sunday, Little Nightmare, and say *my* name when my cock is inside of you.”

The tempo of my thrusts increases with the demands, each slap of my balls against her pussy setting me off. I fuck her hard, mimicking the way she moved before—so hard that the desk shifts, scraping across the floor with the viciousness.

Arousal spins a strong, sticky web through my insides, and my balls draw up again, threatening to spill before I’m ready.

“I need you to come,” I bite out, sweat beading along my forehead as I try to hold off. My head throbs in tune with my cock as it saws in and out of her, and I smack her ass again, earning a loud cry from her lips.

“Cash, I’m so close.”

“Play with your pussy,” I growl, pushing down on her lower back. “You’re so good at making yourself come for me. Do it right now.”

She brings a shaky hand between her thighs, and within seconds, she’s clenching, her inner walls molding to my cock as she crests the edge of her orgasm. Mine follows quickly, barreling like lightning through my veins and shooting out of me before I have a chance to look up and realize we actually *are* being watched.

And that her ex-fiancé just saw me dump my cum inside of her.



I EXPECT Cash to let me up as soon as he notices Vitus, but he doesn't.

As he pulls out of me, his hand remains on my lower back, keeping me flat against the desk, and then I feel him between my thighs. The blunt ends of his fingers delve between my lips, squelching as he pushes his cum back in, and my entire body quivers from the aftershocks of release.

My eyes fall closed, Vitus's presence not even enough to keep them open right now. Euphoria makes my limbs heavy and rich, like melted chocolate, and I just lie there, unable to form a coherent thought.

Besides, I could've stopped this when I first noticed him, but I didn't. Didn't want to.

I liked the look of pure horror on my ex's face.

"Don't want any of that going to waste," Cash mutters, leaning down so his front is flush with my back.

Something presses against my mouth, seeking entry, and I open on a reflex.

His fingers hook in, and my tongue automatically wraps around them, lapping at the flavor of *us* on him. It's warm and musky, exploding on my taste buds.

After a moment, Cash pulls away from me, and I hear the quiet shuffling of clothes from behind me. He dresses as if he has all the time in the world—as if Vitus isn't standing just outside with a look of murder on his face, which I'm sure he's not too far off from acting on.

Cash drapes my dress over me, and I only have enough energy to turn my head. He's already dressed, knotting his tie beneath his chin, and I just notice that, somehow, during all of that, his glasses stayed on.

"Get dressed," he says, and I groan, my body protesting all movement. "Look, I don't care that he saw me fucking you. Serves him right. I'd fuck you in front of the entire city, just to show them who you belong to. But I'll be damned if he gets to see you fully naked ever again."

My stomach flutters, though I roll my eyes at his Neanderthal verbiage anyway to keep up appearances. No one needs to know how soft I get after good sex. In truth, I wouldn't have known until this moment, where all I want to do is curl up against Cash's side and stay there until the energy returns to my body.

But I don't want to lose face, so I just push up and step back into my dress while he blocks me from view. My thong lies shredded on the floor, and I watch as he bends down and tucks it into the safe behind his desk, avoiding my gaze while he locks it inside.

"Do you often keep souvenirs from your conquests?" I ask, running a hand through my hair as I check my reflection in the window.

"I don't have conquests."

My head turns, and I remember him saying he didn't know how to touch me. I thought that was just fluff, but now, I'm thinking he was being serious.

How is that even possible?

I look at him as he strides over to the door, yanking it open and running a hand down the front of his suit.

“Mr. Tallerico.” He takes a step back, and Vitus storms in, making an instant beeline for me. “Ah, I’d advise not moving behind that desk. There’s a little red panic button underneath the front edge that sends this entire building into lockdown when pressed, and I don’t think you want SWAT coming in. They tend to shoot first and ask questions later.” Cash pauses, idly making his way back to me. When he’s at my side, he gives Vitus a slow once-over, as calm as ever.

“And for you,” he says to Vitus, planting his palms on the desk and leaning forward, “I’d tell them to shoot first and not ask any questions at all.”

Vitus scoffs, shaking his head, and then his dark eyes return to me. “What did you do with it, huh? Taking my parents wasn’t enough? You had to go and fuck up my legacy too?”

“*Your* legacy?” I cross my arms over my chest. “I don’t think it’s called Tallerico Inc., but correct me if I’m wrong.”

“Doesn’t matter what it’s called. You were barely ever a part of it. I gave my *life* to your father and this business. Fuck, I gave it to this entire fucked up world, and now, you’ve gone and just pissed it away for some dickhead in a suit.” He licks his lips, cutting a sideways look at Cash. “Your mamma said you were a whore, but I never believed her. Should’ve listened.”

His words set fire to my lungs, but I inhale, extinguishing the flames before they can fester. I don’t want to waste my anger on a moron like Vitus.

“Well, who knows? Maybe the new owner would’ve been okay with keeping you on, if you hadn’t just insulted his wife.”

Cash’s brows draw in, and he starts to counter, but Vitus slams his fist on the desk.

“There is no keeping anyone on, Ariana. Ricci Inc. is *gone*.”

Dread fills my gut. “What?”

“All the contacts, every port outside of the city where we got product, every single dollar sitting in offshore accounts that managed to evade the Feds—gone. The registered name doesn’t even exist anymore, and the protective contracts we had in place with elected officials have just upped and disappeared. Whatever you did, you did it real fucking good, and I want to know why you insist on ruining my goddamn life.”

What does he mean, it’s gone? Organized crime doesn’t just go away.

Not even with the way many crime families run their organizations as Fortune 500 companies, using legitimate stocks and investments like my father to hide his trafficking and protection rackets. That level of power and intricacy doesn't just disappear.

"I didn't—"

"If anyone's ruined your life, Mr. Tallerico, I'm afraid that's likely a result of your poor personal choices. And if you have formal allegations you'd like to make against my wife, I'd suggest a trip to the police station. This office will only partake in her defense."

I swallow, staring at my ex and trying to make sense of what he's saying. A week ago, Ricci Inc. existed. Drug operations were being shifted solely to a couple of smaller families up north, where people tend to be less suspicious of the locals. Protection services were still being enforced, especially with politicians who wanted their voting records doctored or past mistakes erased.

Ermes Barbieri is still running his family operation, so unless he's somehow absorbed ours, I can't fathom how Ricci Inc. could just... disappear.

"You hitched yourself to a sinking ship," Vitus says, pointing a finger at Cash. "If one of Rafe's men doesn't gut her for turning into an informant, they'll have her ass in a federal prison faster than you can threaten me."

"This is a sinking ship you wanted to kill me over," Cash points out. "One you've tried having detained for the disappearance of your parents—"

Vitus's face turns crimson. "She *killed* them! I fucking know she did. And she probably had that psycho brother-in-law of hers help her clean it up, so we wouldn't be able to prove it, but there's no—"

Cash pushes the button on his intercom, sighing. "Zephyr, please have security remove Mr. Tallerico." He pauses. "Inform them that he's become quite hostile... and next time, please warn me before allowing a visitor back."

She voices an immediate apology, explaining that he got through somehow when she was in the restroom. Two security guards show up within seconds, forcibly removing Vitus from the premises.

He glares at me while they drag him away, and I clench my jaw, violence pumping through me. Something doesn't add up with all of this or the fact that this is the first I've even seen of him since Cash bid on me at the Anteros auction.

Given how possessive he was of me when we were together, it doesn't make sense that he'd stay away.

I'm on edge, uncertain of what's going on as the world seemingly implodes around me.

When we're caught in silence again, Cash swivels around to me, an unreadable expression on his face.

"I need to know what you did with Fiero and Cosetta." My lips part, and he shakes his head, reaching out to grip my bicep. "Don't give me vague answers or excuses, Little Nightmare. Just the truth. I cannot help you if I don't know the full story."

My gaze drifts down to that scar on his mouth, my vision growing hazy as I recall the night we met.

The stuff I did after.

It was mostly a test. Just to see if I could actually go through with it.

Cyanide takes less than an hour to shut down the internal organs of a mostly healthy adult man. The timeline is slightly shorter for an adult woman.

Kal had warned me that it wouldn't be pretty. They'd lose control of their bodily functions and possibly seize before leaving consciousness behind. The primary bathroom in the Tallericos' home was covered in vomit, to the point where I couldn't step anywhere until my brother-in-law showed up to help clean.

I don't know what he did with the bodies—that much is true. He rejected my request to leave them there as a message to my philandering fiancé, especially since he was getting involved himself. Now a family man, Kal Anderson swears he's left this world behind.

We both know the truth, but I let him take care of things his way anyway.

I'm not sure I'm fit for prison.

Sucking in a deep breath, I swing my gaze to Cash's. "The truth is," I begin, ignoring the acid incinerating my esophagus, "I was born a broken girl, to people who would spend their lives breaking me even more. So, when the occasional opportunity arises to reclaim some of the soul they damaged, I take it."

And I have never felt even an ounce of remorse for it because younger me deserved so much more. Younger me deserved someone who protected her, and I couldn't then.

So, I do it now.

His eyes search mine—for what, I’m not exactly sure. But then he nods, seeming to accept the answer.

I leave a few minutes after, heading to my studio across the street. Ronnie sticks to my side like a shadow, then takes up residence at the front door. I make my way to the back, digging into the duffel bag I keep in the changing room.

Warmth radiates down my neck once I’ve stripped off my dress, and for a moment, I think it’s just heat from the air vent spilling out. When I turn my head, checking my surroundings, there’s no one around, so I yank on a pair of leggings and a T-shirt, grab a turning board from one of the lockers, and walk into the main part of the studio again.

The mirrored room feels a bit claustrophobic as I set up in front of one of the portable barres. Or maybe that’s just anxiety clawing its way out of me, trying to warn me against impending trouble.

Inhaling deeply, I start my session, testing out a string of new choreography I’ve spent the last couple of weeks mapping out. My feet fall into each step, and my arms embrace the movements, curling up as I finish on a twirl that feels never-ending while I’m in it.

I kick my leg out, holding the spin for as long as I can without using the board; it dies slowly, gracefully, and as I come to a complete stop, I’m not at all surprised to be met by a pair of vicious, dark eyes.

Mine dart to the front of the building, where Ronnie stands, stretching his arm inside of his peacoat, elbow up in the air.

“You can’t trust him,” Vitus says, and I wonder how he even managed to get in here since the outside handle of the back exit is broken off. “That husband of yours. He’ll toss you to the wolves when your cunt stops satisfying him.”

I exhale, exhaustion overtaking me. “Lots of accusations you’re throwing around today.”

“I’m serious. You don’t think he had some ulterior motive, buying you? Do you know how much money he spent? What was the fucking point of throwing away millions of dollars?”

Millions? Trepidation swarms in my stomach, and I feel a little nauseous. Obviously, I knew the man had money, but I didn’t realize he’d spent so much of it on me.

Taking a step away from him, I keep our eyes locked, waiting for any sudden moves. He slips a foot forward, sliding his hands into his pockets, as if feigning innocence.

“If Cash finds out you’re here, he’ll kill you.”

Vitus tips his head back and laughs. “I’m not afraid of some stuffy lawyer with a giant ego. I’ll put a bullet between his eyes and then fuck you while he bleeds out, just so he knows he didn’t win with me.”

Anger boils in my blood, and I curl my fingers inward. “Touch my husband, and *I* will kill you. And I won’t be as nice as I was to your parents.”

Victory flashes in his eyes, and comprehension rings between my ears. He was baiting me, and now that he has a confession, he won’t stop until I’ve paid in some way for their deaths.

When he lunges for me, I take off in a dead sprint, shoving the turning board aside as I run to the changing room. Throwing myself onto my duffel bag, I dig my hands inside as he grabs my ankles, yanking me toward him.

The carpet in this room is unforgiving, grating against my stomach as my shirt rides up. I grunt when he grips my hair, pulling so tight that I’m forced to push up with my hands to avoid him ripping out the strands.

My fingers graze metal in the bag, and I wrap them around the sheath, sliding it off. I shift when Vitus does, gripping my shoulder to roll me over, and when he’s almost got me on my back, I swing my arm underneath his, jabbing quick and hard.

Blood drips down my fingers as the knife lodges into his stomach. His mouth falls open, rage and shock mixing as he looks down, clawing at my hand.

Gritting my teeth, I push deeper, using every ounce of strength I can muster until he’s lost enough that I can push him off me.

He falls to his side, his shoulder slamming into the carpet, and I scramble to my knees, distancing myself from him.

A gurgling sound comes from his throat, and he flops onto his back, bending a knee before sliding the knife out.

I stand up, staring down at the man I once thought I’d marry. The one who preyed on my insecurities and used them to keep me in line while he did whatever he wanted, with whomever he wanted.

Our relationship was never about love or even lust. It was the power dynamic he craved, and I can’t stop the satisfaction pulsing through me at

our current predicament.

Now, he has nothing.

And as I stoop down, brushing back the hair from his forehead and giving him a soft smile as I drive the knife back into his abdomen, I'm glad he gets to die, knowing that.



RICCI INC. IS GONE.

Vitus wasn't kidding about that much.

With the exception of a small branch out in Maine that still bears the official company as some sort of parent brand, distantly removed, it's as if Rafael Ricci's empire never existed in the first place. His own criminal record was expunged, and his time in the correctional facility outside the city is linked to some misdemeanor drug possession rather than what he wound up being convicted and sentenced for.

But now, Vitus is gone, too, and I'm starting to find the woman I share a bed with at night a little suspicious.

Granted, I've always been wary about her because of the treasure trove of secrets I'm certain she possesses, but still.

She all but admitted outright to being involved in the Tallerico murders, but that's the only thing she's been fully forthcoming with. Everything else is information I have to drag from her, usually by fucking it out of her.

Which I don't mind doing. Ariana becomes very, very pliant after sex, and I'm starting to regret not succumbing to my physical attraction sooner. Perhaps if she'd been more palatable from the start, some of the confusion and mystery could've been avoided.

I'm not naive in thinking sex is some sort of cure for the hurt she's experienced in her life, but it is some sort of balm. She climbs on me each night and sheathes my cock inside her snug heat, riding me until we're both a panting, exhausted mess of bodily fluid and limbs.

Then, I flip her over and start anew, unable to keep myself from learning new ways to make her toes curl and moan so loud that the neighbors three floors down complain.

We do it all again in the morning. And at lunch, either on my desk or against the mirrored wall in her studio with her little leotard pulled to the side and her fingers wrapped tight around my throat.

I've spent so much time inside of her after our tryst in my office that I don't go running for a week, and the next time I slip out of bed at three in the morning, my body screams its protest.

There's a sluggishness living in my veins that I've never felt before, and it's tempting to give in and let it take over. Every atom of mine would be happy to stay put, tucked around Ariana in bed, where I can be certain she's safe and not getting into trouble.

But thinking that way does her a disservice and threatens any progress we've made in our relationship. I don't want to be like the other people in her life, who make her question their intentions and do whatever they can to temper her personality.

I happen to like her personality the way it is.

My sister meets me at a short bridge midway through my run. She's bundled up in a pink puffer jacket with a white knit cap pulled over her head while her fiancé stands slightly behind her with his hands tucked into his leather jacket.

Coming to a stop, I frown at her. "Thought you were coming alone."

Lenny rolls her green eyes, punching my bicep. “You didn’t think I was going to get you a meeting with Kal Anderson, did you? He and Jonas go way back, and he’s far more likely to agree to sit down this way. Trust me, I’ve barely spoken three words to the guy.”

“Don’t you and his wife have brunch every week?”

“Yeah, but since we added Cora into the mix, he doesn’t come around at all anymore. Personally, I think it’s the blue hair, but she refuses to change it.”

Jonas smirks, his violet eyes crinkling at the corners. “That is most certainly not the reason, love.”

I blink at her. “Who the hell are you talking about?”

She sighs, looping her arm through mine and starting down the road. “One day, I’ll catch you up. There are a lot of people you need to meet.”

Though Dr. Kal Anderson is at the top of my list.

We take the short ferry ride to Aplana Island, and Lenny ditches us at the marina for a blue-haired woman and her tall, onyx-haired companion, who stands back with a leash wrapped around his wrist, the end of which is attached to a little black dog. They take off toward downtown, and Jonas walks us to a matte-black Range Rover, gesturing for me to climb inside.

No words are spoken on the drive to this little Italian eatery, and I give him a look as he parks the vehicle.

“We’re meeting here?” I ask, taking in the pale pastel siding and the red and pink flowers lining the windows.

“Just trust me, all right? Anywhere else, he’s liable to just kill you for irritating him because most places in Aplana don’t have witnesses who will care. This is one of the few public venues that will because it’s owned by Ermes Barbieri’s grandmother, and she doesn’t put up with any bullshit.”

Even the mention of that fucker’s name causes irritation to flare in my gut.

Jonas and I exit the vehicle, and I try to push my animosity toward the Brit behind me.

In the time he’s been with my sister, I’ve known him to be primarily two things: the man who once tried—and failed—to kill my father and the one who would kill anyone who breathed wrong in Lenny’s presence.

Still, I’ve been holding on to some archaic notion of protection where my baby sister is concerned, and I’m afraid it’s bled over into the

relationships she's had. But it's hard to stop coddling someone you've seen at their very worst and who desperately needed it at a time in their lives.

Either way, by the time we walk into the restaurant and spot Kal looming in a booth at the back, I have very little opinion of Jonas. I suppose, if my sister loves him, he can't be that bad, but I'm not really interested in pursuing more from him.

If he wants to help out, great. We won't be drinking beers together and watching football anytime soon.

Weaving through the small, circular tables and wooden chairs, Jonas walks directly up to his old friend, stopping just short of the booth. The man looks like a fucking vampire, sitting there in his trench coat, with his dead eyes staring at the table as he says something to himself.

I follow Jonas, my gut shrinking as I realize the doctor isn't alone—there's a small child sitting opposite him, coloring on a napkin with a red crayon.

The doctor's jaw clenches when he notices us. "Gentlemen," he greets, his voice completely devoid of any emotion. "I'm busy."

"This'll only take a second, mate," Jonas says, then scowls, turning to look at me. "Right?"

I shrug. "I guess that depends on what he tells me."

Kal's hand curls around a white ceramic mug, and he brings it slowly to his lips, taking a sip of the steaming liquid. The movement reveals a small pomegranate tattoo on his wrist, and I school my surprise at the thought of him allowing someone to drag a needle through his skin.

He keeps his dark gaze on the little girl in front of him, as if unwilling to take his eyes off her for even a moment.

"What can I help you with, Cassius Primrose?"

"I'd like to know why you're helping my wife cover up dead bodies."

Clearing his throat, Kal sits up a little straighter in his seat. Jonas shoots me a dirty look, then reaches for the girl. "Q, why don't you come with Uncle Jojo and we'll go put some change in what might be the last jukebox in the entire world?"

Kal whips his hand out, barring him from touching what must be his daughter. She glances up, her black curls falling into her face, big doe eyes seeking out her father. Part of me expects her to say something, but she doesn't, instead just shrugging and going back to her coloring.

Gritting his teeth, Kal slides from the booth, then grabs Jonas's shoulder and directs him to where he just got up from.

"You stay there and do not let her out of your sight."

Jonas gives him a lazy salute, already bending down to talk to the girl about the snake-haired creature she's drawing. Kal motions for me to follow him to the patio seating out front, and I do, pushing my glasses higher up on my nose as the cool sea air whips against them.

Out here is far less crowded, likely due to the chilly temperature, so I suppose we're freer to speak.

"There is nothing in this world I wouldn't do to make my wife happy," he says after a beat. "Not to mention safe, which means taking care of potential liabilities."

"And Ariana is one—"

"Her occasionally impulsive decisions are. Before a couple of months ago, it was normal adolescent rebellion—ignoring phone calls, partying constantly, spending all of the money her grandmother left behind after she passed. That was manageable. But then, one day, she called me out of nowhere, a week or so after she began ghosting her sisters, and said she needed my help."

I stand there, processing his words.

"Obviously, the murder of two prominent figures in the underground was going to be a fucking nightmare even if Vitus never discovered who was to blame. So, I stepped in and cleaned up the way I would any other job. The way I *did* for her father for most of my life."

Ah, yes. Kal worked for the Riccis from age thirteen until his thirties, around the time he and Elena married. I don't know the exact details about that arrangement, except that his employment ended around a short time before his wife turned her family into the Feds.

"Is this something I should be concerned about?" I'm not sure why I ask because I'm not sure I care either way.

I'm afraid I'm in far too deep for that.

"No." He says it so suddenly, with such assurance, that I can't help but blink at him.

Amusement flashes in his eyes.

"You're not afraid of her, are you?" When I don't immediately answer, he chuckles. "Good. You should be. The Ricci daughters are a terrifying species. Sirens that draw you in and then devour you whole."

My expression flattens.

“Look”—he turns, glancing inside the restaurant, likely to keep an eye on his child— “murder fundamentally changes you. It’s not possible to come back from that the same person you once were, and sometimes, it feels good. Sometimes, you don’t want to come back.”

A chill crawls up my spine, though not because the information is unnerving.

Because I know exactly what he means.

“But do you know what else changes people?” he asks. “Abuse. Constant, unending abuse, especially at the hands of the people who are supposed to love you. So, no, I don’t think you need to be concerned. Ariana has an agenda, and it will likely end there. However, you should maybe consider the long-term effects that vengeance can have on a person and whether or not you’re sticking around to be her main source of support.”

He says it like he knows the truth behind our marriage, and I swallow, considering his words carefully, not really sure what to do with them.

My support of her was never in question.

“She doesn’t know what it’s like to face your demons and come out the other side, completely alone. I don’t think she realizes how close she was to them in the first place.” Kal exhales, running a hand through his hair. “I know I didn’t.”



WHEN I GET BACK from the island, I find Ronnie pacing quickly outside of the apartment building, hands clasped tight behind him. Sweat pours down his face in waves, and I keep a wide berth as I approach him, a grocery bag in hand.

“Everything all right?” I ask him.

His head whips to the side, his arms forming an immediate defensive stance, as if he thinks I might attack him.

I exhale, pinching the bridge of my nose beneath my glasses. “Ronnie, it was a fucking graze—”

“Mrs. Primrose is upstairs with Mrs. Primrose, sir,” he rushes out in a single breath.

“What?”

“Your mother and wife—”

Not letting him finish the sentence, I drop the bag and break into a run, getting to the elevator in seconds and mashing the Up button until it glows white. The trip to the penthouse feels like it takes a hundred years, and by the time the car finally stops at the top, I’ve run through roughly every possible scenario in my mind, ready to push the greedy bitch I crawled out of three decades ago off the nearest balcony.

Ariana and my mother sit in the living room, the latter sipping from a floral teacup I’ve never seen before. Anger bubbles up in my chest, burning holes in the lining, and I step in quietly, clearing my throat to gather the room’s attention.

“Oh, there he is!” My mother plasters a wide, drunken smile on her powdered face, gesturing toward me with her cup. “The pride and joy of the Primrose family, back from one of his mysterious escapades.”

I ignore her, keeping my gaze on the brunette to her left. “Little Nightmare.”

Standing up, Ariana crosses the room quickly to me, tucking her hair behind her ears and revealing the emerald stud earrings I gifted her on my way in from the office last night. Pride blooms behind my ribs at her new willingness to accept the things I buy her, but I shake off the feeling, refocusing on the issue at hand.

“What the hell is my mother doing here?”

Ariana shrugs. “Ronnie let her up, so I figured it must have been okay with you.”

“It is most certainly not.”

She purses her lips, turning her head to consider the bitch in the other room. “Want me to kick her out?”

My brows lift. “Aren’t you going to ask what my problem with her is?”

“Nope. I’ve been up here long enough with her to gather the gist.”

A smile tugs at my lips, flipping them up at the corners, and I wrap an arm around her waist, pulling her in close. “God, I lo—”

We both freeze, our eyes meeting. I can see mine, wide and motionless, in her pupils. My throat constricts, anxiety slashing through my entire body until it feels like I might faint.

Her head cocks to the side. “Care to finish that sentence?”

I press a finger to her jaw, tilting her head back so I can fuse our mouths together.

But I don’t answer because what the hell?

Where did that even come from?

My mind slides down an incline of existential dread as we kiss, warring with my body. God, she tastes incredible, and she smells like the clementine body wash I know she uses because I’ve lathered her in it every day this week. Her lips open for me, and she accepts my tongue as her fingers pinch at the lapels of my suit jacket, hinting at what she wants.

“Later,” I murmur into her mouth, earning a displeased sound from her. “Get rid of the witch.”

“I just made a pot of coffee; I’ll make it really strong, and she’ll probably leave of her own volition. Or maybe I’ll just tell her you’re poor,” she says, wiping my bottom lip with her thumb.

My dick throbs, desperate to be inside of her already.

“She’s made it very clear that she only came here for money, and word on the street is, your wife had a hefty price tag.”

I pause. “Who told you that?”

“A ... friend?”

My jaw clenches. “Better not be a friend whose name starts with the letter *E*.”

Playful deviance lights up her eyes, and she lifts a shoulder to her chin. “Guess you’ll have to come to the awards banquet with me and find out.”

Chuckling as she practically dances out of the foyer, I meet my mother’s gaze. The air immediately changes, electricity shifting into some sort of disdainful, untethered energy. The same kind that has existed between my mother and me since I was a child, watching her sit back and enjoy life while everyone around her was miserable.

“Why are you here?” I ask, my voice tired.

“Well, you wouldn’t bring her to me, so I felt I needed to meet the new Mrs. Primrose.” She takes a sip of her drink, wiggling her brows. “She’s beautiful—that much is certain—but are you sure marriage is such a good idea?”

“We’re already married, Mother.”

“I know that, but this is the twenty-first century, Cassius, and you weren’t raised Catholic. Divorce is an option.”

The comment grates against my skin like sandpaper, reminding me that, technically speaking, Ariana and I are still operating on an expiring schedule, though we never set a permanent date. It's always been sort of rolling with the punches, waiting for one of us to buck up and add a bit of permanence to our situation.

Maybe that's why neither of us has—because we don't *want* to order an expiration.

At least, I don't.

Not anymore.

“Darling, I don't want to fight. I just came to see if you'd changed your mind,” she says after a moment, setting her teacup on the coffee table in front of her. “I gave you your space, my darling boy, but it's time to respect the contract you signed and the deal you made.”

“What about the deal *you* made, Mother? The one that said, when you push three kids into this world, you're supposed to provide for them?”

Her eyes narrow. “You never once wanted for a *thing*, Cassius. Don't be so dramatic.”

Moving closer, I lower my voice, not wanting Ariana to overhear as my patience dries up, completely spent. My hand lifts, index finger pointing out in accusation.

“I wanted a mother. A father, too, sometimes. I wanted parents who gave a shit if I was around, or if I was happy, or—I don't know—when their daughter was sexually assaulted.”

Her nostrils flare, but I'm not done.

“Not wanting for material possessions doesn't mean shit, Mother, except that it taught me what was important in life, so I spent most of mine wanting only one thing: money. And then when Dad died, I decided money wasn't enough, and I wanted the power he had given up too.”

She blinks at me, eyes wide.

My stomach churns violently, but I press on. “Maybe I didn't want for anything important. And whenever I did, I made it a point to go out and *get* it because I knew I didn't want to end up like you, begging people for scraps. I stopped waiting around for things to come to me, and I took them instead. So, no, Mother, I won't be divorcing Ariana because I paid for exactly what I wanted, and I won't be giving you a goddamn cent, because you're a manipulative shrew who doesn't deserve it.”

Getting to her feet, she clutches the lapels of the fur coat she has on, keeping them closed at her throat. Her heels click loudly on the floor, echoing against the ceiling, as she makes her way over to me with a strange look on her face.

“Fine,” she says, anger making her seem decades older than her years, “but you will regret this decision. And you’ll regret keeping that little floozy at your bedside when she’s liable to get you killed. The men in her world won’t leave her be, Cassius. They won’t settle just because she’s changed her name and extracted herself from her father’s business. It won’t stop.”

Looking up, I meet Ariana’s glassy gaze from across the hall as my mother pushes around me, taking the elevator down.

I know, I think to myself. That’s why I want them at my mercy.



THE NEXT TIME I go to my mother's apartment out of town, Cash seems incredibly reluctant to allow me to go on my own.

Against my better judgment, I let him tag along, picking at my fingernails the entire trip up. Nerves tie my stomach into knots, and I spend the ride trying to nitpick everything about me so that when we get there, her jabs won't hurt.

Cash has no idea who we're going to see, and I want to keep it that way until the very last possible moment. When it comes to Carmen Ricci, the less he knows, the better.

He reaches over the console and takes my hand in his, rubbing his thumb over the diamond ring on my finger. I watch him caress it, as if it wasn't a piece of torture equipment and instead a simple staple of his love.

His love. Discomfort lodges in my throat as I think about those three words I swear he almost said the other day.

The real horror wasn't that he felt them though—it's how desperate I apparently am to hear him say it. As if my entire life has been leading up to this one single moment, for someone to see me at my worst and still want me anyway.

He knows things no one else does. Except Kal maybe and only because he's better at disposing of evidence than I am. Otherwise, I'd be sealed up tight like a vault, and no one but Cash Primrose would have the key.

I don't know why exactly it's so easy for me to open up to him, but regardless, I have, and I can't take any of that back. Not even when our little union ends and all I'm left with is the knowledge that I did something good for younger me.

Even if present me winds up unhappy and alone, I can deal with that.

"Are you ever going to let me take this ring off?" I ask him.

He curls a finger protectively around the jewelry. "The whole point of it is to show others you're off the market. Why would you want to take it off?"

"Well, for starters, it hurts."

His head turns, and he flashes me that smile—the bright one that seems to be just for me. "You don't seem to mind a little pain when you choke on my dick at night or when I paint your ass blood red with my hand."

My face heats, and I press a palm to my cheek. "But I ask you to do that."

Slowly, he withdraws from me and drapes his wrist over the steering wheel, and it feels like an absolute loss. The kind that lingers in the back of your throat, a hole that won't ever close.

I want to reach out and pull him back to me, but my hands are superglued to my lap, refusing to move.

Swallowing becomes impossible, and I suddenly feel like I fucked up.

"I-I'll still wear it. It's not a big deal."

Cash's smile slips away. "What?"

A tremor works its way through me, and I fall farther down the rabbit hole of panic. Squeezing my hands together until they ache, I try to

suppress the trembling.

Staccato breaths escape me, and it starts to feel like I'm floating, detached from myself as I try to get my heartbeat under control. It pounds between my ears like a gong someone won't stop hitting, and nausea curdles in my stomach, threatening to unleash everywhere.

Memories flash across my vision, painting my past in heavy reds and blacks—bruises that look like constellations, blood that looks like a broken kaleidoscope spread across the tiles.

Color in the form of sound—angry, throaty admonishments and unnatural, unwanted moans.

Sobs. Mine and hers because I couldn't even feel *pain* without her commandeering it.

Anything I felt got undermined by her perception and experiences until those feelings were warped and twisted on an axis.

Until it was me who was in the wrong.

Me who she was angry with, for a multitude of reasons.

Tears sting the backs of my eyes, and I pinch them shut to keep them at bay. The absolute last thing I need is to add something for Mamma to critique.

The ring on my finger suddenly becomes suffocating rather than just painful, and I pull at it, trying to get it off. Its bands catch on my knuckle, splitting the skin like it did the first time I tried to do it. This time though, I don't give up when I see blood bead beneath the rose gold.

I just keep yanking, ignoring the pain lancing through my finger, focused on getting it off.

"Hey. Stop."

Cash's hand is on me, fighting to pry me off the jewelry, and hot panic rains down my back. My body jolts, rejecting his presence as some sort of reflex, and I curl my bloody fingers into fists, launching them at him instead.

I feel him swerve, and the car stops suddenly. He overpowers me easily, half-climbing into the seat to pin my arms down. We're parked on the side of the highway, the BMW jolting each time a car zooms past.

"What the hell has gotten into you?"

But I don't know what to tell him. I don't know how to explain that it feels like if he doesn't do something drastic right now, I'll never stop thinking he's mad at me.

I don't know how to tell him that I thought I was doing better. Thought the revenge I've been getting on the people who hurt me or made me feel inferior was enough to make all the bad shit go away, but he stopped touching me for a *second*, and all the insecurity and self-loathing returned.

I'm afraid I'm broken, and there's no repairing it.

So, instead of saying any of that, I push up off the seat and kiss him.

Because that's where I feel safe.

He lets out a groan when my tongue lashes against his, and my hips lift, brushing the belt of his pants. I can already feel the hard length of him behind the zipper, and when one of my hands breaks free of his grip, I slide my palm up over it, then past the waistband, wrapping my fingers around him.

"Ariana," he grunts. "I think you just had a panic attack. Maybe we should—"

"Shut up and fuck me, or I'll get out and flag someone down who can."

A heavy, long sigh sweeps over me, and he reaches down between the seat and the door, hitting a lever that almost throws me horizontal. I gasp, and then he's bracing his knee beside my thighs and sliding the other between them, forcing me to spread so he can press against my pussy.

The underwear I have on is satin, so when he goes to tear it off of me, the fabric doesn't rip as easily; it digs into my skin, and when the elastic finally snaps, it whips against me, making me cry out.

He pushes two fingers into me, and it's not until then that I realize that I'm not fully prepared for entry. As if seeming to notice the same thing, he raises his hand back up and prods the seam of my mouth.

Anger and lust form a chemical cloud of emotion in his eyes, and I open obediently, glad that, for once, he's giving in with little coaxing.

Shoving his fingers in, he swirls them around my tongue, then presses down on the very back, making me gag at the sudden intrusion. My eyes widen around a new wave of tears, and his jaw clenches as his hand returns between my legs.

He teases my clit first, spreading my saliva there and making me shiver with a brief wave of pleasure. Then, he's pushing in again, and it's slightly more bearable, though something still feels off.

His breathing grows labored as he works in and out of me, and I try to shift to maximize comfort, hiking my skirt higher and pushing my thighs more to accommodate the girth of his fingers. Cursing under his breath,

Cash removes himself from me again, pushing back into my mouth, except this time, he holds my jaw open with his thumb.

When his spit splatters across my face, I let out a shrill cry, an odd sensation washing over me.

“Needed more lube,” he says, a devilish glint in his eyes.

Mine narrow, and I move my head down, capturing his hand between my teeth.

“Jesus Christ, Little Nightmare. What the fuck is your problem?”

I don’t answer, whipping my free arm up instead, bringing the flat of my palm across his chiseled cheek. The same version of shock and excitement that flashed in his eyes the night in the limousine ignites in those mahogany irises again, and he peels his finger from my teeth, wrapping his palm around my neck instead.

“Someone must not want to come that badly,” he growls, the idea of denial wringing my muscles tight. “I’m not even going to touch your clit, sweet girl. Just gonna shove right into this tight pussy and use her until I get off, like you’re a dirty little cock sleeve, tailored just for me.”

The cruel words make my skin burn hot, equal parts shame and utter intoxication. He releases my other hand and hooks his under my knee, wrenching it up so it’s pressed almost into the back of the seat, and then he undoes his pants, and he’s there at my entrance.

My mouth opens to question something, but his grip on my throat tightens, sending sparks of kinetic arousal through me, and I forget what I was going to say.

“Don’t fucking say anything,” he grunts, and I think I’m wet enough, but he’s still so goddamn big that it stings and stings as he notches himself in before it becomes pleasurable. “Just spread nice and wide for me and watch how deep I can get.”

Oh God. The air expels from my lungs as he bottoms out, and I can practically feel him in my chest, taking up as much room there as possible.

When he starts to move, filling me with harsh, brutal thrusts that make my teeth chatter, I feel him in other places.

My bones, my mind, my heart. It thumps in time with the beat of his, which pulses erratically under my palm.

I feel him in my soul, like an infection that I never had any chance at blocking out because I didn’t know how.

Didn't know what it would feel like, having someone want to exist there.

"That's good, sweet girl. Your pussy loves my cock so much; she's weeping all over it. Making a fucking mess of my seat, but that's okay because when we're done, maybe I'll shove your face into it and make you lick the leather clean."

My eyes roll back in my head, and he squeezes the sides of my throat, the pressure making me dizzy. Ecstasy travels up my toes, swirling through my legs, and coils the muscles in my abdomen until I'm barely hanging on to my sanity by a frayed thread.

"God, you're fucking perfect," Cash says, desperation lacing his tone. A bead of his sweat drips onto my cheek, mixing with the spit that's still there. His glasses are starting to slide off his nose. "If you're still keen on killing me, your pussy is the way I want to go."

"Cash..." His name falls from my lips like a prayer, and he answers in kind.

Maybe if God were as prompt as the man currently wrecking me, I wouldn't have given up religion at such a young age.

"Aw, is my little nightmare ready to come? Do it for me. Be good and let me watch, and maybe I'll fill you up after." That thought seems to flip something in his brain because a devious smile spreads across his face as he starts moving faster, fucking me harder.

His glasses slide all the way off, clattering to the floor, and a car honks as it whizzes past.

I grasp at his shirt, so close to losing my mind. Every tendon and bone in my body aches, begging for release.

"Maybe I'll just knock you up right now and let you take the ring off after all."

For some reason, that's the image that sends me over the edge, and I climax hard, letting out a scream that Cash immediately catches in his hand.

"Shh," he coos, pumping erratically, chasing my orgasm with his own as my pussy clamps tight around him.

I whimper as he continues stroking that spot inside of me, muffling my noises with his palm.

When he comes, he shoves all the way in, and a feral groan rumbles through his chest, grazing mine as it fills the air. His hand slides from my

mouth, and he grips my chin, angling my face so he can lean down and cover my mouth with his.

Compared to what just happened, the kiss is tender and sort of sweet, though still feverish. Like even though he hasn't left my body yet, he can't possibly get enough.

After a couple of seconds, he pulls away, grabs his glasses, and slides back behind the wheel, fixing his pants.

Sucking in a shaky breath, I push my skirt down, wipe my face with my sleeve, and let my head fall to the side. He reaches out, pushing a strand of loose hair behind my ears, caressing the emerald stud in my lobe as he drops his hand.

"You spit on me."

"You slapped me," he counters. "Again."

A million different emotions burn behind my eyelids, and I finally settle on one I'm not super familiar with. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I liked it." A soft chuckle fills the air, softening his features. "Did I just get the first ever genuine apology from Ariana Ricci?"

Primrose, I correct silently. Miserably. The ache in my stomach intensifies, and I shake my head. But nothing else comes out. "I've apologized to you before."

"Yeah, but this is the first I've gotten where it didn't feel like you thought you *needed* to. Apologies are meaningless when they're used as manipulation."

The truth of the statement is unsettling, and I toy with the ring on my finger, acknowledging that part of me. The one just like *her* that I'm trying so hard to leave behind.

We sit in silence for several minutes until my heartbeat slows down to a normal pace and I can drag air into my lungs again. I swallow over and over, suddenly unable to stop, as if my body is trying to make up for lost time.

"Want to know a secret?" he asks, staring out the windshield.

I nod, and he absently picks at a worn piece of the wheel.

"I struggled some with object permanence as a child. My parents could show me a stuffed animal, then hide it behind the couch, and to me, it would be like it just didn't exist anymore. I wouldn't search for it, wouldn't try to reason where it'd gone. My brain would just flip a switch and move on to the next toy."

I watch his mouth move as he speaks, committing the curve and spacing to memory.

“Sometimes, I’m afraid of that happening again. Specifically with you.” He looks at me, pushing his glasses up. “You are far too magnificent to stay, Little Nightmare. I think I’m just trying to keep you for as long as I can.”

Pain lances straight through my heart, but it’s not the same kind as before—it’s softer, more bearable. The type you feel when you have someone who cares what it would be like to lose you.

There’s an importance in permanence. It grounds us and makes life’s fleeting moments something special.

Because if you never know when it might end, you do what you can to make it last.



I DON'T END up taking Cash to meet my mother, deciding to keep that little treasure for myself.

But I lie low for a few days, waiting for an opportunity to arise. If Mamma thinks I'm just showing up for no reason, she'll be far more suspicious, and I don't want her getting antsy. When she gets antsy, she runs, and I want the bitch to stay where I can find her.

If she had anything to do with Ricci Inc.'s disappearance, I'm certain she's already looking for a way out.

A new text comes in from the unknown number—the one I haven't heard from in weeks. I assumed it was Vitus at the other end, but with his

bones buried out on some farm in Appalachia, beneath horse carcasses, it's highly unlikely he's the one sending the message.

Do not trust him.

That's all it says, and I stare at my phone screen for a long time, trying to figure out what the hell they're talking about. At first, I thought it was Vitus's parents, but no one else seems to care about their case. In fact, last I knew, it'd been marked unsolved, and the two detectives assigned had moved on to other reports.

Stuffing the phone into my pocket, I throw a jacket on and brave the early December air, shoving open the car door and waving to Ronnie.

Mamma's waiting when I get to the door, arms crossed as she drags a portable green oxygen tank behind her. My brows lift as she lets me in, and I point at the tank.

"Since when are you on oxygen?"

The look of disgust she gives me scrapes at my soul, but I ignore it. "When my goddamn lungs started failing and, suddenly, my OSAT wouldn't stay up. Wonder what that's about."

I pause on my way to her living room. "Are you honestly suggesting I had something to do with your lungs, Mamma?"

Muttering something under her breath, she walks around me and drops into an armchair. She reaches over into the end table drawer, pulling out a pack of Marlboro Reds and her trusty old Zippo.

"Not like you've stressed me out, taking the company right out from under me." She lights up the end of the cigarette, its embers glowing bright orange.

I move back a step, not liking the mix of oxygen and fire. "Should you be smoking?"

"*Dio mio*, shut the fuck up, Ariana. Don't lecture me while I'm sitting here, dying."

Something light and feathery bubbles up in my throat, but I swallow it down before a laugh manifests. "Whatever. I just came to find out what you did to the company."

She takes a slow drag, resting her head on the chair. "What are you talking about?"

"Did you dissolve it? Spread it out among other crime families, like Papà did with certain jobs?"

"What are you—"

“Where’s the money? You’re practically a ghost right now, so I can’t imagine you’d be able to move it all yourself. Where’d it go?”

“Ariana, honestly, sometimes, you make up the most outlandish claims. I don’t know what you’re talking about, carina.” Her tone shifts, dipping an octave and becoming smooth. It’s her coddling, holier-than-thou voice—the one that says she knows something I don’t and she has no intention of telling me. But that won’t stop her from letting me know she has information I don’t.

I wait a couple of seconds with my arms crossed, my patience thinning the longer she makes me stand there without an answer. Just keeps sucking on her cigarette, blowing smoke up into the air like tiny storm clouds.

The same clouds I remember from when I was a kid. When she’d fray the ribbons on my pointe shoes or light up after sex. The grays always looked the same—dark and impenetrable and thick with a sadness that always seemed ready to spill.

They still look like that, I realize, but now, they’re ready to burst.

I stalk around the sofa, sliding a finger along one of the bookshelves framing the fireplace. It catches on a little glass butterfly, and I flick my wrist, watching it glide from the shelf and shatter on the floor.

Mamma’s startled shout rings through the air. “Oh, good going, Ariana. You and your goddamn butter fingers never could—”

Another figurine, this one a crystal ballerina, mimics the butterfly’s descent, crashing and exploding on impact.

“I will break everything you own,” I tell her, adding another little glass piece to the pile and then a set of votive candles. Glass litters the floor, and I step right on top of it, reveling in the crunch and the way it makes her wince. “Unless you tell me what you did.”

She white-knuckles the armrests of her chair, and I can tell she wishes she had the strength to get up and throw me across the room.

Not so fun when you’re the weak one, is it?

Picking up a fire iron from the stand on the mantel, I grip it with both hands and swing it over my head, pitching forward in a perfect arc, sending the coffee table flying into a million little pieces. Mamma screams, and it’s like music to my fucking ears.

“God, what happened to you?” she spits out, evil bleeding through her dark eyes. “You weren’t like this when you were a girl. That husband of yours has fucked you up.”

“The only thing he’s done is care about me. If that’s all it took to change me, how fucked must I have been before?”

She snorts. “Please, you think he cares for you? He’s a *man*, carina. What have I always told you? They will do nothing but disappoint.”

I just shake my head. It’s not like she knows him.

“Oh, I’m sure the things he says sound nice. That he loves you and he’ll take care of you and never let anyone hurt you.” She points a finger at me. “News flash: they all say that, so they can be the ones who destroy you. They’re *monsters*, Ariana. Greedy, selfish monsters who will chew you up and spit you out and not give a shit when you’re a broken mess, lying on the floor, begging someone to end your suffering.”

My heart aches as I listen to her. I feel that familiar yearning that I thought died with Papà, something erasing my memories of all the horrible things she did to me and accepting on a more basic level that, no matter what, she’s still my mom.

And you’re supposed to trust your parents, right? After all, they’ve done this before.

She was me once upon a time. An idealistic kid trying to weather a woman’s grief.

The difference though is, she grew up and mimicked her demons.

I became a different monster entirely.

“Tell me, Ariana, when he fucks you at night, does he tell you he loves you after?” Mamma smiles, sadistic and wretched. “I know how much you enjoyed it when I did.”

This time, when I swing, I purposely miss another piece of furniture, instead going low and taking out one of her ankles. Her ensuing squeal of agony zips through me like a bolt of lightning, and I wind up for another.

“Fun fact: *Kal* taught me how to break bone with minimal effort.”

I cock my head to the side, seeing if she takes the lie. *Kal* hasn’t taught me shit, but still. It gets under her skin, knowing he’s still out there, living his life, while she’s cooped up in this tiny apartment, wasting away.

It kills her, knowing she didn’t ruin us like she’d wanted.

Even now, she’ll rot in her jealousy.

Tears pour down her sallow face, and I stand there, waiting for remorse to wash through me. Waiting for the age-old guilt to push through and make me apologize for things that aren’t my fault.

But it doesn't. I watch her sob, cradling her rapidly discoloring ankle in one hand, and feel absolutely nothing.

"I didn't do anything," she finally manages to choke out, hunched over in the chair. "Your father had certain protocols in place that would erase Ricci Inc. from the global map and market, if the time ever arose."

"You signed it over to Cash though. So, wouldn't any of Papà's orders have been nullified?"

She shakes her head. "No. Cash would only be the official owner on paper. Nothing else under the table went through yet."

Rage boils in my blood, and I raise the iron again, ready to strike.

Crying out, she holds her hands up, that cigarette still burning. Still endangering us. "*Wait, dio mio.* It doesn't matter though because those protocols only slide into place upon your father's death, so it's—"

"Papà's dead."

Mamma freezes. Blinks. Looks up at me. "He's what?"

I shift my weight from one foot to the other. She drops her ankle, slumping back in the chair.

Silence bleeds in the air around us, and as despair contorts her face, I *almost* feel bad for her.

Their marriage was shitty, but it was still the only one either of them had. Even if they haven't seen each other in the last six years and were never faithful, I suppose I can understand why she's upset.

Then, she brings her cigarette up, sucking on the end, and lets out a laugh that's almost all smoke. She laughs, and laughs, and laughs, and with every breath she sucks in, my previous pity evaporates.

"Well," she says as the laughter dissolves into a coughing fit, beating her chest with a bony fist, "you and that Primrose boy are fucked then."



THE NEXT DAY, I'm at the studio when Ermes Barbieri shows up, somehow entering the building despite the front door being locked. He's wearing a plum-colored suit and a fedora, which he tosses to the ground as soon as he steps inside.

I'm annoyed with the state of my world, so I'm not in the mood to entertain his antics. I don't turn around when he approaches, just watching him from the reflection in the mirrors.

He brushes at a stray piece of lint on his shoulder, then stops directly behind me.

"*Gattina*," he greets, though there's no warmth or humor in his voice. Not that I'd care if there was. This is still the man who bound me in a prong collar and then choked me with it. "It's been a while."

When his hand lashes out, wrapping around my throat, I don't even pretend to be shocked. Truly, it's par for the course at this point, and I give him a flat look in the mirror.

"Do you remember," he asks, bringing his lips close to my ear and lifting so I'm on my tiptoes, "that little envelope your husband gave me the night he took you from my possession?"

I don't say anything. Can't with his fingers strangling the air from my lungs.

"It appears the bank notes were counterfeits, and the serial numbers on them were being traced by several different federal agencies. Half of my men have been arrested in some massive sting operation while the other half have fled the state to avoid charges."

He relaxes his hold on my windpipe, just slightly.

"Sounds like a personal problem," I say, shrugging.

"Hmm," he hums, sliding his hand down my arm and running his thumb over my diamond ring. "I'd be careful antagonizing me there, little girl. Your father isn't around to call the shots anymore, and no one gives a shit if I put a bullet in a Ricci skull."

My chest feels like it might explode.

"Well, except that scumbag you married." He wraps his fingers around the ring, and I suck in a breath, already knowing what's coming. "He *might* be upset, although it's likely he cares more about the power vacuum happening in the underworld right now. Since that was the entire reason he married you."

I stare into *Ermes's* eyes in the mirror, unblinking. Trying not to give away the insecurity he's touching on—that our marriage is still primarily a sham and his end goal is just authoritarianism. The chance to have a *Primrose* in charge of organized crime in the state rather than being stuck as an associate on the sidelines.

His father wasn't able to hack it, so it makes sense that he'd try to carry on the legacy. And while that's what I initially agreed to, I didn't think it would hurt so much to think about him actually getting it.

Didn't think of how it might hurt to be left behind, especially this soon.

Mamma's words from earlier ring loud in my mind, and I swallow around them, trying to keep them from entering my bloodstream. But like everything she's ever said to me, they do, and I suddenly feel like I'm drowning again—and it's still not as quick or painless as I imagined.

The lungs fill up slowly, taking Mamma's vitriol and turning it into fuel. Turning me against the only person I've ever trusted despite everything he's told me over the course of our relationship.

His secrets and confessions get sucked up by the waves of jealousy and madness, and I don't know how to stop them.

When Ermes rips the ring from my finger, I don't even feel it or the skin it shreds from my knuckles.

Instead, I let the sea of doubt take me under.



“REMEMBER WHEN YOU WERE JUST A LAWYER?” Zephyr asks, leaning against my desk as I hold up two ties in the sunlight from the window.

They’re different shades of wine red, though my assistant insists the differences are minimal, and I’m the only one who will notice.

“A lawyer who did cool things, like attending court and not making his assistant do it when she’s not technically allowed to practice yet?”

I give her a flat look, deciding on the tie in my right hand. “Jesus, Zephyr, it’s not like I threw you to the wolves. You have two other bar-certified attorneys there with you in the courtroom. I just send you there to

take notes because Stinsky and Holland are notorious for leaving it up to the reporters.”

“Yeah, but greenhouse gasses are your *thing*,” she says, her hair bouncing as she speaks. “Don’t you miss arguing with the local governments over their impact?”

“It’s not like I’ve left the practice. I’ve missed two hearings. You missed more than that last year when you had your wisdom teeth taken out.”

“They got infected—”

Holding my hand up, I cut her off and then sling my tie around my neck. “Don’t care. Point is, stop trying to create problems where there are none. I’ve not taken a day off in the years I’ve been at Cupid. I think I’ve earned this.”

She sighs, relenting finally. “You’re right.” Pausing, she takes in my outfit as I complete the Windsor at my neck. “And you look... awards-show ready.”

“Well, don’t hesitate before you say that. It makes me think you’re lying.”

Rolling her eyes, Zephyr pushes off the desk and walks to the door. “Someone’s nervous about meeting his wife’s friends.”

I don’t deign her with a response, leaving before she can start getting mushy on me because I can already tell it’s coming. I’ve been getting comments from my siblings and her all week about how they’ve never seen me look so relaxed and how I must be hitting it nightly because the skies have been totally clear.

As if my moods control the weather.

Case in point: when I step outside the office, it’s pouring rain.

Still, I don’t want to let it put me in a mood before the awards ceremony, so I ignore the bad omen and head home.

Parking in the garage, I sprint up to the penthouse, shaking off my umbrella before stepping inside. The place is quiet, and I prop the plastic tool against the wall in the foyer, glancing around.

The quiet doesn’t bother me. Most of the time, when I get home, Ariana’s either reading dirty fan fiction on her phone or taking a bubble bath in the tub upstairs, so I’m used to the serenity.

But there’s something off about it too.

Something that sets me on edge.

I walk slowly through the apartment, peeking into rooms as I creep along. Passing by the den, I reach inside for one of the pistols locked in a cabinet by the door, unlocking the safety and keeping it tucked to my thigh.

Drastic measures perhaps, but I can't shake the feeling that something is very, very wrong.

I don't find anything downstairs, so as my unease mounts like concrete in my stomach, I take the back staircase, avoiding steps that creak with applied weight.

Starting with our bedroom, I kick the door open, half-expecting Ariana to throw her phone at me for scaring her. But she's not here either.

Growing frantic, I sprint into the hall and begin shoving open the other doors, each time coming up empty. When I go back to our room, I take stock of its state, noting that all of her jewelry, perfumes, and clothes are still here, where they've been for months.

The comforter on her side of the bed is turned down, and a bowl of half-eaten grapes sits on the nightstand, so she must have been here after Gloria, the housekeeper, left. Her phone is here, too, which stirs alarm in my mind, because now I'm starting to think she's left of her own accord.

Somehow, that seems more likely than the odds of her being kidnapped, now that Vitus is out of the picture.

Confusion and apprehension make a toxic cocktail in my chest, and I sit on the edge of the mattress, pulling my phone out to see where the tracking device I put in her thumb pings at on the city map.

I haven't had to use it much before now, but I'm grateful that I chose to be a dick and invade her privacy like that, because I see her at a commercial building downtown, and realize she's gone to the awards ceremony without me.

That's when I spot it.

The diamond sparkles in the overhead lighting, and a flash of rose gold fills my peripheral as I pull up the GPS app. My thumb freezes mid-swipe, and I lean forward, fear grabbing hold of my heart and squeezing until the organ threatens to pop.

Ariana's ring.

The one she wanted to take off just the other day, sitting on the nightstand.

Discarded and covered in her blood.

Betrayal burns like lava on my tongue, and I inhale deeply, willing myself to think before I act.

I stare at the ring for ages, trying to make sense of what it means. Trying not to panic, especially given that she didn't seem opposed to keeping it on after our little rendezvous in the BMW.

Though, I suppose, it's possible I misread her afterglow for compliance. It wouldn't be the first time she's kept something from me and likely won't be the last.

Kal's words from the other day echo in my mind as I configure the GPS app, zeroing in on her location.

"You should maybe consider the long-term effects that vengeance can have on a person and whether or not you're sticking around to be her main source of support."

As I note the address where she is, growing more agitated by the minute, I stand up and shoot a quick text, notifying the recipient of my forthcoming location. Just in case. I pocket the ring, determined to get it back on Ariana's finger where it belongs, then drag her to the nearest supply closet at this event and show her where *she* belongs—impaled on my cock and crying out my name.

I'm not sure what she has left of her quest for revenge, but I do know one thing: it will either be *me* supporting her or no one at all.



THE BOSTON DANCE ASSOCIATION doesn't have a building to host an awards ceremony, so they rent out a metropolitan building in the downtown area. I've never been inside of it before, but as I give my ticket to one of the ushers standing on its red-carpeted stairs outside, I ignore the plaque with my father's name hanging on the white brick.

I will not let him ruin what already promises to be a shitty night.

Inside is about what you'd expect from an event like this—big crystal chandeliers hanging from the massive ceiling, bright lights glaring down on the overly polished floor, and catering trays everywhere you turn. There's a balcony up above the immediate ballroom, and through a few doors in the

back, I can see an auditorium, though most of the crowd seems to be out here mingling.

I scan the throng of people, taking in every evening gown and rented tux, trying to find my missing cargo. Gliding around the room, I weave in and out of groups and couples as a string quartet plays a slow number in one corner, making it easy to pretend that I'm just really into the music.

Someone grabs my bicep, and I spin around to meet a petite blonde woman in a shimmering peach dress. She beams up at me, explaining that she was with a former client, and I do my best to act like I'm listening while still searching the room.

Where are you, Little Nightmare? And why do you insist on making my life fucking miserable?

"The shrimp cocktail tonight is to die for," the woman says, crunching on a piece of hers as she lifts it to show me. "If you do nothing else tonight, you have to try these."

I nod, tugging my arm free of her grip. "I'll have to do that, certainly. Now, is there any chance you've seen my wife here tonight?"

The woman purses her lips. "Ariana Ricci, right?"

"Primrose," I correct. "Leggy brunette with an attitude that sometimes makes you wish you could just punch people in the face?"

Her eyes widen, and a grimace takes over her mouth. "Uh... is everything okay at home?"

Sighing, I nod, gripping her by her shoulders and pushing her aside as I go to leave. "Everything's fine. It's just role play."

I leave her standing there with concern etched deep into her brows. Sighing, I glance up at the balcony, squinting at the faces gathered above the ornate banister. Only a few people linger—some tucked away in shadows, others leaning over to watch the room below.

One person at the very end has their elbows hooked over the edge of the balcony, her face obscured by the poor lighting where she's at. Almost as if she parked herself there on purpose, hoping not to be noticed by anyone in the crowd.

Except me.

No matter how packed a room or how much distance we put between us, I would notice her. My soul aches for hers, recognizing it immediately, and I take the stairs to the next level two at a time. Passing up a couple tangled tightly together in a corner, I slow my pace and try to sneak up on

her, though I can tell by the way she stiffens that she knows I'm here, even without turning.

I stop a few feet away, letting my gaze rake down her form, as if it hasn't been just a few hours since I last saw her. For some reason, it feels like an eternity.

I'm relieved at least to see she's alone. I don't know what I'd have done if that fucker Emile had been here, plying her with attention when she's rejecting mine.

Her gown is a deep, shimmering crimson that clings to every inch of her perfect body. A single high slit in the skirt reveals the entire length of one of her long legs, and the corset-style bodice pushes her tits up obscenely beneath the drop diamond necklace she has on.

She looks fucking delectable, and it's a damn shame she didn't want to show up here on my arm for some reason.

I find her hands, propped up over the edge of the banister, and acute misery fills my gut when I confirm she's no longer wearing the ring; her finger is bright pink and swollen, as if she only recently had it removed.

"Glad to see one diamond I got you made it out of the house tonight," I murmur into her ear, placing my palms on the banister on either side of her.

A sigh deflates her shoulders. "Yes, well, forgive me for choosing the lesser of two evils."

"*Evil?* Is that what we're calling me now?" My nose brushes some hair off her shoulder, and I notice the shiver that skates over her skin, grinning slightly. "I suppose it does take one to know one."

"Very mature and profound rhetoric, Counselor. Do you talk in circles like that when you're in court too?"

I freeze at the nickname. "Ah, so we're back to Counselor. I'd love to know what I did to help aid in these massive steps backward in our relationship."

She scoffs, pulling her arms tighter into her chest. "It's not a relationship, Cash. It's fake. We're playing house with an expiration date, and you know it, so stop pretending otherwise."

Gritting my teeth, I glare at the back of her head. Just days ago, we seemed to be on the same page, and now, it's like she's gone back in time and retrieved the woman I was interestingly attracted to, but certainly not in love with.

Closing my eyes, I let out a disappointed breath.

In the turn of events, but mostly in myself.

“So, that’s it then? After everything, you’re still able to just walk away, like nothing ever happened?”

“We don’t get a choice, Cash,” she whispers harshly, her head turning just slightly. “This was the agreement. Ricci Inc. doesn’t exist anymore for you to get your hands on, so there’s nothing keeping you here. You can be free and go back to living your life above board.”

My arm snakes up her front, pressing my palm between her breasts and fitting her so she aligns with my front. Covering her chin with my whole hand, I angle her head so I can look into those gorgeous hazel eyes.

“I was hardly living pristinely before I met you,” I tell her, stroking her bottom lip with one of my fingers. “And you’re delusional if you think there’s nothing keeping me here.”

Downstairs, someone clinks a piece of cutlery against a wineglass, drawing the crowd’s attention toward the bar.

They don’t have a microphone, so we can’t hear what they’re saying, but a hush falls over the entire room just as I grab a fistful of Ariana’s dress and start sliding it up her thigh.

She shifts, her hands gripping the banister as she tries to buck me off. “Cash, we’re *surrounded* by people—”

“Better keep quiet then. Wouldn’t want your old ballet friends to know what a greedy slut you are for your husband’s cock, would we?”

I slip under the slit in her skirt, pulling the separated material back and exposing the curve of her ass to me. Delving between her legs, I’m unsurprised to find her dripping, and a low sound of arousal emanates from my chest as I rock into her.

Keeping myself close to her, I pull my cock from the confines of my dress pants and nudge the crown against her. Moving my hips slowly, I push in, watching her soft, glistening flesh part around me. Already, her pussy clutches to me, sucking me in deeper, like she never wants to let go.

Blowing out a breath, I try to regulate my erratic breathing, but she’s so wet and tight around me that it’s nearly impossible. I lower my chin, digging my teeth into her shoulder as I drive all the way in, seating myself to the hilt.

She pulses, and her hand slips, her elbow catching on the banister as she lets out a strangled cry of pleasure.

A murmur works through the crowd, and I feel several pairs of eyes on us, though that doesn't stop me.

Bending at the waist, I force her to double over, testing the flexibility I've seen her working on at the studio. The new position makes her even tighter, and I bite down on her skin harder, all but breaking through the barrier.

"People are watching," she hisses, her head completely over the balcony now.

I smirk, guiding her hips with my free hand, making her push back into my thrusts. "Let them. If you're leaving me, let them see how good you got it from your husband, so they know they'll never fucking compare."

"Oh God."

Abandoning her hip, I slide my arm up her front, wrapping it around her throat and tugging her up. The only grip she has is a tenuous one on the balcony, and with each slap of her ass against my pelvis, it slides down, pulling her toward the downstairs area.

"Nothing keeping me here, she says." I flex my arm, stealing the breath from her.

"This doesn't count."

The admission feels like a red-hot poker plunging into my chest.

"*This* isn't what I meant, Ariana. It hasn't always been about sex for me. It's not even just about sex right this second."

"Stop," she pleads, and I feel her pushing back, resisting, so I fuck her harder, my thrusts turning into a sort of punishment for the both of us. "Cash, really, I'm slipping—"

My hold around her neck is secure, though I like the edge of fear in her voice. Love the way it makes her pussy clench, as if torn between excitement and self-preservation.

"You can get up when you come," I tell her, my own orgasm drawing my balls up. "Provided you don't fall or draw too much attention first."

A small, shrill moan pushes past her lips, and she looks down at the floor beneath her, trying to reposition her hands on the railing. They slide, likely slick with sweat and adrenaline, and I chuckle in her ear.

"Nice try, but bad girls don't get to fuck in the position of their choice." I glance down, watching my cock saw in and out, reveling in the sight of her sticky white arousal coating my shaft. "But you want to be a good girl, don't you?"

She shakes her head, and I click my tongue in disapproval, tightening my arm around her neck.

“Yes, you do, because you want to come on my cock as badly as I want to feel it. There’s nothing better in the world than your pussy squeezing the life out of me, and you take all of it so fucking well. Even with a dozen people watching, learning what gets you hot. Like someone molded you just for me.”

I momentarily lose balance, my shoe skidding across the hardwood floor as it tries to gain purchase. Ariana half-screams as she pitches forward, teetering on the edge of death.

Gripping the rail, I slide my arm away from her neck and instead tangle my fingers in her hair, holding her up that way as my hips cant into her, showing her how good it can feel to be at my mercy. At the mercy of gravity.

Another moan racks through her, and she comes sort of violently, sparking euphoria in the back of my mind and pushing me over the edge along with her.

Figuratively and almost literally.

I catch my wrist on the inside of the balcony as she begins toppling over. Disentangling ourselves, I withdraw slowly, my cum sloshing out once I’ve stopped being her plug. She lets out a breath, straightening her outfit. Her face is beet red, though I don’t fully understand why since we were half-hidden by shadows anyway.

“If you don’t want to leak everywhere, maybe wear underwear next time.”

Leaning against the balcony, she rolls her eyes. “That has never stopped you before.”

When she goes to move past me, I take the step ahead of her, blocking her path. She sighs, clearly growing agitated, and slides to the left to evade me.

I also go to the left, stopping just before her; she runs into me, stumbling, and she has to steady herself with her hands on my chest.

“You’re serious,” I say after a beat of her refusing to meet my gaze. “You’re... you don’t want to continue on with this?”

She keeps her eyes on my chest, lifting a shoulder. When she opens her mouth and says, “Yes,” a piece of me dies inside, like a lighthouse burning out just as a ship starts toward the shore.

But then she shakes her head, and my eyebrows knit together in confusion.

Her chin lifts, and her gaze meets mine, sweeping quickly to the side and back.

When I don't respond, she repeats the same gesture, and I groan, digging my palms into my eye sockets.

“For fuck's sake, what—”

She does it again, and this time, I follow the trail, looking across the balcony at the people mingling on the other side. For the most part, no one pays us any mind now that we're not engaging in a lewd act, but there's one figure, bathed in darkness, that doesn't move.

He just watches, arms outstretched, and I realize what she's saying.

We aren't alone at all.



MY FINGER THROBS, the phantom sensation of my ring being torn from me still there, even hours later.

I feel naked without it. Or maybe that's just the cum running down my leg and Cash's deadly expression.

He looks murderous when it seems to finally click what I'm telling him—that Ermes is across the room, studying my every move, waiting for me to slip up. The elder Italian brought me here in order to convince Cash that I wanted to move on from him, hence the removal of the ring, but in truth, he just fixed the diamond necklace with some sort of listening device in the hopes of earning a confession about the counterfeit money.

“What are...” he starts, but I don’t stick around to hear the rest of the sentence.

Now that he’s here, Ermes is sure to come over and try to force an admission from him, and I don’t want to just stand around and let him do it.

Knowing Cash will follow if I ditch, I head to the very end of the balcony and disappear down a long, dark hallway. His footsteps are heavy as he comes after me, and I keep my back against the wall, looking for the emergency exit I know is down here.

The Boston Dance Association uses this place for its ceremony every year, and I mapped it out as a kid, sure that I’d need a reason to escape if my parents ever allowed me to come.

Finally, we reach the end of the hall, and a bright red sign glows above one of two doors, indicating the exit. My hand reaches out, turning the bronze knob, and Cash grabs my wrist from behind, stopping me.

“Ariana,” he says in a low, gruff voice, “tell me what’s going on.”

I shake my head, pulling him along with me. “Not here.”

Tugging him along after me, I let the door swing shut as soon as we’re closed in, and then the hallway gets even narrower and more cramped. As I shuffle us through it, a damp, musky smell fills the air, and a dripping sound echoes off the walls.

I slow down as the hall fans out into an octagonal-shaped room, where hodgepodge pieces of furniture are covered by white linen sheets and a thick film of dust.

The only door here is one that leads to a closet, and I blow out an irritated breath, turning on my heels.

“Someone marked the wrong door,” I tell Cash, starting to push him back down the way we came.

“Ariana, what the fuck is happening—”

The sound of a gun cocking rips through the darkened hall, and suddenly, I’m staring down a barrel, mere feet away from Ermes.

“Yes, Ariana, explain to your husband what exactly is going on.”

Swallowing over the knot that forms in my throat, I skate backward, feeling Cash slide his hand around my waist and guide me along with him. When we’re back in the room, Ermes flips a switch, and a small light bulb hanging in the middle of the room turns on, illuminating us in a mild glow.

“Aw, look at that. Protecting her, even when she was going to leave you to fend for yourself with me.” Ermes clicks his tongue, giving a sadistic

smile as he gestures toward us with the handgun. “So cute, but I don’t really feel like stomaching cute right now, so I’ll give you two seconds to release her before she gets a bullet between the teeth.”

Instinctively, my jaw clenches, and after what feels like an eternity, Cash removes his hand, though I can feel his reluctance in the way his fingers cling to me, even as they let go.

I feel sick because this wasn’t a part of my plan. The exit was right fucking there, and we would’ve been clear if I’d taken the correct door.

My heart drops, sinking to the bottom of my chest. The doors weren’t marked incorrectly—at least, not on accident.

Likely sensing my loyalties elsewhere, Ermes must have thought ahead and switched the sign, just in case.

Fuck.

I glance around the room again, looking for something—a window, an air vent, a paint can that could be used as a weapon. Literally anything that might slightly even the playing field here and give Cash a fighting chance.

But the harder I look, the more hopeless it seems.

We’re both going to die in this room.

“Let’s talk about the counterfeit money you gave me,” Ermes says after a beat, raising his brows at Cash. “I have to admit, I was impressed when I learned you’d taken that route. Annoyed since you fucked up my entire organization, but still. It’s not often someone pulls something like that over on me.”

Part of me expects Cash to deny it, but it seems that he’s also aware of our bleak outlook and seems to err on the side of caution. “Not my fault your guys didn’t check to see if it was legitimate before I left Anteros. Seems like a no-brainer to me.”

“Yes, well, normally, the no-brainer here would be you bleeding out on the floor already, but I’ll admit, I’m curious as to why you didn’t just pay your fee. If you didn’t have the money to back it up, a bid that was even one-tenth of what you pledged would have done the trick; no one at the club thought she was worth *that* much.”

Shame scalds my cheeks, and I bite the inside of one to keep from making a dirty remark. If he were closer and not holding a gun, I’d try to leap out and wrap my hands around his neck, squeezing until I saw the life drain from his eyes.

I'm so sick of people undermining my value just because it doesn't look like what they want it to.

"The two hundred fifty million was insurance mostly. I didn't want anyone, even in their wildest fantasies, outbidding me." Cash pauses. "I have the money. I just didn't want to give it to you."

"Because you wanted to take mine." When Cash doesn't respond, Ermes chuckles, aiming the gun at me. "Well, tell me how it feels for me to now take something from you."

"Wait." Cash steps in front of me, blocking Ermes's shot. One of his arms reaches behind him, and the back of his hand presses into my back, keeping me close. "If you shoot her, I won't relinquish Ricci Inc."

Silence.

I frown, not sure what he means, and Ermes says, "Ricci Inc. is gone, boy. You can't relinquish anything."

"Ricci Inc. is *mine*," Cash counters, and I wrench myself out of his hold, moving to stand at his side. "When Ariana became my wife, I was entitled to everything—business accounts, assets, the network of criminals Rafael kept at his disposal. When I got my hands on it, I decided to liquidate the company and absorb any overhead and outlying expenses into my family's company, Primrose Realty. So, technically, it exists, just... differently."

My eyes widen, shock freezing my features in place. "Wait, so *you* erased us off the face of the planet?"

I hadn't even realized he'd taken over, thinking Mamma had put a stop to the transition.

He gives a sheepish smile. "It pays to be an important attorney sometimes. Lots of people owe me favors. And it was the only way to unlatch your mother's claws from the business entirely."

Shaking my head, I laugh to myself, letting his words sink in. When they do, I look up again slowly. Dread swims rapidly through my stomach, flooding the organs there.

"What do you mean, my mother?"

"Carmen? Of course. I should've known she'd have something to do with this," Ermes spits. "Should've gutted that bitch years ago when she was sleeping with my men, trying to bribe them to come work for Rafe."

Cash exhales. "It wasn't very difficult to track down who was running things while your father was incarcerated. And from what I'd gathered from

everyone else I spoke to, she wasn't giving the company up without a fight, so I removed that option completely."

My heart pounds heavy in my throat as I try to grapple with the onslaught of information. It feels like I've stepped into some alternate universe and had the rug ripped out from right beneath me.

As I stare at Cash, I wonder if anything he's ever told me was true. If he's had the company all this time or at least for the last few weeks, does that mean he's considered this marriage legitimate for that long?

Technically, the terms of our agreement have been met, so the only reason he's stayed ...

Is me.

He maintains eye contact, seemingly unwilling to allow me to look anywhere else.

"All right," Hermes says, taking a step in our direction. "Well, thanks for the heads-up, kid, but I don't feel like dealing with either of you outside of here now. I'll tie up the counterfeit issue on my own and just take over the reins at Primrose Realty."

Cash's brows draw in, though the rest of his expression remains neutral. "They won't just hand you my company if I die."

"No," Hermes agrees. "I'll simply take it."

Still, something feels off about all of this. Cash's confession makes sense in the grand scheme, but the mechanics are off. I tap my fingers against my stomach, sifting through each piece of information and trying to complete the puzzle.

Hermes moves forward again, slowly closing the gap between us, clearly not looking for a large margin of error here.

I study Cash's face, taking in the sharp planes and angles, imprinting them in my mind. If this is the last thing I get to see before I die, at least I'll go happily.

Knowing I was loved even if only for a fleeting moment in time.

A fleeting moment.

The thought pierces the fog collecting around my brain, reminding me of that day I had the panic attack in the BMW. We never made it to Mamma's apartment, and I never told him that was where we were heading.

Plus, by then, the company had already ceased to exist on paper.

But...

I narrow my eyes at Cash. “How did you know my mother was running things?”

His mouth opens to answer, but another deeper voice calls out instead.
“Because I told him.”



WHEN PAPÀ STEPS out from the shadows of the room, hands clasped behind his back, to say I'm shocked is an understatement.

I blink rapidly, trying to dispel the image in front of me because there's *no way* he's here right now.

Living, breathing. Glaring at his old friend, who has a gun aimed at his daughter.

Backing up against the wall, I try to swallow over the confusion and anxiety coagulating inside of my throat. "This... this isn't possible."

Ermes makes a strange sound. "I'm starting to think anything might be."

Papà sighs, and I notice how different he looks—his cheeks are still thin, though less shallow than before. The bags under his eyes are slightly less puffy and purple, as if he’s been sleeping better wherever he’s been, and he’s back in one of the expensive suits he used to wear all the time before his arrest, his gold rings adorning his thumbs.

Even though it’s not actually been that long since I last saw him, it still feels like I’m seeing a ghost. My body doesn’t know how to react, caught somewhere between betrayal and confusion, and so I just stare, paralyzed by conflicting thoughts.

“Surprised?” he asks me, his tone light while his face betrays no emotion.

I wish I could evaporate into thin air. “Well, a little, considering I was told you were dead.”

“Did you get visual confirmation?”

“No, I—”

“Thought the poison you smuggled in to give to my cellmate would do the trick?”

My face heats, embarrassment singeing my skin, and Papà just chuckles.

“*Bambina*, do you realize how many times I’ve ingested arsenic? The warning signs are always the same—muscle weakness, shortness of breath, vomiting. My cellmate mustn’t have gotten the dose right because the symptoms were all very mild in me, but it was enough that I realized what you must have done, considering you’ve been doing it to your mother all these years.”

My stomach flips. *What the fuck?*

How does he know that?

“She used to write me anonymous letters when I was first arrested. When she initially started getting sick, I put two and two together and figured someone was poisoning her. My first suspicion was Kal, but then I realized he didn’t know where she was, and you were visiting often.”

“You never mentioned it to her?”

He shrugs. “I was kind of hoping it’d take. But when I realized what you’d done, I figured what better opportunity to fake my death and grant you a little bit of that freedom you’ve been yearning for your whole life.”

Ermes turns, pointing his gun at my father now, seemingly having run out of patience. “Well, this has been a great little reunion and all, but I have

shit to do, and I don't really want to stick around here and watch you all reconnect before I do it."

Papà follows his movements, walking a bit closer to me and Cash, who inches in my direction with his hand outstretched, as if planning to make a run for it. I'm still trying to process through my shock, wondering how Papà knew we were here and at what point he started working with my husband without me knowing.

And *why* Cash didn't tell me any of this, instead choosing to sit back and watch while I mourned a man who wasn't really dead.

When I look up at Cash, regret runs through the lines on his face, and his eyes are turned down at the corners. I want to ask what the hell he was thinking and why, if I was supposed to be his partner all this time, he didn't include me on important matters like this.

But I don't because it'd be a bit hypocritical of me to do so when I didn't include him on the Tallerico issue, or the Mikey P. issue, or even when I had my mother sign the company over to him—even if it didn't end up sticking.

I didn't include him in any of that even though it all posed a direct threat for him.

And it's not like I was really mourning my father anyway. Not when I was the one who had orchestrated his demise in the first place, so I suppose I can't fully fault Cash for not wanting to let me in on that particular secret.

Even if it wound up helping him in the long run.

"If you kill us, everything will just go to another Primrose, and you'll be even more fucked, since they aren't in your pocket," Papà tells Ermes. "Is that what you want, Barbieri? For you to have nothing?"

Rolling his eyes, Ermes brushes his finger against the trigger of his gun. "I have Feds on my side, I'm sure I can convince a couple of Primroses to do business with me. Especially since my organization funds the Wolfe brothers' existence, and your sister is quite close to them, isn't she?" He smiles sadistically at Cash, who doesn't even blink. "Once the whole counterfeit issue dies down, I'll be able to pull their little puppet strings again, and this time, I won't have to worry about fighting your ass to keep my own territories."

He moves his arm, training the gun back on me. "I think I'll start with her."

Clearing his throat, Papà looks back at me, something like remorse flashing in his eyes. “Ariana, I’m ... I don’t know what to say to you. I wish there were something, anything, I could do to make up for the shitty life I gave you and your sisters, but there isn’t. I can’t turn back time, and even if I could, I don’t think I’d be able to do anything differently. I can’t even be mad at you for trying to kill me, because I get it. I would have done the same.”

For some reason, nausea pulses through my stomach in waves, knowing what he’s about to do for me. And even though my plan was to kill him in the first place, I can’t help a little remorse that was lacking when I killed others.

My chest burns. “How did you know we were here?”

He nods at Cash. “The boy sent a message, saying he thought something was off. Didn’t expect this, really, but I’m glad I got to help you out, for once.”

I wait for more, my pulse thick in my throat. Three little words, so fucking simple and easy to say—especially when you’re on the cusp of death.

It’s all I’ve ever wanted to hear from him.

But they don’t come, and when the popping sound of the bullet leaving its chamber echoes in the air, my only regret is that I used arsenic on him instead of cyanide.

A shout rings through the room, followed immediately by a second pop as I’m shoved roughly out of the way and dragged into Cash’s arms. He twists, pushing us into the wall, as several more dull popping sounds ricochet around us, and then a thick, uncomfortable silence ensues.

Cash looks over his shoulder, letting out a breath. The smell of metallic discharge and blood reaches my nostrils, and I press my nose into Cash’s shirt, wanting to inhale his earthy aroma instead, so I don’t have the memory of this night burned into my brain for the rest of time.

When he pulls away, I brush a hand down the front of my dress, heaving a surprised breath of relief when I see Papà still standing there. His back is toward us as he looms over Ermes’s dead body, the latter’s head no longer recognizable due to the amount of bullet holes in it.

I start to smile, grateful for my father’s existence for the first time in my entire life, but when my eyes drop, I notice the red seeping through the back of his suit, growing quickly.

My stomach drops, hollowing out as I realize he's been hit too.

It's not even the first time he's been shot, but when he doesn't turn around to reassure me the way he sometimes did when I was younger, it feels much more finite.

The sort of permanence you can't ever get back.

Death is final.

"Papà?" I say softly, tears stinging my eyes even though I still can't quite believe any of this is happening. It's all been so sudden and abrupt, but then again, I suppose these things can't build forever.

The world we live in is a cold and unforgiving place, and it takes without remorse. In the blink of an eye, everything you think you know can change.

Cash's hand finds my lower back just as Papà's knees seem to give out; he crumples to the ground, and I stare at his lifeless form for several moments, trying to comprehend the magnitude of my emotions.

Once again, my heart shatters over and over for the little girl who only ever wanted her father's love. She probably would've been broken by such a grand gesture since she kind of lived for those things, but for some reason, I still can't find it in me to feel bad for present me.

Present me grew up without love from either parent, and she stopped expecting it. Not wanting it necessarily, but the understanding eventually came that neither my mother nor father were capable of giving what I desired or deserved.

Present me's parents died a long, long time ago. By the time their earthly forms catch up, I guess the novelty has sort of worn off.

I turn my face up to Cash's, smoothing my thumbs over his cheekbones. They're clammy, and it takes me a second to realize he's shaking, and another second to notice the blood splashed against his collar and soaking through the side of his shirt.

Pushing his suit jacket off of him, I press my fingers to his side, hoping it's somehow residual.

He hisses through his teeth. "Don't *touch* it, Little Nightmare. Fuck."

"Oh my God, you were shot?" My voice kicks up in pitch, frantic and shrill. I work at the buttons, yanking them apart so I can get a better look at the wound.

Blood pours from the gash in his side, and I try to see if there's a bullet or fragments embedded in the skin, but the sheer amount of red makes it

impossible to tell.

“Couldn’t let him get all the credit...” he slurs, and then he’s falling, collapsing to the floor the same way Papà did just minutes ago.



ROLLING onto my side is a mistake.

Frissons of intense pain shoot along the length of my body, and I let out a pained sound, reaching for the main problem site. My fingers touch bandages, and I pry my eyes open, lifting the sheet draped over me to see my entire side patched up with white gauze. Some blood stains the middle of the wrap, bleeding through the material, though it doesn't really hurt to run my hand over it.

I blink into the half-dark room, trying to make out my surroundings. The red satin sheets and the nightstand with Ariana's bowl of uneaten

grapes tell me I'm in my penthouse bedroom, and I lie there for a few moments, trying to collect my bearings.

The wound in my side indicates that everything that happened at the awards ceremony was real and not some terrible fever dream I concocted after a long day in court. My involvement in the demise of Ricci Inc. is out as well as my working with Ariana's father to make that happen and the fact that I was aware of her mother's comings and goings without her ever telling me.

Christ. I wouldn't want to stay married to me either.

My eyes travel down to the foot of the bed, where Ariana sits cross-legged in one of my high school band T-shirts, flipping through a jewelry magazine. I slide my leg forward, pushing my toes against her, and she looks up, removing a pair of headphones from her ears.

We sit there, staring at each other for several long moments, and then she sits up straighter and blurts, "I love you."

My brows shoot to my hairline, and my heart feels too large to fit inside my chest. "Jeez, how close to dying was I?"

She snorts, tossing the magazine aside and crawling over to me. Brushing her hair over her shoulder, she leans down and traces the outline of the bandage, an amused look on her beautiful face.

"Not even a little. It was a pretty nasty graze, but I think you passed out mostly from a rush of adrenaline."

I make a face. "Very manly of me."

"I thought so."

Reaching forward, she pushes some hair from my forehead, and I snake my arm around her neck, pulling her in for a kiss. It's slow and sensual, the release of every emotion that ran rampant through our minds and bodies this evening, collecting in that one gesture.

She makes a little sound, and I nip at her bottom lip, already craving more, even as my body protests any movement. Threading my fingers through her hair, I go in for more, pushing up and hissing as soon as a wave of pain racks through me.

Ariana frowns, pushing at my chest. "It was a little graze, but I bandaged you myself. You need to lie down and not fuck up the dressing."

Groaning, I lower myself back onto the pillow. "My nurse is kind of bossy."

“Your wife is,” she corrects, and I turn my head, studying her with the bare minimum mental clarity that this wound allows.

Somehow, she looks even brighter and more beautiful than before. Freer, as if the events of tonight broke the chains that had long kept her trapped with her demons. When she smiles, it’s wide and fluid, lighting my insides up like a starry night sky.

“My wife,” I repeat, relishing the taste of those words on the tip of my tongue. “You sure?”

“Well, that depends.” She chews on the corner of her mouth, rocking on her knees. “I told you I loved you, but you didn’t exactly say it back.”

I smirk, closing my eyes. “Little Nightmare, I’ve only been trying to tell you for the last several weeks.”

When she doesn’t respond, I peek at her from the corner of one eye; she sits patiently, hands in her lap, waiting for my admission.

“There is not a single other person on this planet I would have ever gambled two hundred fifty million dollars on,” I say after a slight pause, meeting her glassy eyes. “Until that night at Anteros, money was the only thing I’d ever committed to. Ever since then, it’s only been you. I can’t imagine a life without you in it.”

Still, she waits, and I let out a laugh, my hand lashing out and pulling her down into me. This time, when she partially lands on the bandage, I don’t mind the sting.

“Of course I love you.”

She kisses me then, soaking up the warmth of my words.

“How could I do anything but?”

And when she pushes her face into my neck, burying her emotion in my skin, I stare up at the ceiling and let the truth of my words fall down around us.

There could never have been any other outcome in this relationship, and part of me knew that from the start, I think.

And maybe we aren’t getting the classic fairy-tale dream together.

But I don’t need that anyway.

The nightmares are so much more appealing.

EPILOGUE



Snapping a black latex glove against my wrist, I revel in the spark of pain it shoots up my forearm, and then cross the living room to where Kal stands, sharpening a pair of pliers. He hasn't made eye contact with me the entire time we've been here, and it almost makes me feel bad for asking him to come.

I'm sure he'd much rather be at his oldest's first ballet practice, making sure she doesn't do anything too dangerous. But I'd assured him they were only working on their fine motor skills and wouldn't even be doing more complicated numbers for several weeks.

It helps that Cash's sister, Lenny, took me up on my incredibly awkward offer to help at the studio part time. Since finishing renovations on the little building about three months ago, I decided to turn it into a miniature academy, and making it an inclusive place where anyone can come and lose themselves in the dance.

Well, any kids. I haven't started offering adult classes just yet, and I'm not sure if I ever will. The point of the studio is to heal my inner child and give back to the community what I craved at their age—love and acceptance.

And healthy, spirited competition. It is ballet, after all.

It's the first class I've missed since our grand opening, but I feel confident in Lenny's ability to lead. At Christmas, I'd dragged her brother to Aplana Island for Elena's birthday celebration, and Lenny had been standing at the security gate, desperate to meet me.

She said she'd always wanted a sister, and that she was adopting Elena by proxy, and we sort of just hit it off after that. I think we have a darkness in common, though neither of us talks about it, instead channeling it into our work.

When she mentioned some ballet experience, I'd suggested she join me at the studio, so now she comes in when she isn't working with a client, or busy painting something for a gallery across the world.

Kal shoves the metal cart into the fireplace, startling me out of my thoughts. The scowl on his face is unnerving, proof that he wishes he were anywhere else.

He lifts a Zippo lighter to the end of the pliers, and I watch the metal glow bright orange, heating beneath the flame. The silence makes me itch, and I scratch at my forearm absently, glancing around the room.

The apartment's mostly packed up. Kal bought the building last month and had every resident but one evicted, so that when we ended things, no one else would be affected.

It feels weird being in here, just us three. There's an energy in the air, something that feels vaguely haunted, and I can't help wondering if it's our personal ghosts hanging out, waiting to see if this helps.

I'm not sure that it will. Cash refused to give an opinion on the subject after I revealed the full extent of abuse from my childhood, and my plan to claim back the parts of me that were stolen.

“I can’t tell you what to do, or how to feel,” he’d said, holding me against his chest, stroking the back of my head. *“But regardless, I promise you won’t have to feel it alone.”*

And then we fucked, because how could I not want to ride the most wonderful man in the planet after that?

I think he says that shit on purpose, just because he knows what it does to me.

Blowing out a long breath, I watch Kal toss the lighter to the cart, then stretch the pliers, as if testing their width.

“What’s that for?” I ask, knowing already he probably won’t answer. The man is clinical to a fault, which I’m sure has to do with his medical background, but still.

“To make it hurt.”

He’s unilaterally focused as he reaches down, slapping Mamma’s face twice to wake her from the ketamine-induced sleep she’s been in. She blinks, drowsy, and then starts thrashing against where she’s bound to her armchair.

The arsenic was taking too long, if I’m honest. Her body wound up being much more resilient than I anticipated, and I got tired of waiting for her to die.

That’s why I invited Kal. I figured he might want to help steal the last breaths she’ll ever take.

Her screams echo around the apartment, causing a crackling sound to grate inside of my eardrum. As she kicks and tries to free her arms, Kal shoves a metal device inside of her mouth, prying it wide open, and then slips the pliers inside.

They latch onto her slippery tongue, and blood begins flooding the cavity as he presses down, flicking his wrist and ripping a chunk of the organ out.

Crimson spurts everywhere, from her mangled tongue and her attempts at spitting toward us, and Kal goes in again, this time with a knife.

It takes him approximately forty-six seconds to sever the pink mass from her completely, and I watch as he pressed it against an eye socket, then pushes in with his thumb, shoving the tongue inside.

My stomach flips at the gore, but I don’t look away, afraid that he’ll make me stand in the hall if I do. Besides, it’s not like I’m totally new to

this—it's just he does it with such callousness, and such precision, that it's a bit daunting.

But impressive and creative, I'll give him that.

And I can't help but revel in the symbolism of taking the voice away from the woman who so often stifled ours.

"Let's get this over with," he says over her mind-numbing sobs, bending to the floor and picking up the red gasoline can, handing it to me. "I want to get back in time to at least see Quincey in her tutu."

Kal's dedication to being a good father warms my heart; there's still a pinprick of jealousy that prods at the organ, though it's no longer directed at my niece, and more so at the universe. I would have loved to have parents who cared the way he does, and I don't want to stand in the way of him trying.

The only way to be better is to try, and Kal Anderson seems determined to break end any toxic cycles with himself.

I swallow, uncapping the nozzle, and walk over to where Mamma's started losing consciousness. Tipping the can, I pour the liquid directly onto her face, and she jolts from her half-asleep state, resuming her thrashing immediately.

Part of me thought there'd be a bit more fanfare than this, when I finally got to face her, but in truth, I don't have the desire to gloat over a corpse to be. She gets to die knowing the two people she tried to ruin gave her a taste of her own medicine—the last taste she'll ever get—and that's enough for me.

I don't need to monologue or ask for her last words.

I just want her gone.

Kal hands me the Zippo as I reach her feet, and I glance down at it, noting the initials engraved in the bottom right hand corner.

C.R.

The irony of this being her Zippo, the prized one she's held on to for over a decade, is not lost on me, and I suppress a smile as I flip the top open and toss it onto the chair with her.

Brutal sounds tear out of her throat as flames spark around her, licking at her skin and engulfing her within seconds. The scent of melting flesh fills the air, and Kal and I make our way to the front door, watching the bane of our existence as she leaves this world.

And goes straight to hell, where she belongs.

Kal and I don't speak on the ride home. He calls a friend, telling them about the fire and what they'll need to take care of inside, and I spend the drive staring out the window, wondering if I look any different, now that I'm free.

Now that I don't have to worry about seeing her, or listening to her spew vitriol, or sit around and wonder why she couldn't love me the way mothers are supposed to love their daughters.

I don't have to sit around and wonder about her at all, because now there's no way of ever getting answers. My closure rests in the understanding that what I got was as good as it could ever be, and my mother wouldn't have ever been able to give me an explanation that felt satisfying enough.

The same goes for Papa, too. I found out through a posthumously delivered letter that the anonymous texts were his doing from a burner phone in prison. He'd said it was his last-ditch effort to sow seeds of doubt, and maybe send me running away from this world, like Elena.

And while it was a nice gesture, in some ways, I don't think it was enough.

It's likely that it never would've been.

So even if I don't look it, I feel a little less heavy as we pull into the parking garage of my building.

Kal puts his Lincoln in park, then glances over at me. "You okay?"

"I don't feel bad, if that's what you mean."

He purses his lips, looking as if he wants to say something else—maybe, "Not yet," or "Give it time." Something wise and brotherly, that will take the emotional responsibility off him and place it back on me.

But he doesn't say that at all. Instead, he gives a curt nod, and then the smallest, teensiest of smiles.

"I'm proud of you."

Bowing my head so he doesn't see the tears welling up behind my eyes, I nod, shoving open the passenger door. When I've disentangled myself from the seat, I hurriedly swipe at my cheeks, turning to watch as he pulls away, disappearing back to ground level.

I stand there for a few seconds, soaking in everything. My head feels clear and calm, even knowing that I'm officially an orphan. Maybe I should feel a little bit sad about that fact, but as I make my way up to the penthouse, the only emotion residing in my gut is contentment.

Even more so when I step off the elevator, and into the waiting arms of my husband, who has the goofiest look on his devastatingly handsome face.

He palms the backs of my thighs and hauls me up against him, sealing his mouth to mine before I even have a chance to ask what he's doing home already.

With the secret joining of Primrose Realty and Ricci Inc., and the effort that has come from scrubbing the evidence of the latter, Cash has been busier than ever, though he does his best to make it home to me early enough every night that we can cook dinner together and then fuck at least twice.

Not that I'm complaining.

His glasses bump against my cheekbone as slips his tongue past my lips, and his palm comes up, cupping my breast through the flimsy shirt I changed into in the car. My nipple pebbles beneath his touch, and I arch into him, grinding my pussy against his belt buckle, already craving him.

In the months since our marriage turned legitimate, though, I don't think either of us has ever stopped.

My back hits the wall, and he tears himself away, breathing hard.

"What was that for?" I ask, swiping some of the saliva from his bottom lip.

"Can't a man greet his wife with a little enthusiasm for no reason?" I give him a look, and he sighs, putting me down. "How're you feeling?"

My eyes fall for a moment, sweeping across the floor as I mentally assess myself, then swing back to his. "I'm great. Really. Thank you for not trying to talk me out of it."

He chuckles. "You are far too stubborn to be reasoned with when you set your mind to something." I push at his chest, and he laughs again, this time deeper, before reaching into his back pocket and pulling out a little black velvet box.

I cock an eyebrow. "You do know we're already married?"

He rolls his eyes, stuffing the box into my hands. "With a mouth like that, how could I ever forget?"

Untying the silk ribbon, I let it fall to the floor, and pry open the lid. Inside is a beautiful rose-shaped diamond, sitting on an emerald-encrusted, rose gold band. Just like the one Hermes took from me all those weeks ago, although as I pluck it from the box and inspect it, I notice an apparent lack of sharp modifications.

“I’m tired of seeing you without evidence of me on you,” Cash says, taking the ring from me and sliding it onto my finger. “I figured maybe this time, I could make it a little less painful for you.”

The diamond sparkles in the foyer lighting, and I let out a happy sigh, throwing myself at him, knowing he’ll catch me.

He’s been doing it since the beginning.

“I can think of some other kinds of evidence you can leave on me,” I whisper in his ear, palming the front of his pants.

He groans, squeezing my ass as he takes me into the living room, dropping me on my back on the sofa, and then coming down on top of me. “Such a bad, filthy girl. What am I going to do with you?”

“Equally bad and filthy things, I hope.”

“If you insist.” Unfastening the button on my jeans, he yanks them open, working them down over my hips. “But first, I was sort of hoping I could keep you.”

A giggle puffs past my lips, and I wrap my arms around his neck, tugging him more firmly on top of me. I’ve never in my life felt so wildly free, and so much of it is because of the space Cash allowed me during our time together. Even before our feelings got involved, he treated me differently than anyone else ever had, and I will never be able to comprehend how a heinous brat landed the obsessive affection of such a deliciously wonderful man.

He strips me quickly, and then he’s pushing my legs apart and sinking between them, biting down on my shoulder as he fucks me into the couch cushions. I tangle my fingers in his hair, the sounds of our animalistic passion echoing off the ceiling, raining back down on us like erotic confetti.

We come at the same time, my pussy milking him until I feel his cum dribble down my seam, spilling onto the couch.

When he pushes up on his hands, hovering over me with his glasses askew, I wrap my legs around him, keeping him inside until he’s ready to go again, as is tradition.

“Thank you,” I say in a soft voice, biting my lip as he just studies me, the way he’s been doing since we first met. Like I’m the most exquisite piece of art he’s ever seen, and he can’t possibly get enough. “For... not giving up on me, even when I was terrible to you.”

He shifts, pushing his pelvis tighter against me, and then cradles my jaw with one hand.

“I love your temper, and your attitude, and that soft, passionate heart you keep hidden away from plain sight. Separately, together, it doesn’t matter—anything at all that you give me, I want, forever.”

His fingers thread through mine, brushing the new ring.

“I wouldn’t have ever given up on you, Little Nightmare, because it would’ve meant giving up all of that. And living without even an ounce of you would’ve been like living without the fucking rain: completely impossible.”

My chest tightens, my heart so full of love for this man, from this man, that it feels close to bursting.

It’s a foreign sensation, but I soak it in anyway because after everything else that’s happened, I think I deserve it.

And after getting a taste of utter bliss, I can’t imagine ever letting it go.

THANKS FOR READING!

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

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