

Savage Prince

CORRUPT KINGDOM #1

SOPHIE WINTERS

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To your vibrator batteries. May they outlast this book.

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Prologue

My hand shakes as I smooth down the skirt of my dress, dragging in a deep breath as the double doors in front of me open.

You can do this, Rose, I tell myself, trying to settle my nerves. You have to do this.

The little voice in my head that won't let me forget why I'm here adds that last bit, reminding me that despite the confusing mix of emotions churning in my chest, I really don't have the option to cut and run. Plenty of women can become runaway brides, but I'm not one of them.

I can't run. Not if I want my father to live.

Music swells inside the church, a familiar strain of stringed instruments. As the processional begins, I grip my bouquet tightly, clutching the silk-wrapped stems like a lifeline.

One step.

Another.

Another.

For the first several steps, I'm just focused on making myself keep moving forward, trying to ignore the hundreds of gazes burning into me as the guests all turn their focus in my direction.

Then my gaze darts up toward the altar at the back of the church, and for the first time, my footsteps stutter. Everything else seems to fade away, the guests disappearing from my periphery as if they've ceased to exist. All I can see is the man in the perfectly tailored suit standing in front of the priest, his piercing blue eyes tracking my every movement.

Even in the sharp black suit that covers up most of his tattoos, Aiden O'Reilly still looks like a predator.

And what kind of prey does that make me, to be willingly walking right into the lion's den?

That thought flits through my mind as I recover my composure, my heart racing wildly as I find my even stride again, walking slowly toward the tall, broad-shouldered man. I'm only halfway down the aisle, but even from this distance, I can see the way his nostrils waver as he draws in a breath. I can see the slight movement in his throat as he swallows, the muscles in his cheek rippling as he clenches his jaw.

I can't look away from him as my feet bring us closer together, step by slow step. My pulse races, blood rushing in my ears, and Aiden's eyes burn like ice as he watches me approach, the piercing blue of his irises strange and familiar all at once.

This man has been so many things to me.

My first love.

My worst enemy.

My temptation.

My tormentor.

And in just a few moments...

He'll become my husband.

CHAPTER 1

Rose

SEVERAL WEEKS EARLIER

I'm awake when the overhead speaker crackles to life, the flight attendant's voice alerting me that we're about to touch down. I hate this part the most.

When I was a kid, I remember being on a flight with my father. There was an air marshal on board, sitting across from me. We had the best seats—lots of leg room—but I knew my father didn't like being close to the air marshal. He had this fake smile for most of the trip.

The air marshal was a young man with perfect white teeth and a charming smile. Like a prince. I must have stared at him, because he smiled at me as we flew, even as the plane rose and dropped in the turbulence.

"Are you scared?" he asked me, leaning forward, arms on his knees.

I shook my head. I wasn't scared. I was my daddy's girl, and I was tougher than that.

The man laughed. "Being in the air isn't the scary part," he said. "It's the takeoff and the landing that's the hardest." He was right.

As I look out the window now, I'm no longer eight and pretending to be brave despite my fear of flying. I'm twenty-two, a woman, in control.

Mostly.

The airport looks the same. Boston hasn't changed much since I've been gone, at least on the surface. I know what lies beneath—the six families that rule the underside of this polished exterior.

My father is the head of one of those families. Antonio Donovan, leader, mafia member, accused killer.

But above all that, to me, he'll always just be *Dad*.

Boston is in my blood, deeper than anything else. Even the maelstrom of emotions in my chest can't snuff out the flood of safety I feel, knowing that

I'm home.

The woman in the seat next to me glances over, trying to look past me out the window as we near the runway, and I lean back to give her a better view.

She seems to notice the way I'm gripping the armrests and gives me a sympathetic smile. "Lovely weather. Isn't it?"

"Yeah. It's a miracle," I agree, trying to keep my voice even.

"Are you from the area?"

The plane hits the tarmac hard. We bounce for a few seconds and my nails dig into the arms of my seat. I can't help wishing I had a hand to hold instead.

It's stupid. I remind myself of that, then remember I haven't answered the woman.

"I am," I finally say. "I've been going to college in California."

"Oh, really? That's a long way away. You must get a lot of miles."

"No, not really. I... haven't been back for a while."

Not for four years.

The woman makes a noise of surprise. I glance over at her as her watery blue eyes widen, taking in her blonde hair and the small lines in her face covered with pressed powder. Her hair is a dye job, unlike my natural blonde locks, but it must've been recent, because I only see the tiniest hint of her roots.

"My nephew won't stop coming back to do laundry," she tells me, her voice dropping to a whisper as if we're sharing juicy gossip. "Honestly, I don't think he knows how to do it at all."

I give a half shrug, chuckling. "Well, I had to learn. California to Boston was too far for me to come back for laundry."

"No kidding! What were you studying?"

"Art history." My shoulders relax a little as we taxi across the tarmac toward the gate. "That's part of the reason I didn't come back. All those sketchbooks and textbooks would've taken an extra suitcase or two."

"Oh, an artist! How wonderful."

"Well, I'm not really an artist," I correct her. "It's part of the degree to take some art classes, but that's not what I'm interested in. I want to be a curator."

"Really? You know, I've never thought about what it might take to do that."

"Not many people do." I shrug. I'm used to this response. People always

think of the wrong thing. "I always found it more interesting."

"How so?"

"It takes something special to be able to set up a room, a collection. It's about lighting, color, theme—so many variables that make something perfect. It takes time. It's an experience you're making, not just an image."

I think I spoke too much. The woman is grinning, laughing. I can feel the back of my neck getting hot. Her cheer isn't ill-intentioned, but it reminds me too much of someone else.

Someone I would rather not think of.

For the first time, I'm grateful that the woman won't stop talking. She pulls her purse out from under the seat in front of her and keeps going.

"So, you must be excited to be back. Four years is a long time."

I'm not so excited anymore. She's right. Four years is a long time. Even if the airport hasn't changed, I know other things must have. Other people.

Aiden.

It's easy to pretend I'm coming just to see my father, but the thought of Aiden has hung over me like a ghost ever since I packed my bags.

Thoughts of him invaded my mind as I booked my ticket.

As I boarded the plane.

As I sit here now, staring out the window.

There are no words to really describe what it feels like to have your heart broken—and not just broken simply because of time or age or the fact that you don't feel the same anymore.

I was in high school when it happened. We were young and I know that—knew it at the time too—but what he did tore my heart to shreds. It was thrown in a blender and decimated.

Aiden was the first person I ever loved, and I loved him with every last cell in my body. He took my love and crushed it to a pulp.

Graduation couldn't come fast enough. I wanted to get away as quickly as possible, leaving behind the last painful gasps of high school that ground me up after Aiden hurt me.

I can't even love Boston fully anymore. For all the beautiful memories of picnics with my friends in the park, there is a memory of kissing Aiden under the awning of the theater by our school.

There are memories of my first love scattered across the city, just like the crushed glass of my heart.

I can say it's okay and move on, but some part of me always lingers a

little too long when I think about Aiden. I want to be done with him. The memory of him just never seems to be done with me.

We reach the gate, and after a few more minutes of small talk with the woman in my row, the doors finally open and we all disembark.

Navigating the airport is second nature. I make it out in good time, stand by the right curb, and call an Uber. I just want to get to my father's house, settle in, and reset. I want to start applying for jobs and distract myself with paperwork. The rest of my life.

It's four years too late to be throwing a pity party. I've moved past what Aiden did. He was awful, but I've known better men. Better people. Just because he ruined my last teenage years doesn't mean he ruined everything for me.

I had fun in college. I lived. The memory of Aiden can't change that.

I lift my chin and flag down the car as it arrives, wheeling my suitcases neatly around to the trunk.

I plan to tune out the ride with music. My favorite thing about taking a car is how many people will leave you alone. You don't talk, they won't talk. I don't have to deal with as many painful conversations and mundane life stories.

The traffic isn't bad. It's early enough in the afternoon that people aren't out of work, late enough that we don't hit the lunch rush. I'm relieved to know that I'll be home soon.

We pass by my old private school, and all those memories I didn't want to think about come rushing to the surface. Battle Hill Prep still has the same brick-and-iron gate, like a magical entryway open only to important people.

And mafia families.

In my memory, Aiden leans by the left pillar clear as day, a perpetual brooding expression darkening his features. He's a senior in my mind's eye, just how I remember him. We've already passed the school, but it's burned into my mind.

He was handsome even as a teenager. I knew I loved him fast, and I fell hard. I wanted to run my hands through his dark brown hair so badly, feel the softness, smell the spice and pine in his shampoo.

I won't deny that half of my attraction was purely sexual, a consequence of being a teenager and being desperately stupid in love.

But it was also his blue eyes that drew me in. They were endless, and they didn't give many people the time of day. I wanted to be someone he looked

I didn't know at first that he could look at anyone the way he looked at me. He was so hard, so rough around the edges, that I wasn't sure he could want me as anything more than a fuck. But Aiden softened just a little when I was with him. When I held his hand.

I thought the hidden moments between us meant something. I thought his softness was a sign of how much he truly loved me.

I believed him... right up until he publicly humiliated me and broke contact completely, acting like I didn't even exist.

He never spoke to me after he tore my heart out of my chest.

He graduated not long after that and left me alone, bloodied, a broken patchwork of the vibrant girl I had been before. I finished the last year of high school feeling totally alone and abandoned.

Fuck, it was awful. I feel sorry for the girl I was then, even though I know I'm stronger now. I know how to make peace with the past and gracefully move on.

At least, I thought I did. These memories and scenes of my past life are making it hard to feel fine right now, and I desperately search for something else to distract me.

We're coming up on a riverwalk. The road curves gently over it, but I'm not looking at the road. I'm thinking about the underpass, our spot, the place Aiden and I would escape to.

He made the rest of the world disappear under that bridge, one hand on my back, the other heavy and warm against my neck.

No place is safe from the memories, apparently. I squeeze my eyes shut and wait until I see red spots.

When I open my eyes, we're far away. The city is closing in, little shops and restaurants lining the street. I let my head fall against the window, miserable, wishing I'd just pretended to sleep the whole drive.

I can tell where we are by the bookstore on the corner. The driver slows, the light yellow ahead of us. I bite my lip and think of where we are and what's ahead.

It's been almost an entire day, and I haven't eaten. All the stress hasn't helped, and honestly, I know just what would help distract me from the reality of the place I've come back to.

"Pull over at the next stop sign, please. I need to pick up some food, if that's okay."

The driver taps the steering wheel with the palm of his hand. Maybe he's considering it.

I know how to handle this. "I'll tip you an extra twenty for the time. It won't be long."

"All right," the guy says. He turns the volume on the radio up.

Cousins Sandwich sits on the corner of the street. We pull up to it, and I nearly cry when I climb out of the car and smell the scent of garlic and deli meat issuing from the propped-open front door.

It's a chain, but a local one. They make the best club sandwiches, and they don't skimp on the sides. I spent countless nights in middle school laughing and talking with my friends while eating their macaroni salad.

This is one of the good things about being back. As I duck inside, the smell of onions on a grill stings my nose, rich and sharp. The girl at the register is probably in high school. She's young, with a smile that says the world is hers.

I order from memory, quickly, then step away from the counter and wait by the deli display.

"Wow. Rose?"

The immediate dread I feel stings worse than the smoke in the air. I turn, praying it isn't anyone I know.

But of course, no such luck.

Fortunately, this is a familiar face I don't mind seeing.

"Noah," I say, surprised. I remember him from high school. He wasn't one of the bullies who made it a personal goal to make my life miserable.

He was actually kind of nerdy, but he was always nice. He looks the same, but the details are different—he's thinner than he was then, his haircut better. He has curly blonde hair and kind hazel eyes.

"Wow. It is you," Noah says, laughing. "I wasn't sure for a second. It's been so long."

"Yeah. It's been a while." I nod, unable to think of anything else to say. I feel like an alien. How do people even talk anymore? "You're still around, or...?"

"Yeah, for now," he says. He shrugs easily, like his shoulders are free of weight. He has an airiness to him, as if he doesn't have baggage.

I'm not sure I know what the fuck that would be like, but I assume it's nice.

"Cool. I'm visiting. Or... I'm not sure," I admit.

It's easy to talk to Noah. I know he doesn't know much about the Assembly. He's not part of a mafia family. He knows what everyone at Battle Hill Prep knew, but he's not in the thick of it.

He wouldn't know about the truth.

I'm sure Noah remembers what happened between Aiden and me, as public as it was. Maybe he doesn't want to acknowledge it, though, or maybe he's just comfortable not having to.

"Well, you should stick around," Noah says. "They cleaned up the shopping center. We even have a legitimate Gucci now."

"Oh, how distinguished," I reply, laughing. We all used to hang out at the same place in high school. There was a yogurt place that always seemed half-broken down, but we loved it anyway.

Noah watches me with a pleased little smile. I wonder if he's not used to having good conversations with old high school acquaintances, or maybe he's just glad talking to me didn't blow up in his face. "You know, if you're around long enough, we should catch up. Maybe do lunch tomorrow?"

His offer is surprising, but not unwelcome. I'd like to get a look around town, but I don't want to get caught alone by someone I don't want to see.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm up for it. We can meet at the center, maybe?"

Noah nods. He leans back against the glass display, relaxed. He's so blessedly normal that I feel like my blood pressure is dropping. I don't have to worry about what his motive is. He's just a normal guy talking to me.

Although he probably thinks I'm a normal woman.

"That sounds good," he says. "How's one o'clock?"

"Perfect."

The counter bell rings and I lean over to pick up my food. I remember the car is still outside, so I turn in that direction.

"Sorry to have to run, but I have an Uber waiting. I'm headed home," I say. "Jet lag."

"Sure, of course. I didn't realize you just touched down." Noah runs a hand through his head of curls, and I can see just the faintest hint of the boy he was in high school.

It's comforting to know someone hasn't changed much.

I smile and hold up my sandwich bag. "One o'clock."

"Oh, here." Noah turns quickly, taking a pen from the cup next to the register. He scribbles on a napkin and passes it to me. "Just in case. Since you just got back, I know you might get busy. If you need to change our plans,

just let me know."

"That's probably smart," I reply. "Well, I'll see you."

I can't wait any longer. I push my way out and wave as I go. The car is still there, thank god, and I realize it's only been eight minutes. I thank the driver as I get in and toss the sandwich bag into my purse.

It only takes another five minutes for us to pass the ice cream place where Aiden and I went on our second date. I quickly look away, but it's too late.

I tell myself it's the lingering onion and smoke from the sandwich shop that's making my eyes sting, but I know it's a lie.

Maybe I never should have come back. Four years did me good. I was able to piece myself together, harden my heart, and learn not to fall in love so easily, but now that I'm back, it feels like a dam is about to burst in my chest.

All the reinforcements I've surrounded my heart with do nothing against the bursts of memory and emotion that keep slipping through the cracks. The pressure is too much, and it's threatening to drown me the same way it did back then.

I close my eyes and clutch my phone tightly in my hand. I can survive this. I'm stronger than the heartbroken teenage girl I once was.

But if I have to see Aiden, I don't know what I'll do.

I'm not sure I'll survive it. I'm not sure what I'll even say. And how can I avoid him when our families are two parts of the underside of Boston?

One thing is certain: if our paths cross, I won't be leaving Boston the same woman that I am now.

Again.

CHAPTER 2

Aiden

At noon, the strip club is an empty box of velvet and unlit neon lights. It's hard to recognize without the men lounging by the front stage or the dancers on their podiums.

I know this place intimately. It's mine, after all.

The place provides a perfect opportunity for illicit activity—though not the type that happens in crowded bathrooms with broken stalls, doors hanging half off. We aren't in the business of pimping out our dancers or using them to slake our own appetites. We know how not to mix business and pleasure, unlike other families.

I take a sip of my drink. The whiskey is smooth, liquid fire racing down my throat. It has a spice to it, the kind that lets you know it costs double figures per glass.

Most things here are expensive.

I'm not a paperwork man. I *am* a man in charge, though, which means that I make it my business to see all the numbers. No one buys a single bottle before I see the price tag.

Not that we skimp on the alcohol. That's where most of the budget goes. "Perfect," I murmur.

I'm not sure who I'm speaking to. Maybe it's the specter of my father, standing in the darkened corners of the room, watching me examine the profits. He is the reason we've come this far. Why we were driven to succeed.

I take another sip of whiskey. Lachlan doesn't mind when I make myself something from the stock. He might be the one leading the family, but he knows I have a specific passion for making us the best. He's the level-headed

older brother. I'm the one that chews the bone until it's powder.

None of these numbers will bring my father back, but I'm not a fucking idiot. I'm not trying to raise the dead.

I'm raising a legacy.

Before I can take another sip, I hear voices. I know them immediately. Connor and Finn are hard to mistake. They're young, and they also ended up with all the spontaneity and lack of control that Lachlan and I didn't get.

I can already tell they're both excited. God help me.

The door to the office swings open. It barely misses hitting the wall, and I resist the urge to chew them out for the damage they could have done.

Barely.

Connor is blond, with brown eyes and all the muscle in the world. He can intimidate people, but it's mostly because he's big and loud. Finn looks more like me. Dark brown hair, leaner muscle. His eyes are greener than mine, the blue in them blending like watercolor.

Whatever it is they're talking about, they're animated. I'm half worried Connor will knock over the whiskey I have on the table.

"Do you need something?" I ask, hoping they'll leave if I humor them.

Connor doesn't quite hear me. Finn does. He turns to me, waving a hand blindly at Connor to shut him up.

"Where's Lachlan?"

I lean back in my seat, crossing my left leg over my right. "Out. Dealing with business. He should be back soon."

"Now?" Finn is almost vibrating. I have no clue what has him so keyed up. "Shit. Meeting with a supplier?"

"Yes." I don't like how exuberant they are. When they're like this, it means trouble. "What the hell is this about?"

"Whoa! Why the bad mouth?" Connor asks. He's laughing. If he had his head screwed on right, he wouldn't have talked to me like that. Whatever this is, it's major.

I raise an eyebrow. "We playing games, now?"

Finn has his hands on his hips, like he's debating how to tell me something. He looks clean, which has alarm bells ringing in my head. Finn being sober is like finding a four-leaf clover. You'd have to trample an entire field, and you'd get fed up before you came close.

Before Finn can spill whatever he's hiding, the door opens again. At least this time, the wall is safe.

Lachlan enters. His almost-black hair is slicked back and his green eyes are cutting. He's still half in business mode. He's taller than us all, and it's always felt like an immense gap. He always feels like he's towering over you.

Lachlan barely has to glance at Connor and Finn to recognize there's a situation.

"What's going on?"

Connor breaks the news, almost bouncing on the balls of his feet as he speaks.

"We have shit on Antonio Donovan."

He's grinning. I'm not.

What I do feel is pure, unbridled rage. The name tends to do that to me. There's really no other way to react to the man responsible for killing my father.

The same rage and satisfaction I feel is reflected in Connor's and Finn's faces as well. Lachlan is more of a closed book, but it's the little things that give him away, like the way he leans back against the wall and nods his head once. He wants this as badly as we do.

It's been a long time coming. Two years, actually. It's been two years since Antonio Donovan killed my father, Callum, and got away with it.

Revenge was always on our minds. We didn't tiptoe around it. We knew we wanted Antonio to pay, and we were going to be the ones to make him suffer.

The Assembly didn't agree.

Six families, and all the power split between us. Yet when our family suffered, the vote was that there wasn't enough evidence. If we tried to attack or kill Antonio, our lives would be forfeit.

As much as we wanted Antonio dead, our father taught us well. We were smarter than to throw ourselves into danger.

So we waited.

After all that waiting, our patience is finally paying off. I smile, an eerie sort of peace searing my veins, stronger than the whiskey.

"It's what we've been waiting for," Connor says. There's a feverish glow to his eyes.

He might be adopted, but there's no doubting he's our brother. He's always been our brother. Connor has just as much reason to kill Antonio as the rest of us.

"So?" Lachlan prompts. He's not keen on dancing around the issue.

"What do you have?"

"He's always wanted power," Finn replies. He crosses his arms over his chest and starts to pace. Sobriety is getting to him, I think. "He's made a move."

"Where and how? Do you have proof?"

Connor cuts in, impatient, practically glowing. There's a giddy grin on his face. "He's cutting in on the Ravens."

Lachlan's brows shoot up, and I almost drop my whiskey.

"He can't be," my older brother growls. "That's idiotic."

"He's an idiot," Finn replies smoothly. "He's undercutting the Raven Syndicate. Buyers, stealing business—you name it."

"Secretly," Connor adds, mocking.

Lachlan leans over the table I'm sitting at. He pours himself a glass, turning the whiskey bottle with a practiced wrist. No drops hit the table.

"If the Ravens find out, it'll be a bloodbath," he says. He sounds like he's musing about the weather.

Connor is practically jumping up and down. I know how he feels, but I wish he'd sit down. He's making me want to get up and punch something.

Or maybe that's just the whiskey talking. The whiskey and the knowledge that we have Antonio.

He's going to fucking pay.

"We have leverage," Finn says. His eyes glint. He may be sober, but something has him in its grip. He's hooked. "We can take this fucker down."

Lachlan takes a slow sip of whiskey. He has the look in his eyes he gets when he's talking to a new supplier. There's a shadow cast over his eyes, a hint of the gears turning in his head. When he looks up, his eyes are fiery.

"We'll do this carefully. Perfectly. There will be no room for failure."

Connor bites at his lip. He has the mulish look of a man who wants to argue, but he knows better. This is Lachlan's and my show. We're calling the shots.

"Okay," Connor says. His smirk is more controlled this time, the glint to it wicked. "Let's do this."

Lachlan moves suddenly, sliding his glass onto the table in the same motion that he uses to cross the room and open the door.

"We owe Donovan a visit. It's been a while, hasn't it?"

I'm out of my seat before I can think about moving. I don't look back to see if Finn closes the door. I know he and Connor are behind us.

I know where we're headed. Antonio's front of choice is an investment firm. Before everything, we used to joke about how boring it was. We'd tease him for being like a middle-class father, working an office job and never having a real life.

It seems like a lifetime ago, now.

We all duck into Lachlan's car. It's sleek, black, low to the ground. He has good taste, but he doesn't like branded things or fancy labels. With Lachlan, it's all about anonymity and image.

Ironic, given that he owns a strip club.

"We're going to nail him," Connor says, shutting his door a little too hard.

Lachlan doesn't even notice. "We are. But we're doing this carefully." "Fuck careful—"

"No." One word and Connor shuts up. Lachlan's been able to do that since he was a kid. He inherited some of our father's intimidation. Maybe not as much as I did.

I adjust my seat and lean it back. "We do this right, we can enjoy the show," I remind Connor. "Can't see the fireworks if you're there lighting the fuse."

"I thought we wanted him to burn," Connor says, his words tense.

If there's one thing I know about Connor, it's that he's always raring for a fight. It's the one thing that sets him apart from the rest of us. Not that he's adopted, but that he's always looking for a fight.

Not that the rest of us don't fight. We just wait for the fools to come to us.

"We do," Lachlan says patiently. It's a wonder he can stay so calm. "But you remember what the Assembly did last time."

"Nothing," Finn mutters. I glance back at him. He's unusually quiet.

"So?" Connor snaps. "They aren't calling the shots now."

"They're always calling the shots," Lachlan says darkly. No room for argument.

I wave a hand toward the backseat. "We'll get our due. But Lachlan is right—we do this perfectly. We make sure he burns, but we do it right."

Connor gives up, thank god. I hate the way Antonio puts us all on edge like this. It's the closest we ever come to not being perfectly in tune with one another. We're usually on the same page. Antonio can throw us all into chaos if we're not careful.

Still, I'd trust Connor to get shit done if my life depended on it. We all

have that same feeling, the bone deep surety that we will support each other no matter what comes our way.

That thought is what makes us silent, not brooding but waiting. Preparing.

The rest of the drive goes by quickly. Lachlan pulls up to a spot and pauses before turning the car off, turning to look at Connor and Finn.

"Wait and listen," he says. He's not asking. "I'll lead. We are going to walk in and tell him exactly what he doesn't want to hear, and he will have no choice but to say yes."

Connor grins darkly. "Fuck yes, he will."

Finn stays quiet, giving a sharp nod.

There's a receptionist at the desk when we walk in. She stands, her mouth opening to say something, but none of us are stopping. She doesn't squawk the way a normal secretary would, but I can hear her murmur something, probably to security.

Somehow, I end up in front. I shove the door to Antonio's office open and almost smile when I hear the doorknob smack the wall.

Antonio stands. He looks pissed, silver-striped blonde hair ruffled when he jumps up. His green eyes are dark, his mouth pulled into a thin line.

I take one side. Lachlan stands front and center, and he waits until Antonio opens his mouth to speak, cutting him off.

"This is not a courtesy call. I think we're beyond that."

Antonio's fingers are pressed to the desk. He looks like he wants to dig his nails into it and break the wood. I wish he would, wish he would lunge so I can hit him. Call it self-defense.

Lachlan continues. "We know you're undercutting the Ravens. You didn't hide your tracks well enough. Buyers, Antonio? Stealing their business? It's not very nice."

Antonio's face is set. The bastard is stoic, if nothing else. It just makes me want to punch him even more.

"I think we should notify our friends," Lachlan says mildly. "I think they'd appreciate knowing that they're being fucked over. I can't say that I'm surprised, but they might be. They might not take it well."

Antonio's jaw twitches. I wait, breathless, and I can feel my pulse race.

"Don't," Antonio says.

I feel like I'm taking a step out into thin air from the top of a high-rise. It's the bottom dropping out of your stomach, the feeling right before the roller coaster soars.

It's the closest thing there is to begging. Antonio clenches his teeth and says, "Don't tell them. Please."

That one word fills me with warmth, liquid ecstasy, relief like nothing I've ever experienced. I can't even begin to explain how much I've wanted to hear him say it.

All that pleasure doesn't stop the fact that I want to hit him until he bleeds.

I can feel Connor simmering on the other side of Lachlan. His leather jacket creaks like he's tensing his muscles, preparing to barrel across the room. It feels like the place is on fire.

"The Ravens value the truth," Finn says softly. "Don't they, Lachlan?"

"They do," Lachlan agrees. "I think their driving principle is truth above all...and loyalty. That's important to them."

"I wonder what they do to liars and betrayers?" Connor adds. There's a savage joy in his voice. "I seem to remember something in the news last year..."

"I am asking you not to tell them," Antonio repeats. He's leaning over his desk a little. Maybe he's sagging, using it for support. Maybe he's trying to imitate a bow without having to really do it.

I can barely stand to be in the same room as the man. I want to take the paperweight on his desk and shove it down his throat, to throw him to the ground and watch his carefully-composed features crumple.

Antonio deserves everything and worse for what he's done to my family. I want this to end here, but I also want it to drag on forever. I want him to suffer for every day of the two years I've suffered.

"What do you want?" Antonio asks, his voice low and his green eyes steady as he stares at Lachlan.

I can tell what's going through Lachlan's head. It's going through mine, through Connor's and Finn's.

We all want Antonio's blood.

But we can't take it.

It would be easy, but it also would be too risky. The Assembly still looms over all of us, despite the maneuver we're trying to pull.

And brute force isn't the way the O'Reilly family works. Even if it's what we all want right now.

"Let's make this mutually beneficial," Lachlan says shortly. "A partnership."

There is no question. Antonio doesn't get that choice. He's fucked and he knows it. All he has to decide is when he dies.

The muscles in Antonio's jaw twitch. He might be trying not to fight as much as we are, or maybe he's trying not to yell. Maybe he's trying not to do something stupid.

I wish he would. A part of me—a very big part—wants Antonio to fuck up. I want him to do something stupid so I can end this right here and now. I don't want to wait just as much as Connor doesn't. I want Antonio to slip up. I want an excuse to end his life.

I don't need an elaborate plan of revenge. I just need a life for a life.

Antonio's eyes flicker between all of us. He looks like he's waiting for the other shoe to drop. I'm not surprised he's suspicious. We know he killed our father, and we're asking for a partnership? I'd be suspicious too.

There's no way Antonio doesn't know we have it out for him. He knows the 'partnership' is just in name, and he knows it's going to be bad, but he can't say no. His life is hanging in the balance.

"Fine," Antonio finally says. "For silence, I will do it."

"Of course you will," Lachlan says.

Antonio leans back, away from his desk. He has nothing more to barter with, nothing more to give. He knows the game is up. He's stuck with us, and he's stuck with the consequences of his foolishness.

I can feel the beginnings of a bone-deep satisfaction set in. This is everything I've ever wanted and more.

I've fantasized about running into Antonio, about him trying to kill me, giving me an excuse to kill him.

This might be better. It's not as quick, but I can enjoy watching Antonio burn.

"It's settled," Lachlan says coolly. "We'll be seeing you soon."

My older brother turns on his heel. I can hear Connor and Finn follow. I stay, pretending to take up the back, but I really just want to catch a last glimpse of Antonio's face.

He doesn't deflate when we leave. The man still has the spine or audacity to stand upright. But the look on his face and the haunted quality of his gaze gives him away.

He's a dead man walking. And he knows it.

CHAPTER 3

Aiden

I catch a glimpse of myself in the glass doors as I follow the others out. I almost don't recognize myself.

My leather jacket shifts as I walk, my movements agitated. My hair is out of place. Dark strands fall away from where I neatly pushed them back away from my temples.

I look like a storm.

I feel like a whirlwind. The reality of what we've just done is beginning to settle in. There's a kinetic energy buzzing between each of us, feeding off each other, amplifying the unsettled nature in our bodies. We've always been men of action and motion. This is adding fuel to the fire.

I take my place in the front seat as Lachlan starts the car. For a few moments, no one speaks.

Lachlan starts to take the long way back to Tír na Nóg. The club feels like it's five hundred miles away and right around the corner at the same time. It feels like we left a lifetime ago.

"Do we have him?" Finn finally says. He doesn't sound amazed. It's more like finality.

The words break the spell of silence. He's made this real by talking, by speaking the truth into the world.

Connor laughs, breathless. "We have him over a fucking barrel."

"He's one of the biggest players," Lachlan murmurs.

It's true that not all six of the families have split their territory evenly. It would be a stretch to ask as much. Power is different to all that hold it. Antonio was given more than enough, yet he still felt like he needed more.

Clearly, Antonio didn't feel well-compensated or respected enough in this

city. He got greedy, and that will be his downfall.

I get what Lachlan is trying to say. So does Connor.

"There's no telling how far we go," Connor says, darkly gleeful. "With our power aligned? We'll be unstoppable. We'll take half of Boston."

Finn interrupts, something dark flashing in his eyes. "We can't trust him." "We don't," Lachlan replies evenly. "That hasn't changed."

"We can't trust him even a little," Finn says sharply. He leans over his legs as if he's talking across the table from Lachlan, trying to impress upon him how much this matters.

Finn is contradictory. He always has been. For someone with an addictive personality, it's strange to me that he's so adamant about being careful now.

It makes me feel like he knows something, or like he has some kind of premonition.

"He could try to go back on the deal," Finn continues. He slumps back in his seat, but the motion is agitated. Like he has to move or he'll go crazy.

Connor shrugs. "And? We have the dirt."

It's like Finn doesn't even hear him.

"He could try to fuck us. He's a fucking rat, obviously," he mutters, waving a hand around. "I mean, he said yes because he had no choice. Who knows what the hell he's doing now that we've left?"

"Pissing himself," Connor says, smug. "Probably checking his will."

"If he thinks he has nothing to lose by it, he'll do what he did again. He'll kill one of us. Or maybe more."

Finn's voice is gruff, and I share a look with Lachlan before glancing over at our younger brother.

Our father's death fucked us up. It was awful, but we were getting by, until six months after his funeral when our mother had a heart attack. Her heart stopped, and the world stopped with it. She became unresponsive, as lost to us as our father but still alive.

Barely.

The doctors call it a vegetative state, but we know it as a waking death. Barely half a year on the heels of our father's murder, it was too much.

Finn spiraled.

The rest of us weren't doing well either. We could hardly manage our father's empire, our grief, and our mother's care, much less Finn. The few moments we managed to get him alone didn't go very far.

He was always out at a bar or a club or a brothel, maybe trying to get

away from the memories. He definitely tried to drink them away.

It became less common to see Finn sober after our mother's health failed. He was always just a little bit fucked up, just a little bit distant from the world. Some days it was worse, and he couldn't even stand. Other days it was barely noticeable, just a hint of whiskey on his breath.

Now, with our father's murderer in our grasp, the cracks are beginning to show. Finn is sober today because maybe this is the one thing he can sober up for, but I can feel in my heart that he'll probably get trashed tonight.

This is digging at old wounds for all of us.

"He's not wrong," I say. I mean it.

Despite whatever trauma or fear is informing Finn, he's not wrong to be worried.

Connor sighs. "Yeah."

I tap my fingers against my knee. "We can't trust Antonio to comply. We know he once risked everything to murder another head of the Assembly. He cheated the Ravens. There's nothing that snake won't do."

Lachlan turns the steering wheel. We're driving over the river now, the water lazily running under us. I can remember visiting as a teenager, before the death of our father. We used to hang targets on the trees and practice throwing knives at them.

"We need insurance," Lachlan says. He has the voice of a man who's already made up his mind.

I can feel realization gnawing at me. Somewhere inside myself, I know what he's thinking. I always know what Lachlan's thinking.

"So, what?" Connor asks. "We take one of his top men? Or we hold someone in his family? I mean, he doesn't have much that isn't tied to the Assembly."

"It'll be hard to get something he isn't willing to cut off to save himself," Finn agrees.

If you're in the Assembly, you know that sacrifices are all part of the game. There is never anything or anyone sacred if your goal is the top. Not that every family is like that. There are plenty of families that will protect their own, content to have as much as they have.

Antonio isn't one of those people.

Not even our father was one of those people.

We are two families that want more for ourselves. That kind of drive, that kind of desire pushes us.

My brothers and I learned young that heart is for family, but only so long as they live by the rules. The second you cross your family, you have nothing left.

We also learned that nothing is sacred in the world we inhabit. Sometimes you have to break with what you love the most to make it a step further.

"His daughter will be easiest," Lachlan says. The words drop like stones in the well of my memory.

Plink. There's a memory of her standing in the hallway in high school, laughing shyly. *Plink*. A memory of her hand on my chest as we stood in front of the movie theater, hanging behind our friends, stealing a moment.

Plink. Her face when I humiliated her before the entire school, her eyes red but no tears running down her cheeks.

Her father taught her well.

Lachlan exhales slowly. "She'll need to be married. Cement the alliance, make it impossible for him to betray us."

"Old school," Finn murmurs, but he's not disagreeing.

There's a reason why a ploy like this works. Why it's still used.

Connor shrugs. "I'll do it, but I don't know. I'm not O'Reilly by blood ___"

"You are to us," I say automatically. It's instinct at this point.

Connor snorts. "Yeah, but will he see it that way? He'd probably dispute it, maybe not even respect it."

"He's right," Finn says. "He hasn't been the most gracious about it in the past."

Not many people have. Being adopted is almost worse than being a bastard in our world. You can't call someone a bastard to their face. You can talk about blood all day. It's all the Assembly will talk about sometimes.

It doesn't matter what we think of Connor or what value we know he has. Everyone in the Assembly knows he's adopted. They know his position and it doesn't impress them.

There's no way Antonio would accept Connor.

Lachlan can't do it. He is the head of the family and he has to be unfettered, unbound by our plots so that if anything happens, he'll be left standing. No matter what.

I know better than to ask this of Finn. He's a mess right now, and we only spoke to Antonio for a few minutes. I can't even imagine what it would be like for him to be married to the man's daughter for insurance.

He'd probably be drunk for the wedding.

"I'll do it."

It's the natural progression, and even as I say it, I know I should have said it first. I knew before Lachlan spoke what we would have to do. I've known since I heard we had dirt on Antonio. I knew the way this would play out. I just didn't let myself think about it until it was bearing down on me like a freight train.

Lachlan glances at me. I can't see anything in his face or the brief glimpse I get of his eyes.

"Are you sure?"

I know he'd make arrangements if I said no. Lachlan would bend over backward to make this work.

I have to be willing to do the same.

Finn chimes in uneasily. "You have a history. We know. You don't have to do this."

Half the Assembly knows about Rose and me. Anyone who went to school with us knows about our history, about the way things splintered between us.

Or at least, they think they know. There's only one man who really knows the truth.

"I can handle it," I tell them.

I don't even know if that's the fucking truth.

The more I think about Rose, the more memories come back. I don't know how to sort them out. I don't know for certain if I can trust myself. I don't even know how I'd react if I saw Rose today, now, right here before me. What does she look like now? Has she changed?

I cared about her once.

Once, I would have given her everything.

Now, I hate her whole goddamn family.

And she's going to be my bride.

CHAPTER 4



It's nice to be home.

I lean back against my pillows, relaxed and too content to get up and do anything just yet. The sheets smell fresh, like flowers, but not the synthetic tang of cheap soap.

Glancing over at the vanity that sits across from the window, I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror. My dark blonde hair is long, soft, and wavy, pulled back in the messy ponytail I threw it into before I got on the plane.

My eyes have always been my favorite thing about myself. They're green like my father's. People have always pointed that out, and it's never failed to make me smile.

Aside from my eyes, most of my face is softer than my father's. I have more of a heart-shaped face, rounder cheeks. One of the guys that flirted with me in college said I had a classical look, like the doll faced women in Renaissance paintings.

My father isn't back from work yet, so I get up and roam around the house a bit restlessly. Dad has lots of pictures hanging on the walls, images of me as a child. I stop to look at a photo from my twelfth birthday party, lost in the memory of that day until the sound of footsteps brings me back to the present.

When I turn to look, I see Tara at the end of the hallway, emerging from my father's bedroom with a hamper at her hip. It's funny how she looks exactly the same but also older, a paradox that makes me feel like I'm in a time capsule.

Tara's been with the family for years. She was the one making me soup when I was home sick from school. I would pretend to be hiding from her in the summer, giggling to myself as I darted away from the sound of her orthopedic shoes on the floor. She was never looking for me, but she pretended to when I needed it. When I was distracting myself from the family business.

"Hey, Tara," I say, smiling. "How's it going?"

Tara smiles and adjusts her grip on the hamper before making her way to me. "As good as can be expected with these old hips acting up. I didn't realize you were here. Are you waiting for your father to return?"

"Yeah. I don't need to sightsee in Boston, you know?"

She laughs. Tara has always been friendly, feeling less like a nanny or maid and more like a distant aunt.

"And your friends?" she asks. Her smile is genuine, soft.

She wouldn't know that it's the wrong question to ask.

It's not like I have many people here at home. Not after what happened in high school. I never really wanted to make ties to this place again, too hurt to even consider it. I moved on with my life, and I didn't care that I let go of almost all of my connections to Boston.

My father was all I ever needed, anyway.

"No," I say, smiling politely. "No one in town."

"Well, that's a shame."

"It's fine. I'm still a little jet-lagged anyway. I may go out later in the week."

"Well, you should take your father out with you. He could use it."

"You think so?"

"That man works too hard," Tara says sagely. She's always been of the same opinion.

I have too.

"I'm not surprised," I say, crossing my arms as I lean against the wall.

"Should do him good to have you around," Tara continues, smiling as she pats my arm. "He's been tired more often than not, recently. Hasn't smiled as much."

"Well, I'll try to fix that."

Tara nods and hefts her hamper a little higher. "Let me know if you need anything. I'll leave some snacks in the kitchen."

I laugh. It's like being a kid again with Tara making me food for study sessions with friends.

"Thank you," I call after her.

When she leaves, I turn to look at another photo on the wall. It's my father with me on his shoulders, laughing as water sprays around us. We had gone to a theme park for the first time and I was ecstatic, though definitely sunburned.

I want to make my father slow down while I'm home. He isn't old, but he's older. I worry about him. When I was at college, it was hard to think about him and wonder if he was doing well. If he took care of himself.

We've always only had each other. I can barely remember my mother. She died when I was young, and all I have are flashes of a smile and a memory of a face vaguely like mine. It's not much.

I continue down the hallway, toward the study. My father practically raised me here when he wasn't in his office. I have good memories of hanging around, reading some of the books from the library-like shelves that stretched ceiling to floor.

It was a good childhood. My father gave me everything I needed, as often as he could. He made sure I had a good education and a comfortable room. He took me places when he could, when it was safe.

Still, more often than not, I ate dinner alone. Mafia business doesn't wait and it tends to happen at all hours of the day, though more likely in the evenings. I spent a lot of time alone at night as a kid.

It meant I didn't have the luxury of being afraid of the dark.

I take a book from the shelf—an old volume of poetry that was my mother's—and wander with it to the corner of the room. There's an old leather chair there, soft with age, a light blanket thrown over the back.

It's where I used to sit while my father worked. I curl up there now, book in hand, and begin to read about flowers and knights and love.

I barely register the passage of time too absorbed in my book. A voice startles me out of my reading so suddenly that I almost jump out of my chair.

"I'm leaving," Tara says. She smiles apologetically at my shock.

I blink, looking around the room. "What time is it?"

"Late. Here," she says, passing me a small tray. There's water, juice, and a sandwich. "You're both the same."

"I guess so." I slide the tray onto the table next to me. "Thanks, Tara. I'll see you tomorrow."

I eat and drink slowly as I go back to my book, getting lost in it again until a new sound catches my attention: the front door opening.

Dad.

I stand quickly, leaving the book on the chair and walking out to greet him.

"Hey, old man," I call, my voice teasing.

He smiles when he sees me, heavy lines appearing on his face with the movement. There are slight shadows under his eyes too, faint enough that I might not notice them if I weren't his daughter, but as I gaze at him, I can tell that Tara was right. He's stressed.

"Rose," he says, my name full of warmth. He pulls his suit jacket off and leaves it on the back of a chair as he makes his way toward me.

He hugs me, then pulls back and studies my face, a faint smile on his lips. "No piercings? Tattoos?"

"Dad." I whack his arm lightly, laughing.

"What? It's college. I won't judge."

I roll my eyes at him. "No, none of that," I say with a smirk. "What about you? Girlfriend? House parties?"

"No, never," he insists, feigning innocence. "There aren't bottles of whiskey hidden behind that row of books behind you."

I shake my head, fighting another chuckle. God, I didn't realize how much I had missed him. I missed this, missed the way we would talk before I left.

I've always only had my father, and he's always only had me, so we had to learn to trust each other pretty quick. And he likes sharp wit, so he raised me to have a quick mind just the same as him.

"So, how was the flight?" he asks, loosening the buttons at his shirt collar.

"Fine." I shrug. "You know I hate air travel, but it was good, all things considered."

I move to help him with his shirt as I speak, gently pressing the collar into place while he watches me. There's something comfortable about the way he watches me, examining my face. It's like he's finding all the things about me that are different now.

I can see what's different about him too. There are more lines on his face—fewer around his eyes, where the skin crinkles where he smiles. The small scar on the left side of his face is almost invisible now. He's not as tan as he used to be. I wonder if he's been outside this week, or this month.

I can tell he's tired. It's in the way he holds himself, and in the way he sighs as I take his tie and fold it in my hands.

"Long day?" I ask.

He smiles, but the heaviness in his eyes doesn't lighten. "Yes. Long day."

I fish around for an idea. I want him to relax, want him to de-stress. Ideally, we'd stay home, but I get the feeling this requires a bigger effort. Whatever is bothering him is something he feels like he can't tell me yet.

"Let's go out," I say. I didn't want to hit the town so soon after touching down—especially after running into a high school acquaintance—but I'm willing to do it for him.

"Out?"

"Yes, out. Dinner," I add, thinking quickly. "Somewhere nice, just the two of us. We can catch up."

He nods. "All right. Dinner, then."

I lower my voice to a whisper. "Maybe I can break the news about my tattoo over dessert."

He laughs, this time more real, more free. It's a relief. He might not be at ease, but I can distract him at least for tonight.

"I'll get ready," I say. "You sit and have a drink, okay? Relax."

I give him a quick kiss on the cheek and leave before he can argue. Slipping back into my old bedroom, I grab a dress hanging in the closet that I brought with me, something I've worn a few times. I slip it on and take a quick look in the mirror. The pale green silk makes me look a little tan, makes my eyes brighter. I decide on some short, blocky heels to make it a little less dressy.

When I meet my father in the living room, I find him staring out the darkened window, a barely-touched glass in hand.

"Ready?" I ask.

He turns to look at me, something like nostalgia and pride in his eyes. "You look beautiful, sweetheart."

"Thanks." I smile, nudging him with my shoulder as we head for the door. "Lucky you, huh?"

He laughs. "Very lucky."

My father takes me to one of his favorite Italian places, a spot where the servers and staff probably all recognize him. We're led immediately to a nice table at the back, in an alcove away from the public eye and dressed with heavy velvet curtains.

"Your usual bottle, sir?" the server asks.

My father nods, one hand raised in brief acknowledgment. "Yes, thank

you."

I unfold a napkin and drop it into my lap, picking an easy topic of conversation to try to keep Dad's mind off whatever was bothering him earlier. "So, I stopped by Cousins on the way in."

My father chuckles. "How was it?"

"Just as fantastic as always. You know, maybe I'll just work there. I'd eat all the sandwiches I want."

"But you'd be bored."

"I saw an old friend there," I say as the waiter returns to pour us both glasses of wine. I'm not sure I could call Noah a friend since I didn't really know him in high school, but I don't know what else to call him.

"Is that so?"

There's a small smirk on my father's lips. I shoot him a playful glare and tip my glass back, taking a sip before I answer.

"It's not like that. I barely knew him. He just wanted to catch up."

"Catch up with a woman he barely knew?"

"Dad."

"No, it's nice," he says, his smile concealing a laugh. "You're young. It's good to go out, have fun. Date."

I groan, but it's half-hearted. I know my father loves me. He's always wanted something for me like he had with my mother.

He never really spoke about her. I always had the feeling it was fresh for him, painful. He never really recovered from her death. The only time I ever saw him close to tears was when he looked at pictures of her.

"Oh, have my things shipped yet?" I ask. "There's an ink drawing I'd love to frame for you."

My father raises an eyebrow. "Really? I thought you weren't an artist."

"I'm not," I agree. "Which is why I'm so proud of it. It may be the one and only decent drawing I'll ever create."

We both laugh, and I'm about to say something else when a shadow falls over our table. I look up, expecting to see the waiter coming around to see if we need more wine or something. But as I register the face of a handsome, dark-haired man standing beside our table, I almost drop my glass.

Aiden.

It's like having double vision. Part of me can still see traces of the boy I once knew, the boy I loved. The one with a brooding face but a secret smile just for me. Dark brown hair and the most vivid blue eyes. Strong arms and

broad shoulders, and so tall that it felt like he blocked out the entire world when he hugged me.

But the other part of me can only see the reality of the man who stands before me now. His gaze is zeroed in on my face like he'll never look away. He has the same dark hair, the same blue eyes. But he's bigger and broader, if that's possible. And he has tattoos now. Lots of them.

I'm too stunned by his sudden appearance to speak, and I search for something in his face, some clue to indicate what's happening. I don't know why he's here, and I can't think past the fact that he *is* here, standing before me after all those years apart.

His face is blank, giving no hint of what he's feeling or thinking. It seems like he's just... nothing. I'm not sure whether it's better or worse than all the possibilities I've thought of over the years.

He was so sweet to me at first, then so cruel. Like a monster.

Now, he's just cold.

"What are you doing here?" my father bites out, his voice breaking through the torrent of questions whirling in my mind. "I told you—"

"We've decided we need to amend our deal."

Someone speaks from beside Aiden, and I wrench my gaze away from him, realizing there are other men with him. I recognize them too. Aiden's brothers. I can see the boys I remember in their hard, stoic faces, three boys I went to school with and knew.

"That's not—" My father begins, but they ignore him.

Moving as a unit, they all pull up chairs and sit down with us. There isn't a lot of room for them at the table, but they make room, all of them imposing and dark as omens.

Lachlan folds his arms, leaning back as he studies my father. He's the oldest of the O'Reilly brothers, with his hair like Aiden's and his eyes a forest green. He's as tall as ever, like a model, his expression one of collected power.

Is he the one in charge of their organization now? He must be. Even with my limited knowledge of the mafia and my father's world, I know Lachlan was the heir to his family name.

Connor and Finn sit on one side of Lachlan, and my gaze flicks over toward them, cataloging all the ways they've changed. Connor looks like he's made of pure muscle, as if he's spent all of the time between high school and now boxing or fighting. His dark blonde hair is messy, his brown eyes as unyielding as earth. Finn, the youngest brother, looks a bit rough around the edges, his eyes dark and a slight hint of stubble on his jaw, like he's had a bad week—or maybe a bad few years.

There's an unmistakable stony bond between the four of them. It's clear in the way they position themselves, squared up to the table with grim expressions.

They look like they mean business, and it suddenly occurs to me that I should know what business this is. I'm out of the loop. I have no way to help my father.

"One thing you should know about me is that I'm a cautious man. Careful. My brothers and I don't take unnecessary risks, and we like to play things safe," Lachlan says. He glances at me casually, and I wonder if he's trying to get me to leave.

But fuck that, and fuck him if he thinks I'll just get up and walk away right now.

I know what can happen in this dark world, this underside to the regular world. I'm not about to leave my father alone.

Dad's hand curls, gripping his napkin. "So, you've come to talk to me about being careful?"

"We've come to talk about insurance," Lachlan explains, his tone even and measured. If this wasn't so terrifying, I might find his voice calming. "You're not trustworthy. Your words are useless."

A spike of liquid anger shoots through my veins. I'm not sure what context or information I'm missing, but I know my father. He's not a liar.

Finn crosses his arms. "It wouldn't do to trust a man who lies to the ally he cheats."

"This needs to be official," Lachlan continues. "Unfortunately, we can't simply do this as business partners."

My father's hand is still tight on the napkin. He's angry—more than angry, I think he's furious. He's always been calm and collected in his meetings with the mafia. He's always been a patient man.

A spike of fear strikes the middle of my chest. Does he know?

I never told him about what Aiden did to me in high school. There's no reason to think anyone told him. Not after all this time. But why else is he so angry at them?

"What do you mean?" Dad finally asks. "What is it you need?"

Lachlan leans back in his seat. His gaze flicks to Aiden, then back to me,

and my stomach twists.
"Your daughter," he says simply. "She has to marry Aiden."

CHAPTER 5



My heart drops like a lead weight. One of my hands starts to fly to my chest, and I barely keep it locked to my side, trying not to let anyone see just what I'm feeling.

Marry him?

My first instinct is a confused flurry of outrage and defiance. I'm furious that anyone would presume to trade me off like some kind of prize animal, married for some kind of contract or agreement.

Despite myself, I find my gaze drawn to Aiden. I'm not sure what I expect to see, but I find him looking at my father, not at me. His face is still stony, his expression unreadable. I can't tell what he's thinking, or if he knew about this when he came here.

I don't know if it matters. I don't know if it would be better that he planned this. Some warped part of me tries to reason that maybe he offered himself as an option because we knew each other once.

That can't be true. Things ended so badly with us, and from the look of him, I don't think he'd agree to marry me if he had any other choice.

Somehow, despite all the time and how much I say that I'm over it, that hurts.

Does he not feel anything anymore? Did he ever?

"You can't be serious," my father growls. Fury doesn't even begin to describe the emotion behind his words.

Lachlan's eyes narrow. "I'm very serious. There's no need to be insulting."

"You're asking—"

"Not asking," Connor says casually. There's danger in his tone and the

way he leans forward a little, the muscles in his arms flexing with the motion.

"We don't trust you," Lachlan says quietly. "We need insurance. It's simple."

It's simple, but it makes no sense. I don't know what my father has done to make them distrust him, and I don't know why this is the solution.

Marry Aiden?

He had me once. He held my heart. I let him hold it, gave him my time and my love. I believed he could be gentle with me, that he truly loved me more than anything else in his life.

He crushed me. He squeezed everything out of my heart and when he was done, I was broken.

I hated him.

I hated him for what he did, hated him for taking advantage of every good thing I offered him. I was so ready to give myself, so ready to get something good in return. All I got in the end was pain.

I thought I moved past all of this when I left for college. I went on a handful of dates, and focused on my schoolwork and my future. I figured out who I was and what I want. I told myself that if I ever came back, if I ever saw him, we'd be adults. We'd have new lives, new perspectives. Things would be awkward, but we could move past it. We could admit what we did wrong.

He could admit what he did to me.

Seeing Aiden now, I know there was no kind of apology on his tongue, in his mind, in his heart. He still doesn't see anything to apologize for.

If anything, he would hurt me even more if he had the chance.

He's doing it now.

I can't do it. The realization hits me hard, and I try to swallow past the rock forming in my throat. I don't know what is at stake, but I can't marry Aiden. Never.

My father stares back at Lachlan. "This can't be the only way. You realize how outdated this is."

"We prefer the word 'traditional," Finn says, leaning across the table to snatch a piece of bread. He tears it in half and dips some in oil, swiping it up with a flick of his wrist.

My father looks murderous. Part of me wishes he'd play along a little, just so we can get the hell out of here and figure out what we're going to do.

"You think I would say yes to this?"

"I think you have no choice," Lachlan says, emphasizing each word. His eyes glitter dangerously as he stares at my father. "We are offering you the peaceful option. Surely you know that."

Is that a threat? I don't know if it is and what it means. My heart races, my imagination spinning wildly out of control.

I don't know what kind of other options they'd give my father. What non-peaceful solutions they might have. I don't think they would kill me, but I don't doubt they might kill him. Maybe they'd take a limb. Maybe they'd burn our house to the ground. Anything seems possible.

My father looks my way, catching my gaze. The anger in his eyes blazes as brightly as ever, but there's a trace of sorrow in his face too. A silent apology, as if he's the one that's responsible.

I shake my head. I want to tell him it's not his fault. I want to tell him it's fine, I've survived worse. This is just another tense misunderstanding, and once it's through, we can laugh. We can go home. I'll pour him some whiskey and myself some wine, and we'll talk about how close we came to disaster.

But I don't think that will happen.

"Go," he says quietly. "I'll take care of this."

There are two emotions, two responses that immediately jump to mind. The first is denial. I want to say no, to put my foot down and prove myself. I want to see this through. It frightens me how stuck my father seems, how much he seems unable to fight this.

The second thought I have is to run—not just out of the building, but out of the state. I want to run far away, away from the past I thought I was done with that clearly isn't done with me. Anything in the world would be better than this. Anywhere in the world would feel safer than this overcrowded table does right now.

I can't leave my father, but I don't want this.

I can't do this.

My heart stutters, surging into my throat and making it hard to breathe. I shove my chair back, a little less artfully than I hoped. I don't say anything. I just slip away and start walking as fast as I can.

I'm almost running. I can hear the low click of my block heels and some distant, panicking part of my brain is glad I wore something I could get away in.

I know why he told me to run. I half expect to hear gunshots or raised

voices. I have to fight the urge to go back and protect my father, and the knowledge that I could never be strong enough to help. Not really.

Not against all of the O'Reilly brothers.

My legs feel wobbly as I stride down a hall, the walls seeming to close in around me. The door that opens onto the ally at the back of the restaurant is right up ahead, calling my name, telling me to get out before it's too late.

I don't make it.

Someone catches my arm, and I gasp. I've choked back so much fear that I can't even scream. For a fleeting moment, I wonder if my father is dead. If I'm next.

The hand yanks me around, and I awkwardly stumble backward. My back hits the wall, the textured brick bumpy through the thin fabric of my dress.

My heart pounds in my chest as Aiden glares down at me.

He has me pinned, caging me in. I can smell his cologne, a grown-up version of the same scent he liked in high school. It smells warm and musky, like spices on a winter day.

I know the feeling of his body close to mine, but not like this. He's taller now, bigger. It's somehow alien and painfully familiar all at once. He looms over me, so close that if I closed my eyes, I could pretend we're in another world, another universe where he never hurt me.

"Think carefully about what you do next," he says, his voice a low rumble.

I try not to look up at him, but my alternative is to stare at his chest. I hate that my mind races, comparing who he is now to the boy I knew.

What would it be like if nothing bad had ever happened between us? Would he be holding me now, having dinner with my father?

Asking me to marry him, but not doing it to threaten the only person I care about?

"Fight all you want," Aiden says. He's almost whispering, his breath warm on my skin. "All it will do is get your father killed. And my brothers and I will be glad to do it."

A spike of fear surges in my heart. I know he's not bluffing. He was always true to his word, always so sure when he spoke. I can hear the same confidence in his words right now, and I know he's not lying to me.

My mind races. I don't know what made him hate my father, what made him so ready to kill. The boy I knew was always willing to fight, but never looking for a fight. What happened? What changed to make him like this—

make him so bloodthirsty?

A cold chill runs down my spine, but I try to hide it as I square my shoulders, staring defiantly up at him.

"I know the rules of the Assembly. You can't kill each other."

The blue of Aiden's eyes darkens like a drop of blood falling into a pool of clear water. His jaw clenches.

"There are ways around that. Are you willing to risk it?"

No. I swallow, barely able to breathe.

"Why? Why do you want to marry me? You hate me."

Some part of me expects him to deny that, to tell me I'm wrong. I know, because when he doesn't deny it, I feel like I'm dying inside all over again.

There's a cold triumph in Aiden's eyes, a satisfaction when he looms over me. This isn't just about duty for him, not just because his family asked him to marry me and he couldn't say no. He's pleased with himself, I realize. It makes my gut twist.

How can he be happy about this? How can he enjoy this?

Aiden leans in. My palms flatten against the wall behind me. I can't stop thinking about his chest pressed against me, his breath hot on my skin. This is stupid. I'm stupid.

Something heats low in my belly, the memory of his lips on mine overwhelming me. I must be fucked up to even be thinking about that right now.

But somehow, I am. Somehow, I can't stop my brain and body from running away with images of us. I can remember what it felt like for him to push me onto his bed. I remember his mouth on mine, remember him parting my legs and sinking deep inside me.

And even now, even in the middle of this mess, my entire body sparks with electricity as Aiden leans in close. My bones burn, an image of me hitching my leg around his waist blazing in my mind. I imagine him yanking his pants down and fucking me right here, taking me against the wall without any care for the people that might find us.

Fuck. No, Rose.

I can't let myself feel this, especially not now. I clench my teeth and try to breathe shallowly as Aiden's body crowds mine.

His large hand comes up to grip my chin, forcing me to hold his gaze. His voice is even harder than his expression when he speaks again.

"We can do this the easy way, or the hard way."

Marriage or death.

I want there to be a third option. I desperately want anything to save me from this, to save my father from whatever it is he's gotten into. I want to run away and not look back.

There is no other option. I know there isn't.

Aiden doesn't love me. He wants to kill my father. He doesn't care that we have a past. He will do what he wants, what he needs to.

But there's no way.

"Fine. I'll do it."

The words sound like defeat as they fall heavily from my mouth. But even as I speak them, I make a silent vow.

I'm going to find a way to make Aiden pay.

CHAPTER 6

Aiden

I stare down at Rose's face as she agrees to be my wife. She's full of defiance, staring right back at me like I'm not holding her in place. Like she's the one choosing to be here now.

She probably thinks she's hiding this part of her. That her steel is hidden behind her pretty face and soft hair, the little bow of her lips and the wide pools of her green eyes.

She always used to meet my gaze, and it turns me on now just as much as it did then.

What kind of fucked up am I?

Her family destroyed mine. Her family is the reason both of my parents are gone to me and my brothers, taken from us too soon. Rose is the child of my greatest enemy, but she was the girl I loved before the storm began.

Even now, I remember how she felt. She still feels so small, so much slighter than me. A little dove that sings prettily and looks even prettier. But she still has that inner strength, that steel that allows her to look me in the eye even as I threaten her father's life.

It sends all my blood rushing straight to my cock. I was never able to deny her, even when we were teenagers, even when I was a boy pretending to be an intimidating man. I would glare at everyone that passed, but she would meet my eyes and look right into me.

And I loved it.

I could take her here. I could flip her around and drive deep inside her, feel how wet and hot she is. I could let my cock take over and fuck her into submission, shoving her panties into her mouth to keep her quiet. I know how soft her skin is and I know it tastes good on my tongue.

As Rose's green gaze sears into mine, I imagine the color disappearing as her eyes roll back, her legs shaking as she takes me. I'd fuck her fast and hard, slamming into her with all the force of the pent-up frustration I've carried for years. I'd hook her legs around my waist and dig my fingers into her thighs.

She'd have bruises for days. I wouldn't want her to walk right. I'd have her panting and soft, rip that dress right off and take her breasts in my hands as I drove into her from behind.

I would have all of her, and I'd make her love it.

Still, there's a sharp blade of vengeance held to my throat.

Some sick part of me wants to break her, make her pay for my father's death, see her suffer what I did. I want her to lose her father the way I did, bloody and painful.

I know that desire makes me a monster. I don't care right now.

I can't let go of her. My hand is still on her chin. I'm half-hard, my head swimming with the smell of her perfume and the sensation of her body pressed against mine. Our faces are close. She's breathing faster, either out of fear or something else.

Her pupils dilate, and I know—or maybe I wish—it's from something else. I imagine her wanting me as much as I want her in this moment, and fuck everything else. Fuck the politics happening in the dining room, fuck the past, fuck everything.

Is she thinking about fucking me the way I'm thinking about fucking her? Is she remembering the last time I touched her?

I know we could do it. I know my brothers will wait. They're out in the dining room, dealing with Antonio. I don't give a shit.

They wouldn't care if I screwed her. Hell, they'd probably call it therapeutic. Maybe she isn't as good as I remember. Or maybe she is, maybe she's better, and if I do this, I can have her again.

Maybe if I give in to this moment, I'll get everything out of Rose about her father. Maybe she'll turn on him and come to me without pause, let me in body and soul.

It's a dangerous thought. I have to grit my teeth and tamp it all down like gunpowder.

I let her go, practically shoving her face away like it can save me from my own traitorous body. I remind myself why I'm here.

Still staring at her, I say, "Good call."

I'm not sure if I'm talking about her choice or mine.

Lifting my hand, I gesture back toward the dining area. Rose knows what I'm telling her to do, and she turns away from the wall, running her hands along her dress. I force myself not to think about what's just beneath that soft fabric or let my gaze track the movement.

And I tell myself it's not weakness when I put a hand on her lower back to guide her. I tell myself it's precautionary, a warning.

Rose stiffens as soon as my palm makes contact with her back, and I press my lips together to contain a savage smile. The dark satisfaction I feel is from that ugly part of me that wants revenge. I leave my hand where it is just so she can squirm, the menacing voice in my heart saying she deserves it.

I know it's just my guilt and anger that are fueling me. I want her to feel bad about the spark between us because I know I should. I want her to be uncomfortable with me because I'm so weak around her, so unable to fight my own desire.

The dining room lighting is soft. I try not to look at Rose as we walk. I know if I did, I'd only imagine what she'd look like in my bedroom, lit by a lamp in the evening as I undress her.

The others are still at the table. Lachlan barely glances at me. Antonio's eyes burn as he looks at me, then immediately turns to his daughter.

He looks her over, examining her for some sign of what could have happened. It's satisfying to see him like this. He has no one to blame but himself. He did something unforgivable, and he's done nothing but put Rose in danger since then. This was always going to happen.

"We'll organize the transfer," Lachlan says, picking up the conversation where he must have left off. "I think you'll find the terms agreeable."

Antonio doesn't even grace the comment with a reply. He knows he has no choice in any of this.

"We'll make the merger simple," Lachlan continues. "I expect full cooperation."

Finn cuts in next, practiced, reciting what we've already decided.

"The wedding will take place in a few weeks. Details will be worked out by our family. You will handle finances. We will handle the event."

"That is excessive," Antonio says, sounding like he's close to losing his cool. Part of me hopes he will. "Do you have no basic respect? Think of what this means for me—"

"You should have thought about what it would mean for you before you

decided on betrayal," Lachlan says sharply.

"This is common courtesy."

"Would you afford a thief common courtesy?"

Antonio's jaw twitches. "I thought we could settle on civility."

"I'm repeating myself," Lachlan says, dismissive. "You'll take the deal. That's all."

Antonio doesn't argue. He must know by now what things are going to look like. And he can't really fight us—not when I have Rose with me, one hand on her as a warning to the both of them.

I try to focus on the back-and-forth, but my eye is inevitably drawn back to Rose. She looks just the same as I remember her, but so different in so many little ways. She has the same blonde hair, but it's longer now, more natural, falling in loose waves.

Her cheekbones are more pronounced, the roundness in her face even and soft. She no longer has the babyish look of a teenager. She is a woman now, her features in perfect balance.

Rose glances at me. I can almost feel the static between us when our eyes meet for a fleeting moment. It's there and then gone, but the tension is immense.

I remind myself this is business. I want something from Antonio. It's why I'm here.

Lachlan and Antonio go back and forth, but Antonio knows he has to give in. I try not to watch Rose but end up gazing at her anyway. Relief is clear in her face when her father calls for the check. She's barely touched any of her food.

I rise with my brothers, and Rose starts to move away toward her father.

Something sharp rises up in me in response to her leaving my side. It tastes sour on my tongue, some combination of desperation, anger, and desire tangling together.

I reach out and pull her back to me in a sharp movement. "You're coming with me."

Her eyes widen. "What? Right now?"

Antonio glares at me. I wonder what it must be like for him—his daughter only just returned, and now I have her. She's a pawn.

All because of his mistakes.

"Is that necessary?"

Glancing at him, I cock an eyebrow. "You've made it necessary."

"I'm afraid there's no other way," Lachlan says coolly. "But you know this."

"This is the deal you made," I say, turning my focus to Rose. "Starting now, you're mine. You may not have a ring on your finger yet, but we'll fix that soon."

"This is—" Rose stops, her gaze flicking to her father. She might be thinking about her promise, about what could happen to him if she goes back on it. Finally, she licks her lips and then nods. "All right. I'll go with you."

"Rose..." Antonio's jaw is tight, his entire body tense.

"Goodbye, Dad," she murmurs. It sounds like the last thing she'll ever say to him.

There's a storm raging in me. This is what I wanted. I wanted her to hurt, wanted the same pain I suffered to course through her veins. But hearing her say goodbye makes something tighten in my chest.

I don't want to think about it.

So I don't, turning and pulling Rose toward the door. She holds her chin up the whole way and follows me to my car, staying put when I shut the door on her side.

She's agitated as I slide into the driver's seat and start the car. Restless energy radiates from her as I drive, and from the corner of my eye, I can see her leg jittering, as if she's itching to move.

Keeping my gaze trained on the road, I reach out and rest a hand on her leg, stilling the small movements. The silk under my palm is warm from resting against her skin, and even though it's incredibly soft, I know her skin would be softer.

Fuck. I wanted this to feel like a taunt, a reminder of who she belongs to now—but I almost feel like I'm taunting myself, giving myself a small taste of what I know I should no longer crave.

Rose stiffens, her breath catching. Then she reaches down and shoves my hand away, scooting over a little on the seat to create more distance between us.

"I'm not yours yet," she bites out.

"Yes, you are."

You'll always be mine. There was never a moment when you weren't. My jaw clenches, and although I don't say the words, they echo in my mind.

I've kept Rose with me despite everything, in some small corner of myself. What I remembered of her was mine, and I can see bits and pieces of that old Rose in the woman next to me now.

I don't know why I'm doing this. Am I testing her, or myself? Or am I just trying to find an excuse to slip up, accidentally forget everything I told myself?

I reach out again. She doesn't react as I slide my hand up her leg. The skin of her thigh is smooth and warm, and I can feel the heat of her pussy so close to where my fingers are, curled around her leg. The throbbing in my dick returns, harder than before, a hot pulse that beats through my entire body.

Moving one of my fingers, I inch it close enough that I can feel her heat and the dampness of her panties. The fabric is barely there. It's almost like she's naked.

Rose is holding her breath. She has the same fucking poker face that runs in the family, but her body won't lie.

I imagine pulling over and dropping her chair backward. I wonder how she would react if I worked her open slowly with my fingers, getting her wetter as she twisted and moaned. The car would get hot, the windows foggy. I'd add more fingers, moving slowly until she was moaning and begging for me.

I would plunge my cock into her wet heat and let her pussy tighten around me, pulling me in. I'd fuck her slowly at first, then tear her dress with my hands, letting it fall away from her naked body. I'd rip a piece off and tie her hands with it, keeping her right where I want her.

I would make her come once and then turn her over and do it again. I might even sit back and let her blow me, fist my hand in her hair and push her down until I felt my cock hit the back of her throat. I'd make her gag and reach around to finger her, making her moan on my cock before I made her come again.

Rose's breath is coming in thin puffs through her nose as her cheeks flush pink. I wonder if she's thinking about me too. I wonder what her fantasies are, what she'd imagine me doing.

Maybe she's imagining something soft. Something like what we once had.

Or maybe, like me, she's imagining something rough. Something almost like hate sex, hard and unyielding, as much about anger as it is about desire.

Everything swirling through my head is so distracting that I barely realize I'm home. We pull into the garage, and before the car is even in park, Rose

pushes her door open and slips out, getting away from me.

I can still smell her though. The heady scent of arousal lingers in the car, mixing with the smell of the leather. She was just as turned on as me. I know she was. She might have tried to keep her face stoic and her eyes locked straight ahead, but her body didn't lie.

That satisfies me in a way I can't exactly describe. The thought that I managed to fuck with her defiant attitude makes me grin. I want to prove to her that she's not immune to temptation, not immune to the feelings that I know she has for me.

I open my door and leave the car, the cool air of the garage brushing against my face. Rose stands on the other side of the car, her small hands fisted at her sides.

As I step up beside her, she reacts to my closeness, holding herself rigid and unyielding. I press a hand against her bare left shoulder, the touch barely there but enough to make her breath catch.

"Welcome home," I murmur.

CHAPTER 7



Home.

Aiden's voice rings in my head. His hand feels ghostly on my shoulder, almost weightless. Yet it's still there, just like the enormous house before me and the truth of my situation.

Aiden's hand presses. "Well, shall we?"

I can't be silent. I won't be mute, some helpless woman tossed around by his will.

"Yes," I say, infusing my voice with as much steel as I possibly can.

Aiden smirks. I ignore him. There are more important things on my mind.

I have no clue what my father did to get on the O'Reilly family's bad side. My father has always been a patient man and a thoughtful one. He had ambition, of course, but it was for my sake. He never overreached.

I can't see how my father could have pissed off anyone, much less the entire O'Reilly family—because clearly, it's not just Aiden who hates my father.

It's all of them.

I saw the way Lachlan looked at my father. He's always been the most calm of all of the brothers, but his green eyes almost glowed with righteous fire as he stared at my dad.

Something big has happened. Something that's changed everything for all of them.

I just don't know what.

Aiden's hand drops to my lower back as we enter the house.

"Foyer. Living room," he says, indicating with his right hand. He gestures to his left, carelessly. "A sitting room."

Although I barely have time to take in what I'm seeing, I can see a theme forming. There's a lot of hardwood flooring, carved wood furniture, and dark metal details at the windows. The rugs are rich jewel tones, embroidered tapestries hanging on some walls of the rooms.

There are books too, set on shelves in a huge library. I can't help but cling to their existence like a drowning man searching for something to stay afloat.

More than the rooms, I find myself looking at Aiden. I can't help it.

I tell myself I'm trying to find his weakness, look for a chink in his armor, but I don't even believe my own lie.

Aiden might as well be stone, as cold and hard as the bust in the hallway we pass through. It's a man I don't recognize, just the same as the one before me.

I thought I recognized Aiden immediately at the restaurant because he looked the same. The more I look, the more I realize that isn't exactly true. He doesn't look exactly the same.

For one thing, the sharp angles of his face are no longer as dramatic as they were when he was a teenager. He's not as lanky anymore, his cheekbones not as defined. There's an adult hardness to his face, a weight that is more muscle than fat. He looks solid, strong.

He looks like the kind of man I would let finger me inside his car.

God, I can't believe that happened. I keep thinking about it, dizzy at the implications. He touched me and I didn't want him to stop.

I told myself I wanted him to stop, told myself I didn't like his hand on me. But there was a burning low inside me when his hand rested on my leg. Something that made me wet, made my legs tremble.

When Aiden's fingers pressed against my panties, I imagined him pulling over to fuck me. I imagined a dangerous fantasy, a fleeting image of him leaning me over the seat and sinking into me from behind, right in view of anyone passing by.

Fuck, Rose. Stop thinking about shit like that.

Aiden gestures toward another door and I realize we're farther into the house now. I know I should probably pay attention, learning this place backward and forward in case I need to escape.

"Kitchen," he says. "Pantry beyond that."

He isn't looking for a response. It's a good thing. I don't think I could give a convincing one.

It doesn't matter that this house is beautiful. I hate it. I don't want to live

here. Not when I didn't choose this.

Not that it matters.

We walk through more rooms. I only half-listen, already feeling the exhaustion of my recent trip home and the night I've suffered.

I just want to sleep. I want to sleep and maybe when I wake up in the morning, it'll be a dream. Or maybe Aiden will be gone, and I'll find a way to leave. I'll get out, find my father, and we'll both leave.

We'll both get out of this city and the shit that's suddenly coming for us.

Finally, we're back at the front of the house, standing by the stairs. I find the strength in me to say something, hoping I'll get a brief reprieve, even if I'm stuck here.

"Where will my room be?" I ask.

Aiden raises an eyebrow. "Your room?"

"It's late. I want to go to bed."

I don't know what time it is, but I know it's not late. I just want to get away from him.

Aiden's gaze finds mine. His blue eyes are unreadable, and I find my stomach dropping, uncertainty holding me in its icy grip. I hate not knowing what's coming next.

I hate feeling like this man I used to know is a complete stranger now. I hate feeling like I lost him, but I still imagine the boy I knew. I still imagine the person I was in love with.

He nods. "This way."

His response is so civil that I almost don't follow him, half expecting someone to jump out at me.

Instead, I follow Aiden upstairs. He opens a door to a bedroom and I follow him in, thankful for the chance to have peace and a moment to myself.

But my heart sinks as I step inside.

It's his room. I know it instantly, half from the clearly lived-in look of it and half from the way he watches me as he stands by the door, his gaze that of a predator.

I stare at the bed. The frame is old wood, beautifully carved. The sheets are deep blue, nearly black. It looks so damned comfortable, but it might as well be my grave.

"What's mine is yours," Aiden says, faking a kind tone, although there's a cruel sharpness in his eyes. "Same room, same bed. That's the situation, isn't it? We'll be married. Of course we'll sleep together."

I itch to slap him.

I know he has enough rooms. I know he has guards making sure no one comes in or goes out. It's not an issue of safety, or that he thinks I might try to slip away at night. He's not doing this to keep me under his watch.

He's doing this solely for his own fucking pleasure. Just so he can make me uncomfortable, or so he probably thinks. He's doing it because he wants me to feel awkward about sharing a bed with a man. A man I barely know and don't really like.

I'm pissed. I'm also suddenly unnerved, painfully aware of everything I haven't put together until this point.

I don't know him.

Not anymore.

I knew him once, and the boy I knew was different. I'm not sure if the man in front of me is trying to tell me something awful.

I'm not sure if the man in front of me is saying he'll force me into whatever it is he wants.

Aiden's mouth twists. There's something mocking in his look and almost as if he can read my mind, he answers the question I wouldn't have dared to ask.

"Don't worry. This isn't how I seduce a woman I want. You're a special case."

He says special like it's an insult. It feels like one and it stings, sharp and unwarranted.

I don't know that it's true. I'm not convinced that he doesn't want me, given the way he touched me in the car. The way he seemed focused on one thing.

And it's not like I can lie to myself about what I wanted. He's attractive, and I used to know him. If he had done this differently—if he hadn't threatened my father and been awful to me—I might even have thrown caution to the wind and fallen right back into his arms.

I don't have a choice, though. I can't run. There's nowhere to run to. We're alone in the house and I know he must have security somewhere on his grounds.

I agreed to this. How long did I think I could avoid it?

I grit my teeth. "Fine."

Aiden smiles. "Good. See? We're already starting well. No misunderstandings."

"None," I reply darkly. Looking away from Aiden, I add, "Anyway, like I said, I think I'll go to bed. It's been a long day."

He nods coolly, leaning back against a dresser. "I'm sure."

My jaw clenches. "Well?"

"Well?" he echoes. His blue eyes are sharp and cold like glass. I feel like I could cut myself if I tried to hold his gaze for too long.

"I need something reasonable to sleep in, at the very least," I finally say, fishing for an excuse to shut myself in a separate place for at least a few moments, even if it's just slipping into the bathroom to change. "Can I... borrow something?"

"Of course. What's mine is yours."

Aiden tosses me a shirt. I catch it in one hand and try not to think about strangling him with it.

His smirk is more vicious than playful. I know he isn't joking. He really doesn't give a shit about me, and he probably cares even less about my father.

I can't hope for anything with Aiden. Whatever shreds of hope I had are done, gone. It's all ashes.

Thankfully, he doesn't stoop so low as to follow me into the bathroom. I almost tear the thin strap of my dress as I yank it off, frustrated with everything that's happening. I can't believe I'm in this situation. I can't believe I have to be here.

How did everything turn into a nightmare?

When I pull it on, the shirt barely covers my ass by an inch. I didn't expect anything less.

I wash my face quickly, then run a hand through my hair to ruffle it before glancing at my reflection in the mirror.

I look nervous. Hunted.

That won't do.

I press my palms into my cheeks until they're flushed and count my breaths until they're even. I stare into my own green eyes in the mirror until the sharp edge to them has hardened to marble. I won't look like some damsel in distress.

I can hear Aiden move on the other side of the door. The floor creaks softly beneath his feet, and I know I can't stall any longer, so I open the door and hold my things in my right hand, trying to keep it at my waist to distract from my legs.

His gaze lands on me for a moment, and I swear I can see heat in them, some flicker of what I saw in the car coming to life before it's gone in a flash.

Doing my best to ignore him, I pad over to the bed and get in. I pull the covers up to my chest and try to pretend my heart isn't racing.

I wait for him to head toward the bathroom, thinking maybe I can pretend to be asleep when he comes back, but he doesn't go.

He starts stripping in front of me.

He's not looking at me, thank god, but it doesn't matter.

It's impossible for me not to look at him.

He has tattoos I've never seen across his chest and arms, intricate things that remind me of the tapestries I saw when I arrived. There are words too, though they're not in English and I don't understand them.

He looks like a beautiful devil. Like a god of vengeance, a demon come to life.

When he gets down to his boxer briefs, my breath catches. But rather than stripping entirely, he goes into the bathroom, and I feel like I can breathe for the first time. I gasp in a lungful of air, pressing my hands to my cheeks.

I turn onto my side and try to pretend I'm falling asleep. The bathroom sink runs, then the light turns off as he comes over to the bed.

His body heat radiates into me as he crawls onto the mattress, and I curl up on my side, scooting away from him.

It doesn't help. I can still feel him like we're touching.

I stare at the wall for what feels like an eternity before I finally fall asleep, exhaustion winning out over the discomfort and uncertainty I feel.

My eyes snap open sometime in the middle of the night, my heart lurching. For a second, I'm dazed and disoriented, but as I remember where I am, I realize it was a sound that woke me. The room is dark, and I blink, staying still and quiet as I listen.

Aiden is muttering, his body twitching slightly as he dreams. I can't tell what he's saying, but his muffled words sound agitated.

He's angry, in pain.

Fear spikes through me. I don't know if I should wake him or not. I'm not sure if he might do something in his sleep.

Slowly, I roll over to face him, studying him in the darkness. I don't know what he's dreaming about, but I know it's not just a nightmare. It's worse. It's the kind of dream you have when you're reliving a loss, something terrible and painful.

It makes me feel for him, despite everything, a pang of pity that almost overwhelms me.

Suddenly, Aiden's eyes fly open. He jerks awake.

It's too late for me to fling myself down and pretend I'm asleep. I am frozen as Aiden's eyes turn to me, his chest still heaving from the dream. For just a second, I can see despair in his eyes. It's the kind of gut-wrenching pain that makes you want to cry.

Aiden stares at me, eyes narrowed. There's a new kind of anger on his face.

I feel like I'm the intruder somehow, despite the fact that he brought me here. He wanted me in his room. He had me sleep beside him, even knowing this might happen.

But still, I feel like I wasn't supposed to see this.

There's a thick cloud between us, acidic and tense. I stare at him, and he stares back at me for a long moment before he finally speaks, his voice rough and deep.

"Go back to sleep."

I don't know how I can, with my heart racing and my stomach churning like this. But I take the excuse to break eye contact, rolling over again and wrapping my arms around myself, trying to forget the tortured sounds he made in his sleep.

We lie in silence for several long moments, until finally, my eyelids start to grow heavy again. I don't know which one of us falls asleep first, or whether Aiden sleeps at all, but at some point, consciousness slips away from me.

CHAPTER 8

Aiden

The nightmares don't return, but still, I sleep like shit. I wake up again before dawn, restless and irritable.

Rose is still asleep. Her breath comes softly, almost unnoticeable in the silence of the room. Her pose is less controlled in sleep. She's not curled far away like she tried to at first. Her legs and arms are sprawled a bit more across the mattress, as if she moved closer in her sleep.

I look away, refusing to indulge my craving for her by staring at her. Instead, I push my hands through my hair and think about last night. I'm still angry at myself for dreaming of my father's death.

The dream isn't new. I had nightmares about his murder for weeks after it happened.

None of us were with my father when he died. His body was found in the alley behind a bar Antonio owns. Antonio was the last person to see him.

It doesn't take a fucking detective to figure out the truth.

I remember how burned the body was. I was there for the identification. We all were, even if it was unnecessary. We had to see. We were all in a state of anger, disbelief, and shock. I felt like I was in a parallel universe. Our father wasn't supposed to die.

He was too powerful.

Staring down at the body, all I could think was that it looked like someone tried to destroy the evidence and didn't succeed. It was a shit job.

Antonio couldn't even fucking murder someone properly.

I've had nightmares of watching my father die. Nightmares where I'm there, seeing it all, unable to help. I just stand there and watch. I watch him choke on his own blood and watch him burn. My feet are fucking cemented

to the ground, my arms held back by some invisible force so I can't even reach out to him.

No matter how much I fight, no matter how much I struggle, I can never save him. I'm never strong enough to move past that moment where I'm stuck to the ground.

I can feel the flames on my face. I can feel the fire that burns my father mock me. It licks at my body, taunting me, as if it's saying it could take me too.

I haven't had one of those nightmares in a while. Not since my father's death was fresh, my mother in the hospital, my entire life circling the drain.

But I know why I dreamt of it last night.

The woman beside me is beautiful, perfect, and delicate. She's also the reason I dream of fire, and I hate her for it.

Antonio got greedy, trying to build up his legacy, to give his family more than they deserve. She doesn't know the kind of pain that I do. Her father is still alive. Her father is the reason mine is gone.

But as I glance at Rose now, her body close to mine, her lips slightly parted, heat burns in my veins alongside the anger that's festered there for so long.

I've only fucked her once, but even that one time was enough for me to know that I was addicted to her.

And now? I still want her, despite everything.

I throw the covers off and go to the shower. This chaotic mess of emotions can't control me.

Fucking hell, I won't let it.

But I also can't stay beside her when all I can think about is her soft, yielding body and her delicate touch. I'm supposed to be holding her hostage, using her as a pawn against her father, but in this moment, that's the furthest thing from my mind.

And that's a problem.

I'll handle this somehow, but right now, all I know is the consuming need I feel.

Reaching down, I fist my cock as the water pours down on me, groaning at the small relief of feeling my own hand wrap around my shaft.

Gritting my teeth, I think about Rose lying on the bed, hair fanned across the pillow, smooth skin contrasting with the dark sheets. I think about the way her nipples are hard under her borrowed shirt, the morning air cool against her body.

God, there are so many filthy things I want to do to her.

I could lift her legs over my shoulders and fuck her, watch her face as she tries to deny what she's feeling. I could turn her over, push her into the pillows so I don't have to look, don't have to remind myself that I'm betraying my family and myself.

I could finger her, driving her even closer to the edge while she twists on the sheets. I'm sure she would try to fight that too. I wonder how many times I could make her come before she gives up on the charade. Once? Twice?

But that's not what I think about as the hot water rains down on my back.

No. The image that sticks in my mind is of her lips wrapped around my cock. I can imagine what her mouth would look like, pretty and pink, stretched just to fit me.

My jaw clenches as I think about what it would feel like to have Rose's silky hair tangled tight in my fist, holding her in place as I drove all the way into the back of her throat. I'd make her suck my cock until she begged to be fucked. She would get wet while I slid in and out of her mouth, making her breathless and red.

I think about tugging at her hair when she stays too long at the base of my cock, urging her to move faster. I wonder if she'd moan when I pull.

I wonder if anyone has ever been rough with her before, or if she's only had useless lovers.

Has anyone taught her what true pleasure can feel like? The wild, dangerous, consuming kind?

Fuck, I want to show her that.

I imagine just what it would feel like to fuck her mouth and have her hands cling to my legs, her nails digging in as she tries not to gag.

Rose would shut her eyes, try to touch herself. I'd pull her hands up and hold her wrists so she couldn't. She'd look up at me, pleading, but I wouldn't let her find relief. I'd make her wait for me.

I think about Rose moaning around my cock. I think about her breathing hard through her nose, clinging desperately to me as she takes me in.

I think about Rose's tongue pressed to my dick and the sound of her sucking on it, lips popping as she comes off, breathing hard.

Would she ask for me? Beg?

Maybe she would deny it the entire time. Rose is defiant. I know it. She'd probably act unaffected, but I'd be able to see the truth in her eyes, in the way

she touched me. I would hold her chin and tell her to be good. I'd put my hand on her throat and pull her back to me, guiding my cock into her mouth. I'd listen as she took me all the way.

My hand tightens. I can almost feel her, feel Rose whimper against my dick, feel the vibrations in her throat as I ram faster and harder into her mouth.

I can feel the heat of her body. I can feel how wet and tight she'd be. I can feel her throat under my hand, feel her tongue flick against the head of my cock, teasing me. I can feel her hand on the base of my cock, her fingers curved perfectly around it, as tight as she is inside.

I come hard, just the way I want to pour into her throat.

Except instead of Rose, all I have is the wall before me.

The tiles are hard under my hand as I lean against them. For a second, I let the fantasy linger, imagining what would be next. I can see Rose get to her feet, her breath coming as heavily as mine is.

She'd ask—no, beg—for me to fuck her. She would whisper that she wants me.

I need you inside me, she would say. *Please*.

And I would give her what she wants. I'd sink my cock into her and go hard again, and this time, I'd come inside her. I'd fill her again and again until she knew she was mine.

I breathe hard and let my forehead hit the tile for a moment. There are red spots swimming before my eyes as my ears ring.

Fuck. Fuck. I shouldn't have needed to do that.

I shouldn't be attracted to Rose at all, even slightly, for all the reasons I've thought about since I saw her again.

Her family destroyed mine. She's everything I shouldn't want, and yet here I am, imagining what it would be like to have her for myself. To fuck her like there's something real between us.

I scrub off every trace of my weakness and then turn off the shower and go back into the bedroom. Rose is still asleep. I avoid looking at her as I get dressed to leave.

My mind is still a tangled mess as I get into my car and head over to Tír na Nóg, but one thing slips through without my consent.

I dial Jamie's number before I can think better of it. He's a cousin, a member of the inner circle. He knows about my past with Rose, but I feel less guilty about asking him to do something for me. He doesn't hate her as much

as my brothers do.

"Aiden?" His voice comes through my phone.

"It's me. Listen, we have an arrangement with Antonio."

"Do we?"

There's a spark of muted curiosity in his voice. I nod, even though he can't see it.

"Yes. He's ceding control to us. Essentially. We're now partners."

"This was a good deal."

"It was," I confirm. "We've caught him with his fingers in the Ravens' pie. He'll do what we want."

"The Ravens? I didn't realize he was that stupid."

"Good for us," I say, a savage joy rising in my chest. "And he's not great at covering his tracks."

"Clearly," Jamie replies. "How did this happen?"

"The usual. With a lot of intimidation and some veiled threats from Lachlan."

"And insurance?"

"I'm marrying his daughter."

There's a beat of silence before Jamie whistles. I'm sure he's surprised. It's not an unheard of proposition, but it's unusual. We tend to do our business in more straightforward ways.

"Is this a good idea?"

"What?" I ask dryly. "This, or any wedding?"

"What do you think?"

"I think it's a moot point."

Jamie hums speculatively. I know what he thinks. He's still mourning his wife. She died only a year ago and he swore he'd never find love or marry again.

"So, what do you need from me?" he asks after a moment.

"I'll need her things brought over from Antonio's."

"All right. I'll handle it."

"Thank you."

I mean it. I don't need judgment or an argument. I know I can trust Jamie to handle this, and I know he won't chew me out later for going soft on our enemy. He understands something about what I've gotten myself into, enough to know when to question and when to shut up.

We hang up, and a few minutes later, the club comes into view up ahead.

I pull into the lot and meet my brothers in the back room. As soon as I enter, Lachlan starts speaking, as if he was just waiting for me to begin.

"We're allied with Antonio now. We need to start taking advantage of it." Connor nods. "The sooner, the better."

"Our alliance with the Messina family has been helpful," Lachlan muses.

The Italian mob family has been downright pleasant to work with. At least none of them have murdered a family member of ours. Plus, they own the best restaurants.

"We have a lot of territory to get back," Finn adds.

"He's right. We've come far, but we've got a way to go," Lachlan says.

We were almost knocked out of the game when our father died. It was a wake-up call. We weren't equipped to handle the blow and it showed.

The same thing won't happen today.

Finn sighs. "If we're going to take over the club on the south side, I vote we change the bar. It's ugly."

Connor snorts. "That's bottom of the list. Anyway, we shouldn't make it obvious we're taking over. Not yet."

"We should hold off as long as we can," Lachlan adds. "Paperwork first. Security."

"Paperwork, then," Finn says. "I'll get the contracts set up."

Lachlan glances at me, and I can see he's just as surprised by Finn's offer as I am. Our brother seems mostly sober again, for the second day in a row. I wonder what he's doing or what's changed.

It's good to see him like this, but it makes me wonder. I'm not sure if we should celebrate yet.

"Besides that, we need to book a venue for the wedding," Lachlan says, drumming his fingers on his knee. "Locking it in won't be an issue, but I'd rather not handle moving someone else's date."

"Ugh. Yeah, dealing with that is the worst," Connor mutters. "Give me a cop payoff any day over paying off a bride-to-be."

"You need a date first," Finn points out. "Any thoughts?"

"The sooner the better," I say. "It'll make this easier if everything is legal and in writing."

"True." Connor shrugs. "I'll take a look, make sure we don't have anything coming up in the next few weeks. If I can clear the other families too, we can make it a production."

A show of power.

I know it's what they're all thinking.

"Well, figure it out," Finn says to Connor. "We set the date, and then we can get this plan in motion."

A surge of anticipation runs across my skin like electricity.

In just a few weeks, Rose will be my wife.

CHAPTER 9



Aiden's side of the bed is empty when I wake up.

Thank god.

Moving quietly and cautiously, I slip out of bed and tug on the dress I wore to dinner last night, then slip out into the hallway. I poke around a bit first to make sure Aiden is truly gone, despite the fact that I can practically *feel* his absence in the house. Once I'm certain he's not here, I start to snoop around a bit.

I don't know what I'm looking for. Aiden wouldn't have left me alone if there was really anything scandalous for me to find. If he thought I could get into shit while he was gone, I'd probably be shadowed by some scary bodyguard acting like a jailer right now.

Some of the doors are locked. I try an ornate brass doorknob and find it doesn't budge, then push against a wood door just to find it firmly shut.

The rooms I do find my way into are the ones Aiden showed me when I first arrived. Nothing holds interest for me in the sitting room. There aren't even any family pictures. It's all strangely impersonal for a man that seems to value his family over everything else.

I know the O'Reilly family is close-knit. The brothers are tight, and it wasn't hard to tell that their restaurant ambush was something they're used to. They work as a unit, like a pack of wolves.

So it's odd that I don't see pictures of Lachlan or Finn, or even Connor. There aren't any little personal touches in the living room. No receipts, no tickets to movies, not even spare change. There's nothing.

It's like no one lives here.

Somehow it makes me feel even more uneasy than I already do. It's like I

can't find a window into Aiden's mind.

I don't know him anymore, and this place makes it even harder to know him.

Despite the nerves twisting in my stomach, it growls with hunger, so I pad into the kitchen and root around in the fridge and pantry for something to eat.

I'm just finishing up my makeshift breakfast when the sound of the front door opening reaches my ears. I jump up, my heart lurching in my chest as I stride out of the kitchen.

I step into the foyer just as a dark-haired man closes the front door behind him, and the two of us lock gazes.

Jamie.

I recognize him immediately, and I have vivid memories of hearing the girls—and some guys—back in high school sigh and whisper over him.

He's the same as he was then, lean and tall. His jet-black hair has a bluish tint in the light and his eyes are gray, looking like storm clouds set in his face.

Handsome isn't quite the word for Jamie. He has long lashes, chiseled features, and dark eyebrows that make his eyes seem even lighter. He looks more like a model than an average man, like someone worth painting.

He's not my type, but I always knew why my girlfriends would stare at him. It was just too bad for them that he was taken.

"Rose," Jamie says, breaking the silence. "Sorry to bother you."

"No. Um, not at all. Come in."

I feel like I'm in some bizarre parody of my own life. This isn't my house and he isn't my friend, yet I'm inviting him in like we're about to talk over lunch and drinks.

Jamie nods. "Excuse me."

I realize as he starts to move that he has things with him. Suitcases.

My suitcases.

I stare as Jamie rolls in a few things, carefully bringing everything inside. I don't even know how to ask him how the fuck he has my things or even why.

But I know why.

"I have your things," he explains belatedly. "I would have called ahead to make sure I didn't miss anything, but I didn't want to wake you."

I can't help feeling torn. I appreciate that Jamie took the time to gather

my stuff and bring it, but I know it was Aiden who made him do it.

It's just another way he's trying to control me. As if Aiden wants to show me yet again that he can have my life put together or dismantled on a whim. That he can make things as easy or hard for me as he chooses.

At least I have fucking clothes now.

The thought makes me hyper-aware of the fact that I'm in nothing but an oversized shirt and underwear.

"Well... thank you," I finally say, trying to surreptitiously tug down the shirt to cover more of my legs. "I'm sure you had more important things to do than pack for me."

He shrugs. "I don't mind."

Crossing my arms over my chest, I search for something else to say and come up with, "Are you, um, still with Harper?"

The change in Jamie's face is immediate. Even before he speaks, I know the answer isn't good. His jaw clenches, the stormy color of his eyes darkening further.

"She died. A year ago."

My stomach tightens, and I feel like an asshole for asking, even though I probably shouldn't feel pity for any O'Reilly.

"Oh. I'm sorry," I whisper.

Jamie just nods. He lifts the suitcases beside him and starts walking up the stairs.

The tension that radiates from him makes it clear he's done talking to me, so I go to throw away the last remnants of my breakfast and wait until I hear him come back down. I step out of the kitchen as he passes by, half expecting him to leave without uttering another word.

Instead, Jamie pauses at the front door and turns to look at me over his shoulder.

"Let me know if I forgot anything," he says quietly. "And be sure to lock the door."

"Yeah. Thank you."

He nods, then steps outside. I lock the door and then go upstairs to take a quick shower before tugging a light sundress out of my bag and dressing.

Staring at the open bags on the floor, I chew on my bottom lip. There's not a single part of me that wants to unpack. I don't want my things in the closet next to Aiden's things. I don't want my clothes to smell like him. I settle for rummaging through the suitcases and refolding everything,

organizing it all so I can live out of my bags for the next few weeks.

As for what happens beyond the next few weeks? I don't know, and I'm trying not to think about it.

A little before noon, my phone pings with a message, and I almost jump out of my skin at the sound.

Fuck, I'm so on edge right now.

When I pick it up to read the screen, I see a text from Noah confirming that we're still on for lunch today. I blink stupidly, trying to reconcile the plans I made with him just yesterday with the strange, terrifying turn my life has taken.

I bite my lip and stare down at the little text bubble. Aiden never said I couldn't leave. I may be stuck marrying him, but I'm not a prisoner.

I make up my mind before I can chicken out and text Noah to let him know that I'll be there. Then I use a rideshare app to call for a ride. I wasn't given rules, and I'm not going home, so it shouldn't matter that I'm going out.

The car arrives after just a few minutes, and no one stops me from walking out the front door, although I half expect a man in a black suit to tackle me on my way out of the house. Instead, I slip into the back seat and we take off down the road.

Noah is already at the restaurant when I arrive, sitting on the patio that borders the sidewalk. He smiles when he sees me, and I feel a relief unlike anything I've experienced before.

He's still here, still real, still normal.

Maybe that means *I'm* still normal.

"Hey. I picked a spot outside. I hope that's okay," he says, shoving his phone into his back pocket.

I grin, slipping through the opening in the small black fence that wraps around the patio. "This looks perfect."

"Great."

He stands up to pull my chair out for me, and I shoot him a grateful smile. A few moments after I sit down, a waiter comes up to take our order, and we chat easily as we wait for our food to arrive, sipping on lemonade.

"I worked at the library after high school," Noah explains, stirring his drink. "It was a nice gig before college."

"Really? God, I remember spending hours there."

"You did, didn't you?"

"What—you saw me?"

He laughs, leaning back in his chair. "God, yeah. I mean, I knew you from school. I'd see you occasionally. Especially senior year."

I don't say that it's because I lost all my friends. The memory of that year isn't particularly good, and I definitely don't want to dredge it up now.

Our lunch arrives after a few more minutes, and we keep the conversation light. Noah talks about his work and I talk about art, mostly. It feels good to just let regular things take center stage instead of kidnapping and arranged marriage.

I'm happy. I have lunch, a good lemonade, and a decent guy sitting across from me. It's perfect.

But just as I take another bite of my pasta and set down my fork, the little hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

Something is off.

My gaze darts around warily, as if I'm an animal sensing a predator, and my heart stops when I see Aiden striding toward us.

He looks like an angel of death as he walks up to our table, standing on the other side of the metal fence that encloses us. Aiden's jaw is tight, and Noah glances up at him with his brows furrowed, like maybe he's about to ask if they know each other.

But Aiden speaks before he can say anything.

"Who the fuck is this?"

The words are furious. They come out flat and calm, but something heavy and dangerous laces every syllable.

My hands curl under the table, gripping the hem of the sundress I threw on after my shower.

What is he doing here? And how the hell did he find me?

"No one," I say, my voice strained. I don't want him coming after Noah or Noah's family. I'd never fucking forgive myself.

"Really?" Aiden growls. He gestures to the table with one hand. "This is nothing?"

"It's lunch," I say, barely getting the words out through gritted teeth. "I have to eat."

He shakes his head, his gaze boring into me. "You can eat at home."

It happens so fast that I barely realize what Aiden is doing until he's lifting me up out of my chair and hauling me over the iron fence that borders the patio.

The world spins around me as he throws me over his shoulder, and I let out a yelp as his heavy footsteps start to stride away. From the corner of my eye, I catch a glimpse of Noah staring at us, his jaw slack and his eyes wide.

Then we reach Aiden's car, and I'm tossed unceremoniously inside.

My breath is coming in jagged gasps, and I feel like my ribs are tightening, squeezing around my lungs. Anger and embarrassment whirl inside me, turning my stomach sour and making my palms sweat.

Aiden keeps his gaze on the road, his expression as dark as a thundercloud. Neither of us says a word the entire drive home, and as soon as he pulls into the garage, I jump out of the car and slam the door behind me.

As I run inside, Aiden strides in behind me, and the sound of his footsteps only pushes my anger higher. I'm so mad that I do something stupid.

I stop.

Turning on my heel, I wheel around to face him. Aiden glowers at me, radiating fury like an avenging god. But as terrifying as it is to face his wrath, he has no right to be angry. Not after the stunt he pulled.

"I agreed to fucking marry you," I hiss, my jaw still clenched like I'm holding back a scream. "I didn't agree to let you dictate every goddamn minute of my life."

His nostrils flare, his eyes flashing. "This is not up for discussion."

"What is? I was having lunch! Explain to me why the hell you have a problem with that."

"I saw the way that fucker was looking at you," Aiden growls. "I should have broken his fucking jaw."

"You don't want me to talk to another man?" I narrow my eyes. "Why the fuck do you care so much? I'm not your girlfriend. I'm your fiancée in name only. This is just business, isn't it?"

Somehow, we've ended up closer, and Aiden grabs my chin in one hand. I can feel his fingers press into my skin.

Instead of answering, he stares down at me with the kind of intensity that makes goosebumps rise up on my skin. His gaze flicks down to my lips, and all the oxygen seems to vanish from the room.

Oh god. Is he about to kiss me?

CHAPTER 10

Aiden

My pulse rushes in my ears as I stare down at Rose, my hand shaking with tension.

Her tongue darts out, and the sight of it sliding quickly over her plush bottom lip nearly undoes me. Whether she knows it or not, she's playing with fucking fire right now.

Unable to resist, I drop my head to her neck and breathe in. There's an intoxicating mix of her body wash, faint and floral, and her natural scent beneath it. I focus on that, on the thoughts that have teased me since I first saw her again.

"Aiden..."

There's a plea in her whisper, and I don't know what she's begging for. For me to stop, or for me to go on?

But I don't ask. Instead, I nip at the skin of her neck, then drag my tongue and teeth over her shoulder. Rose shudders, a small gasp falling from her lips.

She's fucking addictive. I can never forget how much I hate her and her family, but maybe indulging in my craving is the only way to break it.

Maybe I can fuck her out of my system.

I breathe against her skin, scraping my teeth lightly over her throat, and I swear I can hear her swallow a moan, a vibration in her throat that she won't let out.

The beast inside me is pacing in its cage, demanding that I rip her dress off. It would go so easily. It's soft and worn under my hands. I could tear it from her body until she's left in just her panties.

She's probably already wet. The fabric would be damp right between her thighs, right where I'd put my fingers. I would tease her along the line

between her legs, making her twist and moan.

"I hate you," I murmur roughly. "But that wouldn't stop me from fucking you so hard and deep you'd feel me for days."

"I—" Her breath hitches. "I fucking hate you too."

"I know you do." My tongue trails over her collarbone. "But I could make you scream my name until you forgot how to say anything else. Until you forgot the name of that as shole from the restaurant."

"Fuck you," she hisses.

"Oh, don't tempt me, little dove."

My voice is raspy with both desire and fury, the two emotions mixing in me until I can't distinguish between them anymore. I want her unable to stand, her legs weak, her chest heaving. I want Rose to scream my name, want her nails to dig into my back. I want to leave bruises that she can't forget, evidence that she gave in. That she enjoyed it.

I'd fuck her until all she could feel is me. Until she knows she's mine.

I can't stop touching her. I tug the neckline of her dress down so I can slide one hand inside and cup her breast. I run my palm over it, feeling how hard her nipple is.

That one touch breaks her control. It's faint, but I hear the sound of pleasure that escapes Rose's lips, a gasping sigh that tells me she wants me just as badly as I want her right now.

"I fucking knew it," I groan. "Hate me all you want, but your body doesn't lie."

"You... god, you..."

She shakes her head, her nostrils flaring, but at the same time, she arches her back, pressing her breast into my hand.

I dig my fingers into the soft flesh, wrapping my other arm around her to pull her closer to me.

And then my phone rings.

Everything stops.

The tension that's wound tight around us snaps like a rubber band, and I take a half step back as I tug my cell from my pocket, still standing in front of Rose, still half-consumed by visions of what I want to do to her.

Whoever the hell interrupted me better have something important to say.

"This is Aiden," I bite out curtly as I answer.

There's a shuffle on the other end of the line. "Mr. O'Reilly, it's Dr. Andrews."

Ice floods my body. The world grinds to a halt, and I can feel myself shut off inside.

"What is it?" I demand.

"I just called to notify you that your mother had a small drop in her vitals. She's been stable since her cardiac arrest, and this came out of nowhere. We're keeping an eye on her, but I thought you should know."

I swallow and glance at Rose, realizing she's watching me closely. Her chest is heaving. The front of her dress is out of place, the swell of her breast partly exposed, and her skin is flushed.

"I'll be right there."

I drag my gaze away from Rose as I hang up, not saying a word as I turn and head for the door to the garage.

The drive to the hospital takes place on autopilot. I barely pay attention to where I'm going, but I have the route memorized by now. I park quickly and go inside, navigating the maze of floors and elevators without even looking.

I've always hated the way these places smell. It stings my nose and brings me right back to that week from hell where everything crumbled around me for the second time.

Dr. Andrews is waiting outside my mother's room. He has a clipboard in hand, preoccupied as I arrive. He looks up just in time to see me.

"Mr. O'Reilly. Everything seems fine now," he begins, probably noticing how anxious I am. "The drop was concerning, though. We'll be monitoring her closely for the next forty-eight hours."

I nod sharply. "All right."

"We haven't really seen a change aside from this," Dr. Andrews adds quietly. "Nothing positive, at least."

I know what he's getting at. There's no hopeful prediction for my mother recovering, ever. There's little chance things will improve.

Most likely, she'll never wake up again.

"Thank you for doing what you can," I finally say, my voice hard. Then I walk past the doctor and into my mother's room. It's quiet aside from the soft beeps of the machines. I pull up a chair and sit by her bed.

My brothers and I have never agreed to pull the plug. That's a stupid phrase anyway. There is no one plug, no real easy end. But it doesn't matter what you call it. We've been unable to do it.

The thought breaks me every time it comes up.

I'm not ready. Besides me, Finn took this the hardest. I think if we do it,

it'll fucking wreck him. We might lose him for good to his addiction. Or worse.

My mother lies still and quiet on the bed, looking almost more like a ghost than the vivacious woman I once knew. I'm not sure if she can hear me or if she ever will again, so maybe it's just for my sake, but I can't do nothing.

So I talk to her, telling her about the most recent games and stats. She loves baseball. I never used to watch, but I know she loves it, so I try to keep up. Someone has to talk to her about it.

I don't think about what I tell her next as much as I probably should.

"I'm getting married," I say quietly. "I know you wanted that for me."

But I know that's not true.

She wanted me to fall in love. Marry a girl I adore, just like she adored my father.

I wonder if she could see me now, if she would be proud.

Or would she just be disgusted?

My jaw clenches, my chest tightening. After a few long moments of silence, I stand.

"Goodbye, mom. I'll be back later."

I turn to leave the room and shut the door as quietly as I can, as if she's just asleep and I'm trying not to wake her.

I know it's a useless lie. It doesn't make me feel any better, and it won't bring her back.

When I leave the hospital, I feel like there's a lead weight on my shoulders. Today has gone all kinds of fucking wrong.

It's all screwed, and I need a goddamn drink.

CHAPTER 11



I lie in bed and try to empty my mind, breathing deeply and counting each inhale, focusing on the sound and the feeling.

It doesn't work.

My mind is still racing, my entire body infused with agitation. After Aiden left, I went back up to the en suite bathroom and showered again, as if twenty minutes under scalding water could somehow wash away the feeling of his hand squeezing my breast, his body pressing up against mine.

When he didn't return by dinnertime, I made myself some food from the pantry and ate alone. When he wasn't back by eleven o'clock, I crawled into bed and tried to fall asleep.

That's what I've been trying to do for the past two hours.

The room is dark, but there's enough ambient light for me to see the shape of the furniture set against the walls, and I roll over onto my side and stare at them, willing myself to fall asleep.

After what feels like at least another hour, I hear the distant sound of the front door opening and closing. My heart stutters in my chest, and I shut my eyes, pretending I'm asleep.

The stairs creak under Aiden's feet, and a few moments later, he opens the bedroom door. I keep my eyes closed and my breathing deep, and when he walks closer to the bed, I can smell him. He smells like a bar, like alcohol and cigarettes. It's probably Tír na Nóg, the strip club the O'Reillys own. They've owned it for years.

The whiskey and smoke on Aiden is cut by the stronger scent of cheap perfume, a little bit acidic and heavy with floral tones.

Something one of the dancers wears, maybe?

Fuck. It doesn't matter, Rose. Let him screw whoever he wants. I keep my eyelids shut and remind myself none of this matters. I don't care what he does at that club or who he does, for that matter. Aiden isn't mine, and I don't want him to be.

He's clearly drunk. I can hear him bump softly into things, muttering and tossing clothes onto the floor. The mattress shifts, and I fight not to tense up. He crawls in beside me, and I'm careful not to do anything to betray the fact that I'm not actually asleep. The last thing I need is for him to decide now is the time to talk.

Or continue what he started downstairs before he left so suddenly.

When a thick, muscled arm snakes around my waist, my breath stops for a second. I twitch, the instinct to pull away kicking in before I can stop it. Thankfully, he doesn't seem to notice.

Aiden pulls me closer, against the warmth of his body. I can feel his face press into my hair, can hear him inhale like he's taking me into his lungs.

He murmurs something, the words muffled against my hair.

"Never... anyone... the way I..."

I don't know what he's trying to say, or if he's even conscious of speaking. He seems like he's almost half asleep already, and I'm tempted to try to scoot away from his hold, but I don't want to rouse him again. So I stay completely still, allowing my muscles to relax one by one.

And somehow, despite the fact that sleep has eluded me for hours tonight, my eyelids eventually start to droop. Then they close entirely as I slip into dreams.

I've felt the sheets on Aiden's bed beneath me before when I've come over to his house to study during the day. But they feel different now, raspy against my bare skin, each brush making me shiver. I'm lying on my back, my heart pounding wildly in my chest as I look up at him, barely able to believe this is real.

That it's happening.

In our junior year, Aiden and I became friends before we were anything else. We started hanging out after school, both a little lonely and unsure of where we fit. I've seen the gorgeous dark-haired boy with shuttered eyes and

a blank face, withdrawn from everyone else. I've seen him shut off, brooding in the corner of the classroom.

He isn't like that now. His blue eyes are focused on me, and they look different.

They look consumed.

There's something nervous in his gaze, something entranced. I can see myself in his eyes, and I can read all the same emotions I'm feeling in their depths.

We've been dancing around this moment for weeks, been playing around the edges of the inevitable, catching stolen kisses at school and in public. We've gotten lost in each other, our "study sessions" devolving into makeout sessions when we couldn't control ourselves. He's put his mouth on me, and I've done the same for him. He's made me come on his hand, watching my face as he leans over me, braced on one elbow.

Every touch seems to leave us wanting more, and finally, today, we're going to take it.

But despite the way my heart pounds wildly in my chest, there's no urgency between us, no fumbling pressure to hurry or hide.

We're alone.

There's no one else home. We're upstairs in Aiden's bedroom, and his father and brothers are out of the house. We don't have to rush, which is good, because I want this moment to go on forever.

"You're so handsome," I whisper, and Aiden grins, one side of his lips curving up.

"Are you trying to seduce me?" he whispers devilishly, and I chuckle.

"Is it working?"

"Hell, yes."

"Good." I bite my lower lip, grinning back at him.

He really is handsome, the most beautiful boy I've ever seen. He always has been, despite the way he was always stony-faced around me before we got to know each other. He has a strong jaw and lips that kiss me breathless, and blue eyes that look like a Caribbean ocean.

Hooking the back of his neck with one hand, I pull him down to kiss me. His mouth is soft and warm as his lips move against mine, and a small sound vibrates in his throat. The pressure of his lips grounds me, a steady weight that draws me in like gravity as my pulse pounds in my ears.

"I want you so fucking much, Rose," he groans.

His hand tangles in my blonde hair, his tongue sliding over the seam of my lips until I let him in. When I open my mouth, he licks against my tongue like he's been starving for me, and the edge of desperation in it makes me ache. I cling to his shirt, my arms around him, hands on his back. I hold on for dear life, like I'm trying not to drown, even though I want to lose myself in him.

His kisses grow harder and hungrier. I can feel a moan in my throat and I hope he can taste it, hope he knows how much I need him.

When he switches our positions suddenly, I go with it, allowing him to guide me. I wind up on his lap, thighs spread over his legs. I mindlessly rock against him, stars bursting behind my closed eyes when Aiden growls. I can feel the hard bulge under his jeans, tantalizing. I know he's hard for me, know he wants to spread my legs and press into me. It's powerful knowledge, an even more powerful feeling.

I made him like this.

I made him want me like this, made him hard, made him cling to me the way he does. Aiden's hands spread over my ass, digging in as he guides me along. I know he wants to be inside me, and fuck, I want that too.

We could go on like this, fully clothed and needy. We've done it before, so many times I've lost count, grinding against each other without ever taking that last step.

But something is different this time.

Desperation curls in my gut, low and hot.

I'm gasping for air as a single word leaves my lips, panting and uneven, heavy with need.

"Please."

Aiden pulls back just a little. He looks at me, eyes searching, pupils black and wide. "Please what?"

"Fuck me. Take my virginity, Aiden. Please."

His jaw tightens. "Are you ready for that? Ready for me?"

"Yes," I whisper, my heart pounding, burning in my chest. "I want you to be my first."

Aiden looks at me like I am a saint or an angel, a mix of awe and hunger in his expression. Then he crashes into me, his kiss hard and full of need, and I lose my thoughts once again.

The world spirals away as he kisses me, his mouth on mine and then at my neck, my shoulder, my chest. My body burns, my core getting wetter as I'm caught up in what we're doing, what we're about to do.

My legs are already shaking, my body reacting to things I'm only thinking of him doing. I don't know how long I'm going to last when he finally does push into me.

Aiden pulls my shirt off. I want this to go faster, so I fumble with my bra as he pulls his shirt off. We're panting against each other, mouths crashing as we fall faster into this.

His hands grip my waist as he lifts me and sets me on my back on the bed. He kicks his jeans away, and I slide my hands over his bare chest, tugging him closer to me. He leans down to kiss me, searing heat overtaking every thought in my mind.

Aiden's hands are everywhere. He teases my nipples as he kisses me, and I push against the bed, arching to meet his touch. I gasp a little, not caring what I sound like. The sound makes Aiden kiss me harder, almost bruising.

One of his hands pulls my panties off, and before I can look, I feel him sliding a finger against my clit.

"Oh, god!" I gasp, a cry escaping my lips as my hips jerk toward him. I want more, but he keeps me bound in place, hands on my wrists. He rubs my clit and draws me closer while he bites my lip. I know he's just making me wetter, making me slick for his cock, but I can't stand to wait.

Waves of electricity roll through my body. I shake and blink away tears, needing more. I can't hold still any longer.

I strain against his grip and blindly reach for his wrist, guiding his hand down toward his cock. I think I mumble a plea, but I'm not sure. My words are swallowed as he kisses me.

Aiden shifts and rolls a condom on, and I feel the head of his cock press against my entrance, hot and hard.

"Yes," I gasp, and then he drives into me.

The pressure is incredible. It's almost painful, and I tense up for a second, instinct taking over, but he murmurs softly in my ear, telling me to open up for him, to let him in.

And I do.

It takes a couple of thrusts, but I feel it when he's fully seated inside me.

We're connected, bound. I can feel Aiden's cock, feel my walls tighten around him. It makes my head spin, and I moan, shaking as my back arches off the bed.

I never want to lose this.

I never want to lose him.

Aiden thrusts slowly, each drive of his hips sending me further into bliss and making white spots flash before my eyes. I cling to his back, fingers digging into his skin.

He groans near my ear as I tighten when he pushes into me. I cling to him as he moves faster, harder, the intensity running through my body like lightning. Every thrust seems to hit something inside me, something unreachable that sends waves of pleasure through my body.

"Rose..."

Aiden grunts my name next to my ear, sounding almost tortured. He's just as intoxicated by this as I am, and that realization makes me flush more, heat spreading outward from where it's pooled low in my gut.

"Aiden, please," I cry, my nails digging into his shoulders. "Please, more"

"Fuck, baby, you feel so good," he groans, and then he kisses me. It's hot and fast, messy and wild, but it feels wonderful.

Rising up onto his knees, he slides his hands down to grip my legs, holding me up and open for him as he keeps shoving his cock into me. My ass leaves the bed, and a whole new set of sensations break through me as the angle changes.

"You look so perfect like this." He sounds drunk. Or maybe high. His eyelids droop as he stares down at the place where we're connected. "Fucking look at that, Rose. Look at the way you take me. The way your pretty pussy swallows me up. You're bleeding for me, and you still want this, don't you?"

"Yes," I gasp. "Yes, yes. Fuck!"

"Then look." His voice is harsher now, and I swear his cock feels bigger than it did when he first pressed into me, like he's swelling up, growing impossibly harder. "Watch me fuck you. Watch how greedy your pussy is."

His words are dirtier than anything he's ever said to me before. He's whispered things to me while he's made me come on his hand or his tongue, but never quite like this. It's almost as if the words are forced out of him, as if he can't contain them. As if he can't contain his need for me.

That thought sends a spike of electric heat shooting straight to my clit, and I whimper, doing as Aiden commanded and letting my gaze drop from his face to the place where my body stretches around his thick cock. My ass is tilted up a little, so I have a perfect view of the way he thrusts in and out of

me. His dick is shiny and wet, and as he draws out again, I gasp, my toes curling.

It's red.

Covered in my blood.

Maybe the sight should frighten or repulse me, but for some reason, the primal, raw sight of it makes my clit throb wildly. My inner walls clench around him as if my pussy is as greedy for him as he said, and Aiden chokes out a rough noise.

"You like that, don't you?" His teeth are bared in something almost like a grimace, his eyes flashing.

I nod wildly. "Yes. I like being claimed by you. I-I marked your cock. It's mine now."

"Fuck, yes." He slams into me with a harsh grunt, bottoming out and staying that way for a second, like he's trying to overtake me completely. "All yours, Rose. Always fucking will be."

"Aiden, I—"

My voice breaks off on a whimper as he draws back and drives his hips forward again, rocking the bed beneath us.

"Mine," he growls, his voice like nothing I've ever heard before. "Mine."

He starts to move faster again, and the pleasure mounts, crashing through me. I can't think of words to say or anything to do to show him how much I love him, how much I love this. There's a slow burn building, his thrusts so deep that the pain mingles with sweet pleasure.

I feel like he's opening me up, touching something inside me that I could never reach. I feel like I'm made for him, made to fit him perfectly. He fills me like he was made for me too, his cock sliding inside me in ways that knock the breath from my lungs.

"Fuck, I'm close," Aiden pants out. "Come for me, Rose. I don't want to come until you do. I want to feel you clench around me. I want to feel how much you need me. Let me feel you, baby. Please. Fuck, please."

He sounds so desperate, so strung out on desire, and I don't want to deny him.

I don't know if it's the way he practically begs me, or the way he drapes his body over mine, kissing me feverishly as he fucks me hard and fast—but either way, the end result is the same.

White-hot heat blinds me, my ears ringing as the pulsing pleasure in my core spikes again.

It's too high, too much.

I can't hold it back.

A cry pours from my lips as I come hard, my entire body tensing, and it's overwhelming. It feels like every cell in my body is reacting to Aiden, exploding in a moment of sheer pleasure.

He follows me over the edge, his cock thickening inside me. He spills into the condom in spurts, making heat bloom through my body, and—

I snap awake, the intensity of the feelings pouring through me forcibly yanking my consciousness from the dream.

The room is still pitch black around me, and my heart races so fast I feel like it might crack one of my ribs, but I try to keep still. My clit throbs, my body aching with arousal as my core clenches over and over.

Fuck. I had a sex dream about Aiden.

And not just any goddamn dream. Not just a made up fantasy. I dreamt about the first and only time we ever had sex, something that's imprinted so deep in my memory that I can recall every single second of it with vivid clarity.

That's why it felt so real.

That's why I'm literally on the verge of coming right now.

I want to groan in frustration, but I press my lips together to keep from making a sound. Arousal is flooding my veins, a consuming need turning my lower belly hot. I'm half tempted to slide my fingers under my panties and finger myself hard and fast until I come to an image of Aiden taking my virginity, his cock slamming into me.

The even more insane part of me wants to wake him and say nothing, just slip his cock inside me and ride him until it hurts. I want to show him what we had once, and to punish him for ruining it.

It's not like I'm inexperienced. I've been with a few men in college, although none of my relationships were ever serious or long-lasting. I tried different things, met different people.

But nothing ever compared to the experience I had with Aiden. Not because we were both magically great at sex—we were teenagers—but because of everything else. There was something about that night with him that made me come harder than I ever had before, and if I'm honest, harder than I ever have since.

I was in love. I gave all of myself, and everything felt so real, so raw. I wanted him so badly.

But no matter how amazing it was, what came after was the worst thing I'd ever experienced.

He held me and kissed me, made me feel special and adored.

Treasured.

Wanted.

And then the next day, he hung the sheet up in the cafeteria at school, where every single student saw it during lunch period. He wrote my name on it too—the words "Rose Donovan is a whore" scrawled in red right beside the spot of blood I hadn't even noticed at the time.

I was humiliated. Crushed.

It broke my fucking heart.

I look over at Aiden, back in the present, reality closing in. No matter how often the good memories keep coming back, no matter what emotion I sank into him, I can't fall for him again.

I know he'll hurt me just like last time.

Only this time, I won't recover from it.

CHAPTER 12

Aiden

When I wake up, I immediately know it's early. My bedside clock stares at me, mocking, the numbers far too small for the pounding in my head.

I'm hungover as fuck, and I hate it.

Last night, I went to Tír na Nóg after the hospital for a drink, not wanting to go back home and see Rose. I meant to wander the club floor to distract myself, trying not to brood.

Instead, I shut myself in the office with a bottle, then drank until I lost the point of why I'd gone there in the first place.

Ana offered me a dance. She likes me, everyone knows that, even though Lachlan has a rule against hooking up with staff. Don't fuck where you do business, or whatever the hell his motto is about that shit.

But it wasn't my brother's rule that made me turn down Ana. I just didn't want a woman to touch me.

Well, that's not true.

There is *one* woman I want to touch me. And only one.

Rose.

I crave her softness, her sweetness. Her scent.

I'm grinding my teeth together, and I try to relax my jaw as I look at her. She must still be asleep, her breathing deep and slow.

My arm is slung over her waist, and without thinking, still in a half-asleep daze, I slide my hand lower, tracing the curve of her hip and leg.

Her breath hitches just the tiniest bit. It's barely perceptible, but I notice it.

I was wrong. She's awake. But she's not pulling away from me.

Somehow, that knowledge lights a flame inside me. I slide my hand

between her legs and press against her panties, feeling the dampness of the fabric.

A fleeting whimper leaves Rose's mouth, escaping into the room as she grinds against me. She stops suddenly, tense, as if she knows she shouldn't give in. Like she just remembered whose bed she's in.

But it's too fucking late for that now. There's a beast living inside me, and maybe it lives inside her too, a force of nature that draws us together.

"Tell me to stop," I say, my voice low. I drag my fingers under her panties, along the damp warmth of her pussy. "If you tell me to stop, I will."

Rose doesn't say anything.

It's like she can't.

She wants it too badly.

She wants me.

I don't think about myself. I don't think about how I shouldn't do this, how it's too easy for me to forget and get lost in her. I don't think about how this could ruin everything.

I just focus on Rose, on her body against mine, her skin soft beneath my hands.

I circle her clit, and she inhales sharply. She's still holding back her sounds, still gritting her teeth. She's trying not to respond but I can feel the tiny, aborted jerks of her hips as she pushes back against me lightly.

When I finally slip a finger inside, Rose lets out a delicious, low moan. I want more, want her to lose control. My cock throbs against her ass, my head pounding right along with it. I'm no longer drunk like I was last night, but I might as well be. She makes me feel like I've lost my damn mind.

I go slow, sliding in and out of her at a torturous pace. I can feel her walls twitch around me, desperately trying to pull me in, begging for more. Rose's hands move to grab my wrist and then fly away. I can feel her trying to fight what she wants.

"Fuck," I rasp as I add another finger. Rose cries out when I scissor them inside her, pressing deeper. I imagine I'm opening her up for me, widening her so I can shove my cock into her, and my balls draw up tight as desire surges through me.

The sounds she makes drive me crazy. I want to be inside her, want to pound her into the bed and hear her scream. I want to bite into her skin and taste her sweetness. I want to thrust into her and feel how slick she is, feel her pussy grip me tight as she pulls me in.

She clenches against my fingers, whining like a wild thing as she pushes her back against my chest, the curve of her ass pressing against my cock. My dick throbs painfully, rock hard and leaking.

It's like she knows. Like she's teasing me. I can feel how wet she is, how warm her pussy is, and my cock screams at me that it should be inside her, not my fucking fingers.

"Goddammit."

The word is hardly more than a feral grunt as I plunge my fingers inside her deeper, harder, until she's arching against me.

I slow down every time Rose seems close, every time her gasps hitch in her throat. She whimpers, her hands scrabbling against the sheets as she tries to get a grip. She's struggling to hold on, fighting against the pleasure even though she's riding my hand like her life depends on it.

I love the way she looks like this. I know she'd look just as good riding me, giving in to what she wants. I want to see her like that. I want to see her lose control.

Thrusting hard and fast, I ignore everything else until all I can hear is the wetness of her pussy and the wordless noises of her pleasure.

And then, finally, she gives me what I want.

Rose comes so hard her entire body spasms. She cries out, the sound of her release making me grit my teeth. I feel like I'm about to fucking explode.

As the last shudders of her orgasm pass through her, I stop thinking entirely and roll her onto her stomach.

I tug her sleep shorts down and then rip her panties off, throwing them somewhere off the bed. Rose shudders beneath me, and I shove her shirt up until I see her bare ass. Her skin is so fucking perfect, the curve of her lower back the most tempting thing I've ever seen.

Dragging my fingers over her skin, I smear the wetness of her arousal over her ass then grip her soft flesh tightly in my hands, watching the dents in her skin as I nestle my cock between her ass cheeks. It doesn't feel as good as her pussy would, but it's enough.

I fuck her wildly, without abandon, digging my hands in so hard I think I might leave blunt nail marks.

I desperately want to be inside her. I want it, but there's a thin thread of control keeping me from doing anything more. So I hold back, rutting against the curve of her ass.

My cock slides against Rose's skin as she shudders, her orgasm still

racking through her. I press her hard into the bed, squeezing her cheeks around my shaft and imagining I'm inside her.

I want to fuck her endlessly, all day, discovering all the noises she can make. I want to fuck her mouth, hear her choke on my cock when I hit the back of her throat. I want to see her lips spread obscenely around me. I want to see her red and breathless.

I want to slide my cock between her tits. I want her to push them together for me, watch me come on her pretty face. I'd fuck her mouth again after that, do it until I'm hard again, then come in her mouth. I would turn her around and fuck her from behind then, hard and fast, pinning her hands so she couldn't do anything but feel me.

Maybe I'd fuck her ass too. I'd spread her legs and get her face down, cheek to a pillow. Maybe I'd do it in front of a mirror so she could see.

I want to make her cry with pleasure.

I want her to know without any doubt who she belongs to, who can make her feel like no one else.

All of those thoughts are a wild torrent in my mind as I pump my cock harder against the swell of Rose's ass cheeks until I come. My release spatters across her exposed back and the sleep shirt she's wearing, thick ropes spilling over her.

The room is quiet except for the sound of our breathing, thready and thin from coming so hard. I can't hold myself up, don't want to. I let myself collapse over her body, my lips against the skin of her neck as I breathe in the smell of her shampoo and soap.

For a moment, both of us are relaxed, our heartbeats thudding in what feels like a single rhythm.

Then Rose stiffens suddenly. I feel her start to move, trying to get out from under me, and it breaks the spell that overtook me for a moment.

I shove myself up and away, my jaw clenched as I realize what I've done. I can't stop looking at Rose, the way her skin is flushed, ass red. She looks gorgeous with my cum on her back, but the sight only makes my teeth grind together even harder.

I get off the bed, my voice gruff as I tell her, "You can use the shower in this room."

I leave before she can reply, needing to get away before I do something stupid. Stalking down the hall, I make my way to the guest room and slip into a shower in the attached bathroom, turning up the water and scrubbing

angrily at myself.

The unsettled anger hasn't abated by the time I get out of the shower. Rose is still in the bathroom when I go back to the bedroom we share, and I'm glad I don't have to see her again. I dress quickly and leave, shutting the door hard so she knows I'm gone.

My hands are tight on the wheel as I drive to the club, and I have to force myself to calm down as I pull up outside and walk into the back.

Lachlan, Connor, and Finn are all in the office when I arrive. Lachlan glances at me briefly but doesn't seem to notice my agitation—or at least, he doesn't comment on it.

Unfortunately, Finn notices too, and he doesn't cut me the same slack.

"You all right, Aiden?" he asks, cocking his head.

I nod. "Yeah. Fine."

"How's shit with Rose?" Connor probes.

"Fine," I repeat. "She's not going to be a problem."

It's the truth. She won't be a problem, but I might, if I can't find a way to get a handle on my emotions when I'm around her.

"So, we're still on track," Finn says.

"Yeah. Of course."

I can handle this bullshit. It's my responsibility. It's my issue to deal with. All I need to do is marry her, and I will. For the family.

Lachlan takes a sip of something. I don't think it's alcohol. Even the thought of liquor makes me sick. I'm still hungover, my head still pounding. I want to be anywhere else, recovering from last night.

Recovering from this morning.

"So, what's on the table?" I ask. I need a distraction.

"A contract," Lachlan says shortly. "We need to figure out what assets will be ours when the wedding is finalized."

"How much stake we get in his business," Connor adds. "Antonio will take what he gets. It's our terms."

"Obviously," I say. We have his daughter all but locked up. "But how much are we willing to risk taking?"

"More than just enough," Lachlan says. He smirks. "We can get away with it."

"Should we? I'm all for taking everything we can, but maybe we should try to secure some things beforehand. Just in case he tries to pull shit in the meantime." "He won't. We have him under watch, and you have Rose."

I don't push the issue. Lachlan knows more about the business outside of the club. If he thinks this will work, I don't mind holding back.

For now.

"Well, the Messinas also have an issue," Finn says, breaking the few seconds of silence.

Lachlan stands from the desk. "We have to go see them."

I follow the others out. It's been a while since I've seen the Messina family. They're our allies, but they're usually a quiet presence. They were the only ones who would work with us for a while after our father's death. They like to keep to the shadows.

Enzo Messina heads their organization. Lachlan must have set up a meeting ahead of time. We drive to meet them downtown, in an out-of-theway spot by a warehouse. It's not the Messina headquarters, but this feels last-minute. Impromptu.

Serious.

Lachlan pulls up to where Enzo is already standing by his black car, and we all get out.

"O'Reilly," Enzo says. He dips his head at Lachlan, giving the rest of us a brief jerk of his chin.

Lachlan folds his hands in front of him patiently. "What's the problem, Enzo?"

"Shit's been unstable."

I catch Finn sending me a sideways glance. Enzo isn't one to tiptoe around anything, but this is a lot for him. Especially since he's an ally.

"Unstable?" Lachlan echoes.

"Your territory," Enzo says, his voice low. "The docks."

I glance at Lachlan. We allow the Messina family in our territory just for this, and there's trouble?

"It's a good spot," Enzo says, as if he can read my mind. "Right on the docks. But it's been dangerous for my men lately. We've had two deals go bad."

I hadn't heard about this. I tense, hiding my curled hands behind my back. It doesn't make sense for us to have trouble. We've been relatively clean for a long time now.

"We'll deal with this," Lachlan finally says.

Enzo gives Lachlan a once-over. I feel a gut tug, a sharp warning at the

way he's looking at Lachlan.

"I hope your alliance with Donovan won't make you forget your old friends. Your first."

There's the other shoe dropping.

Lachlan tilts his head. It's a tiny movement, a signal he's annoyed. Something only his family knows.

"I think it should be clear by now that we don't forget," Lachlan replies.

He won't back down from a threat, no matter how vague. Enzo just nods, as if he thinks the point has been made. Lachlan gives him a polite word and then he turns away, leading us out of the conversation and away from the shade of the looming warehouse.

None of us like being threatened, but right now, I can understand why Enzo is on edge.

If there's instability in our territory, we need to get it under control. We need to figure out what's causing it and squash it, fast.

We keep our shit in order. Whatever this is, we have to stop it. Now.

CHAPTER 13



I'm in the library, which has become my sort of safe haven in the house, working on my laptop. I'm scanning a few different websites looking for curating jobs, indulging in the fantasy that I'll be able to live a normal life and actually pursue the career of my dreams once Aiden and I get married.

It's a pipe dream, but those are the only kinds of dreams I have these days.

It's been several days since that incident in the bed, where he brought me to climax with his hand and then came all over my back. Neither of us have mentioned it, and we've both taken to sleeping as close to our sides of the bed as possible, leaving a two foot gap between our bodies.

In fact, Aiden has barely even spoken to me or looked at me since that morning.

Part of me feels like I should be glad, since it's a lot easier to keep my sanity when he's not looking at me or speaking to me, or—even worse—touching me. But at the same time, I can't help the little voice in my head that whispers awful things to me, reminding me of how this is just like back in high school, when he acted like he wanted me so badly and then threw me away like trash.

It's just one more reminder, as if I needed it, that my heart will never be safe with him.

As if summoned by my thoughts of him, Aiden suddenly looms in the library doorway. I can sense his presence before I see him out of the corner of my eye, and I drag my gaze away from my computer and look up.

He's wearing dark pants, a crisp white shirt, and a casual suit jacket. He looks professional and also somehow a little savage, with just a hint of his

tattoos visible beneath his collar.

"Our wedding will take place soon," he says. "You need a dress."

My stomach flops like a fish. I've known this day was coming, but I had no idea it would be quite this soon.

"Fine," I say. The word tastes like ash in my mouth. "I'll go shopping this weekend."

"No. We're going now."

My heart does acrobatics in my chest. I blink, setting my computer aside.

"It's bad luck," I blurt. "If you see me in my dress before the wedding. It's bad luck."

Aiden smiles, but there's no warmth in it. It's even missing the smugness he usually has when he's making me do something I don't want to.

It occurs to me that maybe, this is one thing we have in common.

We both don't want this.

"I think you and I are beyond hoping for good luck," he says in a low voice.

My heart aches, my chest tightening as if I've been pummeled by every word.

He's probably right.

"All right. I'll go," I say. It's not like I have a choice.

I barely pay attention on the drive over. Something feels different about this. Aiden isn't gloating, isn't trying to make me squirm. I don't think it's even entered his mind to touch me.

I don't know what this change in him means, but it puts me on edge.

The shop we go to is a small boutique tucked away in a corner of the upscale shopping district. Aiden parks in front and leads me inside. There's a woman at the front desk, so crisp and collected that I immediately feel underdressed. She's willowy, with a jet-black bob cut at an angle against her sharp jaw. Her gray eyes calmly take us in and she rounds the desk.

The gilded tag on the front of her black blouse says her name is Diana. She raises a hand, gesturing toward the entrance to the main room.

"Welcome, Mr. O'Reilly. We've prepared a few things per your instructions."

"Thank you."

I follow Diana and Aiden into the room, which is full of full-length mirrors and curtained dressing rooms. There are sections of dresses, all different styles and colors.

"You'll find everything you need here. Once you decide on something you like, we'll finalize the details. Everything is done in-house. Color and material changes are, of course, a simple task."

Diana withdraws to the desk, I assume to retrieve something for measurements. I'm left with Aiden, who seems like he's less than interested in the process. He walks to a white upholstered chair near the door, like he's ready to run.

If I were actually marrying him—if I really wanted to—I'd worry he was getting cold feet.

Instead, I'm grateful to be given a break. I roam around the room, looking at random dresses as I go. They're gorgeous.

They're expensive.

My father has money. He's been wealthy since I was a child. This is crazy, though. I glance over at Aiden. He doesn't seem to care. I know he set this up. He chose this place, so he must know what it's like.

Deciding not to think too hard about that, I focus on the dresses again. Part of me doesn't want to pick a dress I love. I don't want to give that to Aiden. But another part of me worries that I'll never have this chance again.

If nothing works, if I can't save myself, I'm going to be married to Aiden for good.

Diana comes back just in time to see me pull a dress from the rack. She comes forward to take it, artfully tossing it over her arm. She follows me around the room, taking my picks as I find them.

When I have everything, I start the process.

The dressing room curtains are heavy. Diana draws them closed for me before helping me into the first wedding dress.

I try to treat it like just a regular shopping spree, pretending I'm looking for a clubbing dress or something. But that illusion gets harder to maintain when I step in front of a mirror for the first time, Diana at my side as I examine myself.

My hair is pulled into a messy bun, out of the way for the process. It somehow looks less messy and more soft when I'm in a wedding dress, like I'm a casual, beachy bride.

The dress is gorgeous. It's not my style, but I can appreciate the full ballgown silhouette. It somehow doesn't make me look like I'm drowning in an upside-down cupcake, which is how I expected to feel. I could wear it if I had to.

I don't want to, though.

"What are we thinking?" Diana asks.

Her tone is patient, neutral, like she's used to unusual situations with brides who are less than ecstatic. Like she's used to brides without bridesmaids.

I wonder if other women have come here before being married off to men in the mafia.

"I don't think so," I say. I glance at Aiden's reflection in the mirror. He isn't looking.

"What about it doesn't suit you?"

"It's a little too full."

"All right. Let's try something else."

The rest of the dresses fly by. I barely recognize what I'm doing. The magic of it has worn off, like cheap silver-plated jewelry. I keep going through the motions without much thought.

Finally, I try on something that looks good. Something I wouldn't mind wearing. I've decided that if I have to do this, I'll do it in a dress I like.

It looks a little vintage, like it was made to evoke bygone days where weddings were put in the newspaper. The neck is boat-shaped, the sleeves off the shoulders, all of the top lace. It has a full skirt, but less fabric than a ball gown. The high waist is punctuated with a thin ribbon.

"This one," I say immediately.

Diana nods. "Any alterations?"

"Lower on the sleeves," I say, touching my shoulder.

"Here?"

"Yes."

"Anything else?"

"Half an inch shorter. I won't be wearing very high heels."

Diana nods, and as she does, a stray thought races through my mind.

Maybe it's the frustration in me from having to do this, or maybe it's that Aiden brought me here only to ignore me the entire time. Maybe it's the way what happened between us a few days ago brought back too many memories of high school.

"I'd actually like a color adjustment," I murmur.

Diana pauses, then shuffles through her papers to a flat cardboard page with swatches. "Here's our color bible. We can also custom mix. Do you see anything you like?"

I scan the page, then let my finger hover above a swatch.

"Crimson."

For the first time, I hear Aiden stand.

"What the fuck are you doing?" he asks.

Diana steps out of the room quickly, vanishing as if she's turned into a wisp of smoke. I square my shoulders and turn to face Aiden as he advances toward me, focusing on his hard expression. I wonder if he realizes why I chose this color.

It's a blood red, after all. A fitting nod to what he did when he hung the bloodied sheet in the cafeteria.

"You don't know?" I ask, arching a brow.

Aiden clenches his hands. There's a flicker of anger in his eyes, but behind that, there's something else. Something almost like guilt.

"You wouldn't want me in white, would you?" I ask, twisting the knife with each word. "Not when I'm not a fucking virgin. But you knew that—everyone knows. Don't they?"

He leans over me, towering, as if his emotions are about to snap and pour out of him. Again, that almost pained expression tightens his lips, but then he turns away. He sits back down, and a few moments later, Diana returns to help me get out of the sample dress. None of us speak, the room suddenly charged with... something.

When it comes time for him to pay for the dress, he doesn't change anything. Not even the color.

"Rush order," Aiden says, pulling out his phone and typing as he speaks. I have no idea who he's texting, but he glances at Diana as she nods.

"Of course," she says. "That won't be an issue, although there will be an additional fee."

"That's fine."

I peek at the form Diana has on the counter. The cost would make me blanch if I was paying, or even if my father was.

Aiden doesn't blink.

"Good," he says. "That's all."

Then he turns and strides out of the shop, leaving me to trail in his wake.

CHAPTER 14

Aiden

Something heavy sits in my chest as we leave the shop, making my shoulders tense and my lungs tight.

I don't know what the hell I'm supposed to feel anymore.

Rose glances at me as we walk. I can't tell if she's glaring or if she's trying to gauge my anger.

But it's not anger I'm feeling anymore.

There was real pain in Rose's eyes when she made the comment about her virginity. It was a deep hurt too—one that I could tell she's carried for a while. It hurt me to see that in her, see the wound she's nursed for years.

I still remember how incredible she felt that night, how soft and sweet she was beneath me.

Fucking perfect.

Addictive.

I also remember taking the bedsheet and hanging it in the cafeteria with the message I scrawled on it in red paint. My stomach clenches just thinking about it. I hated it when I did it, but I thought I had to. I thought it was the best way.

It hurt to hurt Rose. Every time I thought about how I'd done the worst thing to the best person in my life, I wanted to stab myself. That would be less painful than what I had done, what she'd felt.

After that day, I cut off all contact with her, but I fought with myself daily, the urge to reach out to her nearly overwhelming.

Then my father died.

It became easier after that to do what I knew I should. It was easier to pretend that she deserved what I did to her in high school, that the hate I

feigned for her was real. I convinced myself it *was* real, allowing my hatred of her father to bleed over into her. Allowing myself to hate her entire family with unrestrained rage.

She became a symbol of all the pain I experienced when my father died.

Now? Now, I don't know what the hell I want.

A part of me wants to protect Rose, has always wanted that. But another part of me, a newer, harsher part, wants to hurt her. I want her to suffer the same pain I did when I lost both of my parents.

The thoughts I have are fucked up.

I want to save Rose from everything, but that *everything* includes me. It includes my own need to see her hurt for what her family has done to mine.

Fuck. Things will never be right between us.

We make it back to my car, and I try to stop my mind from churning as we get in. I almost told her everything in the shop. When she looked up at me, hurt and defiant, I almost told her the truth, the real reason why I did what I did in high school.

But it's easier if she just hates me.

It's easier to stay away from her, easier to not get attached, if she hates me. I need to remember that this marriage is just about business.

I can do business with someone I hate. I've done it with Antonio for years.

I can do it with Rose.

She probably wouldn't even forgive me. Even if she knew the reason, how could she ever see past the hurt I caused her? I knew it would break her heart, but I did it anyway. I thought there was no other way.

My phone rings before I can start the car. Connor's name flashes on the screen, and I reluctantly answer, trying to clear my mind and my voice of any lingering emotions.

"Connor. What is it?"

"Hey, Aiden. Listen, there's a charity gala this weekend," he says, jumping in without pause. "We should be there."

"If we need someone to go, Lachlan should be there."

"He will. But you need to go too. We all do."

"Why?" I shake my head.

"A lot of the power players in Boston are going to be there," Connor says, as if it's obvious.

"Single operators?"

"Yeah, but most of the Assembly will be there too, doing business. These people have deep pockets."

I know it. There are plenty of non-mafia men in Boston who are lax with their money. If you have something they want, they're willing to pay any price for it.

I nod grudgingly, although attending a gala is the last fucking thing I want to do right now.

"All right. We'll be there."

"Good. I'll talk to you soon."

He hangs up, and I tap my fingers on the steering wheel as Rose glances at me out of the corner of her eye. I can tell she's curious but still guarded, still withdrawn from me.

I don't care. I can't. This is business, and I do business well.

Keeping my features carefully impassive, I turn to look at her.

"We're going to need to get you another dress."

CHAPTER 15



The evening gown Aiden had delivered for me is laid across the bed. It's not as expensive as the wedding dress he ordered, but it's certainly a lot fucking fancier than anything I ever wore in college.

It's gorgeous, made of a blush-colored silk, floor-length and cut close to the body. There's a slit in the leg, high enough to be sexy but still tasteful. The front drapes beautifully, barely allowing any cleavage to peek out. The back is the opposite—it dips low, hanging in a soft pool at the small of my back.

I haven't touched it yet. I've spent the last hour doing my makeup. I've been almost afraid to put the dress on, like I can't let myself love it.

But fuck it. I'm here. Why not do something that makes me feel powerful again?

When I slip the gown on and stand in front of the mirror, I bite my lip, stunned by my appearance.

The dress fits like a glove. It drapes perfectly, hugging my hips and falling loose to the floor. Even the slit in the side is perfect, situated just right to show my legs when I walk but disappear as I stand still.

My hair is loose, curled softly as it drapes over my shoulder. The ashy blonde color is perfect against the rose fabric of the dress. Even my makeup is perfect, muted browns that make my eyes look deeper and sexier. The green of my irises looks even richer, accentuated by the colors.

I don't look twenty-two and fresh out of college. I don't look like a woman who still hasn't figured out her future. I look sexy, strong, and refined. I look like I know what the fuck I'm doing.

Even if it's just an illusion.

Pulling my shoulders back and turning away from the mirror, I leave the bedroom to meet Aiden.

When I arrive downstairs, he's standing in the doorway to the living room, hands in his pockets as he leans against the wall.

He looks up, and the moment he sees me, a look of pure heat passes over his face. My skin flushes, and it takes me a moment to actually take in his appearance.

He's in a perfectly tailored dark suit, and with his dark hair and sharp blue eyes, he looks savagely handsome, just like the dangerous man I know he is.

Aiden's eyes linger on my body. I know I'm doing the same, openly staring at him, but I can't help it. I almost forget what we're supposed to be doing, but then his phone buzzes, and he drags his gaze away from me to answer it.

Someone speaks on the other end of the call, and his voice is low when he answers, "Yes. Bring it around."

He gestures me toward the front door as he hangs up, and I realize he's hired a driver, or more likely recruited one of the lower level mafia members to play the role of chauffeur tonight.

I carefully slide into the limo that pulls up, minding the length of my dress, trying not to reveal too much. Aiden and I are both silent as we drive across Boston, each gazing out our separate windows.

The gala is on the upper floor of an expensive hotel, and the street in front of the building is lined with luxury cars as people arrive. Everyone here is wealthy and dressed to impress, diamonds and fur displayed in excess.

A valet holds the car door open for me, and I get out and walk around the back of the car to meet Aiden. When I step up next to him, he rests his hand on my lower back. The heat of his palm burns through my dress, and I'm acutely aware of it. Just an inch or two higher, and he'd be touching my skin.

I try not to think too hard about that.

The place is gorgeous, the inside of the hotel just as beautiful as the outside. It's done in gold and cream with accents of crimson, everything expensive and well-maintained. There are elevators at the back and a bustling reception area on the ground floor.

We walk straight to the back elevator, a nineteen-twenties style affair with an enormous gilded front. There's someone inside in a uniform and he presses the button for the top floor.

The side of the elevator is glass. I look out as we ascend, transfixed by the city skyline. This late in the evening, the multicolored lights of the city twinkle like stars.

After a few moments, the elevator doors open into the gala entryway. There are white roses and red hyacinth among other flowers bursting from vases. Everything twinkles, gold and glass, diamonds blinking under soft lighting.

Aiden's brothers are nearby. They must have arrived before us. They linger near the entry, speaking in low voices.

Lachlan sees us first, and he nods at me when we arrive. "Rose."

I nod back. I don't really know what to do. Connor and Finn greet me with a similar coolness, although it shouldn't really surprise me. I know they don't like me—or more accurately, they don't like my family.

There's a woman with them. I don't recognize her, but she turns to me after greeting Aiden.

"Hi. I'm Violet, I'm a friend of the family."

"Violet. I'm Rose," I say, tentatively smiling back at her. "Did you attend —?"

"Battle Hill Prep? Oh, no," she says, laughing. "I can't imagine spending that much time with these guys, although I love them. They can be a lot, can't they?"

I laugh, a little more at ease. Violet seems nice, but more importantly, she seems like she doesn't mind giving the O'Reilly brothers shit. They don't seem to mind getting it from her, either. Connor just snorts and bumps her arm with his elbow, but the move is halfhearted at best. He doesn't seem annoyed that she's saying anything, even if it's to me.

"All right, where's the alcohol?" he says after a moment, glancing around the room. "Half this crowd isn't nearly as interesting as they think they are."

"Half this crowd has potential," Lachlan says quietly, scanning the guests like a predator scoping out his prey.

So that's what this is. I guessed there was something important about the gala, but it hadn't really come to mind that it would be a place the brothers could do mafia business. My father never brought me to events like this. He must have a different style of doing business than they do.

"Well, if there's champagne, we'll find it," Violet says.

Before I can react, she slips her arm through mine and waves goodbye to the men. I look to Aiden before I can help myself, but he's talking to Lachlan.

I guess he trusts Violet enough to take me. Or maybe he doesn't care.

There are servers everywhere, and people mingling in groups. I glance at the guests as we walk, trying to guess who's in the mafia and who's just rich. It's unnerving to realize I can't be sure. After all, my father is part of the criminal side of Boston, but you would never know from the outside.

"So, are you from here?" Violet asks. She finds a server with champagne and effortlessly turns us, making a beeline for him.

I nod. "I went to Battle Hill Prep with—the O'Reillys."

I stumble on my words, almost saying Aiden's name before I feel like I'm giving away too much. I'm not sure if Violet notices. She brings us up to the server and smiles at him, offering a polite word and a smile as she takes a glass.

We chat for a few minutes, and I'm relieved to find that despite the cold shoulder the O'Reilly brothers gave me, Violet is warm and friendly. I learn that she's a ballet dancer in the city, although I never quite figure out what brought her into the brothers' orbit, and I'm not sure I should ask.

She must be a pretty successful dancer, because we're interrupted by a few guests a short while later who approach Violet to compliment her on a recent performance.

She gets drawn into a conversation with them, and I take the opportunity to slip away, hoping to find a quiet corner where I can watch the event unfold without having to talk to anyone.

I'm not sure where Aiden is, and I hope he doesn't see me and get angry that I left Violet's side. But I don't need babysitting.

After I find an out of the way spot with a few empty bistro tables, I turn to study the crowd. But as I do, I realize I'm not the only one who decided to hide out in this quiet corner of the sprawling space.

A woman is standing just a couple yards to my right. There's a strange aura to her that makes me keep looking even as I take small sips of my champagne. She has the kind of shell-shocked look that I think I must have when I was taken. I wonder if she's another bride-to-be, another pawn in someone's game.

She looks tired and lost, but not like she's searching. Her hair is dark and pulled over one shoulder. She's wearing a long dress, a gauzy shawl pulled around her shoulders.

I stepped away from the crowd in an effort to not have to speak to

anyone, but empathy wells inside me, and I can't stop myself from stepping a little closer to her as I say, "Hello. I'm Rose."

The woman startles, her fingers clutching at the fabric of her shawl. She smiles faintly after she realizes I'm talking to her. "Oh. Hello, I'm Willow."

I realize who she makes me think of. There was a girl in college two years behind me. I was her orientation leader when she came to campus as a freshman. She always made me think of a little sister I never had, someone worth protecting.

Willow seems kind of the same. She smiles but it's like she's a kicked puppy. Sweet, but wronged.

"It's a lot, isn't it?" I ask, gesturing at the crowded hall. "I had to step away for a bit."

Willow nods. "It is. I don't really know what to do."

"Neither did I. It's so crowded. I'm not sure who I should speak to, anyway."

"Me neither," Willow confesses. Her smile is tentative but there, maybe a little hopeful.

"Are you here with anyone?" I ask. If she came with friends, they're pretty shitty for leaving her by herself. She doesn't seem like the party type.

Willow shrugs. "I'm here with my husband. I think he's busy."

I can't help but think of Aiden. I've been left alone while he does his business. Will he leave me alone when we're married? Will he even bring me out at all? Maybe I'll just be an arm piece, a decoration. I hate the thought.

"Well, I'll keep you company," I promise. I hope she's not another one of the O'Reillys' mortal enemies. I don't want to be forced to stop talking to Willow.

She smiles a little more, ducking her head. She still looks tired, but at least the lost look in her eyes is disappearing a little.

"So, do you usually come to things like this?"

"When I can." Willow shrugs carefully, like doing it wrong will hurt her. Everything about her movements is slow. I would think they're rehearsed, but there's nothing fake about her. I keep going, hoping I can coax her out of her shell a bit.

"I've never been to something like this. It's a little over my head. But I do like dressing up."

Willow nods, but there's something uneasy in her smile now. Her words are tense when she speaks again, like she's saying something she shouldn't.

"You know, I think I just need to get away."

I glance to the side and see doors nearby, the glass panes cracked open a little to let in the air.

"There's water over by the entry. Maybe that would help you? And you can come out to the balcony afterward. It would probably help to get some fresh air."

Willow nods. She's already moving forward, a little ghostlike in her flowy dress. "I'll do that."

I almost offer to join her, but something about the way she moves tells me she's used to going unseen at events like this. I figure it's better to save us a spot outside anyway, so I head toward the balcony while she gets herself some water.

It's lovely outside. The air is crisp and cool, but not enough to dissuade me even in my dress. I rest my palms on the balcony railing, reveling in the glow of the moon and the starry night sky.

When I hear footsteps behind me, my heart beats a little faster. I wonder if it's Aiden, finally coming back to see me after doing whatever business he had to.

Instead, I turn around and see a tall man striding toward me.

I recognize him, and it takes a moment for me to remember why, but then it comes to me. His name is Dmitri Sharp, and he went to Battle Hill Prep. I was never exactly friends with him, but I knew him. Everyone did. He was popular and confident.

He was also an asshole.

Maybe it was Dmitri's father that made him so assured. After all, the Sharpe family was at the head of the Raven Syndicate. Dmitri knew he'd inherit the entire organization from his father, so he was cocksure and insufferable.

He still looks insufferable with his black suit and slicked-back hair.

"Rose. I heard you were back in Boston," he says, drawing out my name as he speaks. "But I didn't expect to see you here."

"You heard? That's nice."

I expect Dmitri to stop five inches further away from me than he does. He's too close. Close enough that I can see a faint scar on his chin and the self-satisfied gleam in his eyes.

"You know, you don't look like a day has passed," Dmitri says, his gaze scanning up and down my body.

I feel like something's crawling down my spine. There's something distinctly gross about his cocky attitude and the way he talks about me. I don't like the way he's insinuating I look like a high school girl, and I don't like the way he thinks he can just invade my personal space.

"Really?" I reply. I try to keep my voice light, but it feels strained. "I haven't really thought about you since then. I didn't recognize you at first."

Dmitri smirks. I'm not sure if he heard me, or if he thinks my veiled insult is funny.

"I find that hard to believe. You were smart."

"I am smart," I say, taking a step back to open up more space between us.

But he moves at the same time I do, following me so smoothly that it's as if we've both stayed in the same place. His hand rests on my hip suddenly and he brings his mouth to my ear, his voice lowered to a whisper.

"Want to know a secret?"

I don't. Goosebumps spread over my skin, and I pull back, away from his looming presence, completely unsettled.

But before I can say anything, footsteps ring out behind Dmitri.

"Get the fuck away from her," Aiden's deep voice growls.

CHAPTER 16

Aiden

All I can see is Dmitri's hand resting on Rose's hip. The shadowy light on the balcony is tinted with red, my ears ringing as I stride toward him. As soon as I'm close enough, I step between them, bodily blocking Dmitri and forcing him backward.

He takes a step back, startled, but then regains his composure. He shifts his stance, planting himself in place as if he hasn't already given up ground to me. Like he thinks he can fucking take me.

But he's wrong about that.

If he touches Rose, I'm going to fucking *end* him.

Dmitri doesn't hide the way he looks at me. Distaste twists his features, fear and anger burning in his eyes. It just gives me another reason to want to fuck him up.

Tension cracks in the air, unreleased energy brewing between us. This is the worst fucking place to make a scene. No one may have noticed us yet, but they'll sure notice if I punch Dmitri in his smug mouth.

Dmitri's lip curls. I want to tear it off his face. His voice is calm when he speaks, but I can hear the revulsion in his words.

"You'd better learn to watch your fucking Irish temper. You aren't married yet."

A growl rolls through my throat. I want to fucking throw myself at him, but I know I can't. My words come out rough when I finally manage to string a sentence together.

"You're married, though. Why don't you go take care of your wife and leave Rose alone?"

There's a dark flicker in his eyes. I know Dmitri loses his temper almost

as quickly as I do. He's a hypocrite and a piece of shit.

I don't give him time to answer. I turn on my heel and reach for Rose, grasping her arm and pulling her away. She makes a small noise of surprise, her heels clicking as she stumbles to keep up.

"Hey," she says, trying to pull at her arm to get my attention.

I ignore her. I need as much fucking distance as possible between us and Dmitri. I drag Rose off into the crowd, putting people in the way like a wall. I don't even want the bastard to see us.

"Hey! Stop," Rose says, her voice raised. She digs her heels in, resisting.

I'm too frustrated to handle this. I stop when we reach the wall, watching Rose twist her arm away and face me. There's annoyance in her eyes, but confusion too.

I want to know what he said to her.

Did he tell her?

I prepare myself, but when Rose speaks, she asks, "What the fuck is going on?"

"Dmitri is an asshole."

"I noticed."

I clench my jaw, then search the room. "You see that woman?"

Rose turns to follow my finger. There's recognition in her gaze when she finds Willow, who's heading for the balcony. "Yes. But what does she have to do with—"

"That's his wife. Willow."

"His... wife?"

"Yes. And Dmitri fucking wrecked her."

I can feel my voice shaking with anger. Rose's mouth hangs open, surprise silencing her. She looks back at me, as if she's struggling to understand.

I keep going.

"She was bright, beautiful. She's the daughter of a family from New York. It was an arranged marriage."

I can remember her clearly, what she was like before. I hate what Dmitri has done, and I hate that no one stopped it.

Rose shakes her head, looking dazed as she gazes surreptitiously at Willow. "Arranged? So—"

"I met Willow once before she married him. She had *life*. Vivacity. Now she's a fucking shell. Because Dmitri made it a point to break her spirit. To

ruin her."

I have to shut my mouth to keep from raising my voice as I finish. I hate Dmitri, truly hate him. There are no excuses for a man like him.

And with him here, business isn't my first priority anymore. The others can handle that. For the rest of the night, I have to keep Rose beside me.

So, I do.

I keep Rose near, unwilling to let her out of my sight. Unwilling to let anyone take her. I've seen what Dmitri can do.

I won't let it happen to her.

CHAPTER 17



I can sense the change in Aiden. It feels like the air before a storm, metallic on the tongue and charged with incoming electricity.

I have no clue what the hell brought it on.

I'm still lost as Aiden pulls me around the room. I lose track of who he's talking to, eventually, and they don't seem to care who I am. I can tell these are business deals, important things I probably shouldn't be privy to. If I were more present, I could learn important things about the O'Reilly family.

The world seems a little tilted, like a funhouse meant to make you dizzy. I can't get my footing, thrown off by it all, but I don't fight.

At least for now, Aiden is distracted. I don't mind being ferried around at his side. I can deal with it for now, maybe get some answers later.

Finally, it's time to leave. I'm tired by the time we go back down the elevator, leaving his brothers behind to finish up whatever business they need to.

Aiden doesn't speak when we get into the limo. I expect him to say something, anything, even a word to the driver—but the partition is up and Aiden is just as shut off.

Finally, I can't hold back anymore. I turn to look at him.

"Why the hell did you get so upset?"

Aiden glances at me. He still has that stormy look in his eyes, his jaw twitching like he's holding back an entire monologue.

I don't get an immediate answer, so I shake my head and ask again. "You're way more pissed than you were when I had lunch with Noah. What's the deal with you and Dmitri?"

Again, he doesn't speak.

I can't figure it out. Aiden was pissed when I had lunch with Noah, but it wasn't like this. He wasn't squaring up to Noah, looking for all the world like he'd rip his throat out with his hands.

Sure, Noah didn't touch me, but it couldn't just be that.

I try to think of an answer. All I can think of is the way Aiden spoke about Willow, the way he talked about how she'd changed.

Is that why he hates Dmitri?

I wonder if he feels the way I did about Willow, if he sees the same kind of young woman that needs protection and help.

Or is it something else he sees? Feels?

I feel shitty even thinking about it that way.

"I'm serious," I say, pushing. "What the hell is the bad blood?"

Instead of answering, he growls out, "Don't ever speak to Dmitri again."

Something flares inside me. He won't answer any of my questions, but he's willing to order me around? It doesn't matter that I don't care to speak to Dmitri anyway. This is different.

I lift my chin. "Why the fuck not?"

Aiden turns suddenly, moving like lightning as he grabs me and pulls me across the seats, hauling me onto his lap. He stares at me, his eyes dark and anger clear in his eyes.

"Because if I see him touch you again, I'll fucking kill him."

My breath catches in my throat. I know he's serious. The vehemence in his voice is powerful. I fully believe that Aiden is one bad move away from full-out killing Dmitri.

I stare back at him, dizzy. The realization of what he wants to do is almost as powerful as the question ringing in my head.

Why?

Something in Aiden's eyes makes me certain that he's telling the truth. He hates Dmitri, and even more than that, he hates Dmitri touching me. This goes beyond just a simple feud though.

The sound of my breathing is loud to my ears. Our gazes stay locked, as if neither of us can look away. We're stuck here, bodies close, the crackling energy that's been building up since the gala filling the limo.

I feel Aiden's hand slide over my thigh, right at the slit in my dress.

I don't even look down. I can't.

My body burns. My pulse roars in my ears, rising to meet Aiden's touch. My throat feels dry. He leaves a burning path behind his hand as it slides farther up my leg.

Aiden's fingers push aside the thong I'm wearing. I distantly wonder if the lace is torn now, but I can't bring myself to care.

I'm already warm before he touches me. When his fingers press into me, I inhale sharply, unable to stop a noise from leaving my lips. I can feel him move slowly. The buzz under my skin gets faster.

Why can't I look away? I can't say anything, can't take my eyes off Aiden. I can't separate what I'm feeling from the color of his irises, the blue pulling me in like an ocean. I almost feel like I'm drowning, but it feels too good to be bad.

My pussy is throbbing, frustratingly empty of what I need. I want more than just this. I gasp a little when his fingers slide deeper, right into the part of me that shivers with need.

"Goddammit. What are you doing to me?" Aiden growls under his breath.

Then, just as fast as before, he pulls me off his lap and lays me across the seats. I gasp out in surprise as he leans down and throws my leg over his shoulder, spreading my thighs. He shoves my dress out of the way and I feel the silk like water on my skin, pooling up at my waist.

Then he drops his head and presses his mouth to my pussy.

I almost scream in shock and pleasure, then slap a hand over my mouth at the last minute, frantically looking toward the front seat. The partition is up, the tinted color reflecting only a hazy image of Aiden as he leans over me, but I'm sure the driver could hear me if I cried out as loud as I almost did.

Aiden's hands are at my hips, his fingers pressed to my pelvis. I can feel them dig in, and I think about him leaving bruises that I can see the next morning. His breath is hot against me, his tongue pressing with determination in every way I want it.

Despite the hand I use to cover my mouth, I can hear myself panting and gasping. Somehow, the tension Aiden carried through the gala has changed, morphing into something hot and sensual. I've never had someone eat me out with this kind of force, this kind of single-minded determination.

But it's pulling me apart piece by piece, sending pleasure spiraling through me. I was already wet, and now I'm blindingly hot, twisting on the seat as Aiden works me open. His fingers press against my inner walls, driving harder to get me close to the edge.

My legs shake, and I slam a hand against the door behind me, trying to find purchase on something around me. I can't spread my legs wide enough for him. I want more. I feel like molten lava, hot and liquid at the same time.

I buck against Aiden, feeling the slow build coming. He holds me in place with his hands, pushing me down when I react to his tongue sliding into me, keeping me right where he needs me so that my eyes water with tears.

Spots dance behind my eyes. The rising wave inside me grows higher and higher until finally, I come hard.

"Oh, fuck!"

I cry out, unable to stop it before it escapes. I don't even care. My hips twitch, my body jerking as I feel the orgasm roll through me harder than the last time he touched me.

It feels so fucking good, and I let it grip me as Aiden kisses the inside of my thigh, teeth grazing skin. He moves up my body, and I try to focus, my gaze locking with his for a moment.

He hovers above me, close enough that I could kiss him if I could push myself up. I breathe out, still panting wildly, as he inhales. We're so close.

My lips can already feel the phantom pressure of his, but when Aiden bends down, his mouth goes to my neck instead. He bites down on the curve where it meets my shoulder, sending a fleeting spark of pain shooting through me that he soothes away with his tongue after a moment.

I blink.

I don't know what to think. I thought he would kiss me.

Did I want him to kiss me?

Aiden pulls back. I feel my leg slide off him, and I almost yank it back to my body, throwing my dress back down over myself. My legs still feel shaky. I glance at him out of the corner of my eye as I pull my dress into place and sit up. He's pushing his hair back, pulling at his shirt collar.

I can't believe what just happened.

I can't believe he did that. I can't believe I let him. I can't even believe I did something like this while some stranger was driving, probably listening to every sound I made.

I don't know what to think. One minute, Aiden acts like he hates me. The next, he's eating me out like he can't live without me. What the fuck does that mean?

Maybe threatening to kill Dmitri isn't about me. Maybe it's about someone else, or maybe it's some fucked-up possessiveness that makes Aiden feel like he has to mark me.

Was that what the bite at my neck was? Was he just marking me?

Is everything that's happened just his attempt to mark me as his?

The car rolls to a stop outside Aiden's house a few minutes later, and I open my door and practically throw myself out, a rolling storm brewing in my chest.

CHAPTER 18

Aiden

It's been days. I've counted them all as they pass, almost convincing myself that the numbers mean something. Like there's a specific number I need to get through before this will make sense.

That's a lie though.

There's only so much I can do to avoid Rose, but I do it anyway. We may sleep in the same bed, but I haven't touched her. Not since the night of the gala.

How could I? I'm a fucking monster.

I can't stop thinking about what I did in high school to keep Rose safe from Dmitri. I thought he told her out on the balcony, and there was a moment I felt nothing but blind panic, a fleeting horror as I thought she might know everything.

But she doesn't know.

Dmitri uses women like fucking toys to be broken.

But am I really any better? Who's going to protect Rose from me?

I've already hurt her once.

I wanted to fuck her in the car. I was seconds away from freeing my cock and plunging into her. In just the brief span of a second, I imagined what she would feel like, the noise she would make. I imagined her legs tight around me. I imagined her pulling me in.

I keep imagining a different night in a different world. I think about Rose giving in to me, about letting go inside her.

That world doesn't exist anymore, but if it did, I'd say "fuck it" to all the reasons I have not to let myself care about her.

Hell, I'd say "fuck it" to all the political maneuvering, all the ways I'm

trying to get back at Antonio through her. I'd give it up if I could get back just an ounce of what we had.

I lost myself in my desire for her for a moment, but what pulled me back from fucking her right then and there in the back of the limo was a single thought: I remembered what it was like to have Rose. For her to love me.

I pulled back because I didn't want her in the backseat. I didn't want her like that.

Rose wouldn't have refused me. In that moment, she would have let me do whatever I wanted to. But it was all lust, all the heat of the moment. It wasn't real. Not the way things were for us before.

If I had fucked her in the back seat of the car, it wouldn't have been a memory she'd smile at. She wouldn't have wanted me or thought about me with desire every time she remembered it.

She would have hated me.

Once, I wanted that. I wanted her hatred. Now? I don't know anymore.

I've never wanted to control a woman, to hurt a woman in the way I would if I fucked Rose now. I was taught better. I know it's disgusting to take by force, a thing a weak man would do.

I don't want that.

What I really want is Rose, desperate and hungry for me. I want her the way I used to have her. When she was open to me. When there was no doubt, no confusion, no hurt. None of the things I saw in the car that night.

I don't know if I'll ever have that with her again.

Perhaps I truly lost that chance long ago, when I first broke her heart. Despite my reckless, growing hope that I can get some semblance of our relationship back, that reality seems to slip farther away every time I see Rose. I keep feeling like she's about to be lost to me forever.

Fucking hell. It doesn't matter. I can't dwell on it, especially now. There's an Assembly meeting to attend.

I don't look for Rose before I leave the house. We've been staying far out of each other's orbit for some time now, and I don't need the added distraction.

These Assembly meetings usually happen once a month. It's rare to have more, rare to have business that needs so much discussion we all have to convene again. Most times, one is enough. Especially for families that don't get along.

Lachlan is waiting outside the house when I exit. He looks behind me as I

approach, probably checking to see if Rose is near.

"She's not sending me off," I say as I get in. I try to make the words sarcastic, but they fall short.

My older brother doesn't comment, and I wonder if he can sense my frustration. Thankfully, the car ride is quiet. I take most of the ride to distance myself from thoughts of Rose and our impending marriage.

Finally, we arrive at an upscale high-rise in downtown Boston. The top floor is restricted access for the Assembly only.

Most of the other families are already in the meeting room on the top floor, a wide space with a large oval table in the middle. The room is encased in tinted glass. From the outside, only the shapes of bodies are visible. The glass is bulletproof.

There are six criminal syndicates in The Assembly, and typically, the heads of each family will skip the meeting if there's nothing important on the schedule. Today, every head is here. They each have a representative with them, usually their second. There are twelve of us in total.

Of course, the moment I walk into the room, the first person I see is Dmitri.

He looks just as smug as he did at the gala.

I always have the urge to punch the smile off Dmitri's face, and my hands curl into fists without thought, but I control myself. I've taken the drive to force everything aside, tamping down the fury and complex tangle of emotions that surround Rose.

I can handle Dmitri, although I'll still imagine kicking his teeth in every moment of this meeting.

"Don't indulge him," Lachlan mutters under his breath as he settles into his seat.

I lean over to pull a chair out and answer back in an equally quiet whisper. "Don't worry. He isn't worth the time."

Of course, Dmitri takes the seat directly across from me when he sits.

"Aiden. Lachlan." He nods in greeting before shifting his focus to me. "Rose looked lovely the other night."

Just hearing her name come out of his mouth makes fury rush through me, straining the control I thought I had so carefully cultivated. Lachlan shoots me a warning look, and I grit my teeth, satisfying myself with glaring at Dmitri as I snort softly.

"I wish I could say the same for your wife," I murmur, my tone biting.

"At least Rose will never look as strung out as her."

I made sure of that. Even if it meant I lost Rose too.

Dmitri's eyes flash, his lips pulling back, but before he can respond, Antonio strides into the room, drawing my focus.

As usual, anger flares inside me at the sight of the older man's face, but his presence does afford me a new object to focus on, a new thing to pour my energy into. I can survive Dmitri's prodding if I can focus on Antonio and the ways I'd like to humiliate him in front of the Assembly.

And Dmitri has given me the perfect idea.

The meeting begins. There are minor disputes to smooth over, a few politicians and city council members that have been bought off, as well as discussions about how to negotiate existing partnerships.

Once the formal business is taken care of, the floor is opened up for any new matters, and I sit up straighter as Lachlan gives me a small nod.

He knows what I want to do, and he's letting me take the lead in it. He knows just how personal this has become for me. I know he trusts me enough to break the news, despite Rose and everything I'm dealing with.

It doesn't matter what I feel or don't feel for her. Right now, I have Antonio to worry about. And I'm going to enjoy holding this power over him in front of the entire Assembly.

"Antonio Donovan and my family have reached an agreement," I say, and the rest of the Assembly members turn to look at me. I can feel Antonio's gaze on me, feel the hatred in it, but I ignore him as I continue. "Our families will be joined by marriage soon."

There's a barely-noticeable ripple through the gathered Assembly.

They've heard the rumors. They knew already, really, but this is different. This is an official announcement, a formal declaration. It pulls the noose around Antonio's neck a little tighter, making it even harder for him to try to fuck us over or back out of this deal.

"Well. Congratulations are in order," Kade Underwood says, but there's an amused edge to his voice.

He's the most relaxed member of the Assembly, always looking on with a sardonic smirk curving his lips. That's not to say that he's ever sided with my family. He likes a good show, but he rarely sticks his neck out. He knows where to draw the line.

"Indeed," Nikolai Kozlov says, his voice low. "If we had known, we might have arranged something."

"No need," Lachlan replies smoothly. "We've been busy with arrangements. The wedding date is set, and you're all invited."

"Good." Kade nods. "I for one would like to toast the happy couple."

That's what he says, but I know the reality. There will probably be conversations behind closed doors tonight. The heads of each family will discuss how this happened and why Antonio agreed.

Some may be angry that my family managed to secure this wedding. It increases our power, and it's not exactly a subtle move.

Arranged marriages aren't unheard of in this underworld, with its separate rules and alliances. But it is somewhat outdated. Most times, the families have no need to marry between one another. It would all go to shit pretty quickly if it happened too often.

This kind of deal is rare, and it's even more lucrative because of that. Most families branch out to other cities, other states. Our family joining with Antonio's means that our power will be combined.

Or at least, that's what others will assume. In reality, everything that was once Antonio's will become mine. I'll make sure of it.

The rest of the meeting flies by, and Antonio is noticeably quieter, stewing in his anger. I'm sure the only reason he keeps his mouth shut is because Rose isn't under his protection.

One wrong move and he probably thinks we'll kill her before we kill him.

The added bonus of the announcement is that Dmitri also looks pissed. I know he's been trying to bait me throughout the meeting.

Good. Fuck him.

As we leave the building where the meeting was held, Lachlan turns to speak to me.

"That was risky."

I shrug. "It was always going to be risky. Better we confirm it sooner on our terms than wait around for Antonio to spread his side of the story."

"True. I think Nikolai is particularly unhappy."

"He's always been too quiet for me. I don't trust him."

"He's quiet because he likes to keep his business straight," Lachlan reminds me. "That's not a bad thing."

"Maybe. I just don't trust a man who doesn't smile."

"You never met yourself in high school, did you?"

I laugh shortly. I don't tell him that Rose changed me. It makes me think of her again, and that's the last thing I need.

"Wait."

A voice from behind us interrupts our conversation, and we turn to see Enzo Messina striding after us, his second close behind. Lachlan shoots me a glance then nods to the other man, his expression carefully neutral.

"Enzo. What can I do for you? If there's business we need to take care of, we can—"

"You don't seem to be interested in the business of honoring our alliance," Enzo interrupts.

Whatever adrenaline and joy I was riding on dissipates. Enzo is serious, his gaze dark. He isn't happy. Not at all.

Fuck. The last thing I need is for our closest ally to take offense to the marriage.

"Of course we are," Lachlan says slowly. "We've never dishonored you."

"No? You are distracted." Enzo glances back toward the building we just left. "Distracted by these new maneuverings of yours."

"That business is separate," I say.

"It is not separate," he insists, his voice hard. "Your scheming is leaving your first allies by the wayside."

"That is not our intention. Our alliance with you is built on respect and understanding."

"As opposed to the Donovans?"

I shut my mouth. I don't want to give any more away than I already have.

Lachlan presses his lips together. "Is there something you need?"

"We need you to deal with this," Enzo hisses under his breath. "This and the attacks we have endured in your territory."

"And we will."

"Do. Before our alliance slips," Enzo adds darkly.

I hold my tongue and watch him stride away. This isn't what I expected. And I have a sinking feeling that this won't be the end of it.

CHAPTER 19



The house is dead quiet.

I've always been used to silence. I was an only child. When my father would be away for work or mafia business, I'd occupy myself in my quiet room or curl up with my mother's poetry books or one of her romance novels.

This silence is new. It leaves me in an unfamiliar house with nothing but my feelings and thoughts, all of which are spiraling around Aiden.

What the fuck is going on between us? Why can't we seem to keep our hands off each other, even though we both claim to hate the other?

Determined to distract myself from my thoughts, I focus on something that feels less impossible to untangle than my complicated relationship with my soon-to-be husband.

Willow.

Whatever misplaced jealousy I felt toward her after the night of the gala is thankfully gone. Now that my head is on right, I feel a little guilty about even indulging that envious pang.

She seemed so lonely and lost in the massive room where the gala was held, and after hearing about how Dmitri has treated her, I want to help. To befriend her, if I can.

I know most of Aiden's important things are hidden from me, but there's a leather phone book on the desk in the library. I gingerly lift the cover and flip through, searching for the name I want. Two minutes later, I sit on the edge of a chair and listen to Willow's phone ring.

She answers after a few beats. "Hello?"

"Hi. This is Rose," I say before it occurs to me that she may not

remember my name. I quickly add, "From the gala?"

"Oh." She sounds surprised. "Hi. It's nice to hear from you."

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

"No. Not at all."

"Good. I, um, I just wanted to talk. I know this may seem strange, but I don't have a lot of friends in Boston, and it felt like we might have some things in common."

"Really?" Willow shuffles on the other end of the line, maybe taking a seat to get comfortable. "I... didn't expect you to go out of your way like this."

The poor woman sounds just as lonely as I feel. I wonder if she had friends before she married Dmitri, or if she moved to Boston without any connections and didn't make any once she was here.

"It's not out of my way," I say firmly. "And I'd like to have a friend here. If you'd like to."

"I would."

I'm relieved that she sounds glad for the call, and it makes me feel like I made the right choice in reaching out to her.

Aiden seemed to feel bad for her too, so I can't imagine he would be angry at me for reaching out and trying to become friends with her. Especially since, despite the clear animosity between them, he and Dmitri are both members of the Assembly. They're supposed to be allies, even if it's in name only, so I know I'm not violating any mafia rules by contacting her.

"You know what?" I say on a whim. "I'm free right now. Would you like to get together?"

There's a beat of silence, and then Willow murmurs, "Okay."

A grin spreads across my face. "Great. You're welcome to come to our house, or would you rather I visit you—"

"You can come here. Do you need the address?"

Her answer is so quick that I have to fumble around for a pen. "Sure. Let me have it."

A few minutes later, I have the address on a scrap of paper and I'm heading out the door, dressed casually in jeans and a soft sweater, my hair loose and pulled over one shoulder.

The house Willow is shut in looks just as massive as Aiden's. Instead of brick and warm wood, it looks severe and dark. There's black and metal detailing everywhere, the ground floor paneled in tinted glass.

I don't know why, but I don't like it as much as Aiden's place.

Not that I'd ever tell him that.

I ring the doorbell and wait. When the door finally opens, Willow is there. She looks different outside of the golden glow of the gala. Her dark hair is loose and straight, falling in a glossy curtain around her pale face. Her blue-gray eyes still look hazy and disconnected.

She looks so much like a ghost in her white pants and gauzy blouse that I almost want to reach out and touch her just to make sure she's really there.

"Hi," Willow says, a faint smile curving her lips.

"Hey. It's good to see you."

"You too."

She stands there, one hand on the door frame, for a long moment before shaking her head as if to clear it.

"Oh. Come in," she murmurs, flushing slightly. "Sorry. I'm not used to hosting."

"Neither am I." I laugh, then follow her inside. "It's fine."

The inside of the house is just the same as the outside. The walls are mostly glass, the furniture spare and upholstered in black leather. It doesn't feel like the kind of place a real person lives. It doesn't feel like a home.

Everything is cold, with sharp edges. Willow doesn't fit in this place, no matter how hard I try to imagine her here. She's too soft, too pale and wispy for it. She looks like she belongs somewhere warm, curled up on a soft couch. This place looks more like Dmitri.

She leads me into what I assume is a living room, and I sit in a small chair as Willow takes the longer sofa next to me, curling into the arm.

"Would you like anything to drink?" she asks. She seems a little more animated, as if having to think about a guest is giving her slightly more life than usual.

"No, I'm fine, thanks. Were you busy? I didn't interrupt anything?"

I'm fairly certain I know the answer, but Willow seems nervous. Distracted. Maybe making small talk will help.

"No, you didn't," she assures me.

We chat for a few minutes about harmless, inane things, and as we do, I start to notice little tells in Willow's behavior that I missed during the gala.

She isn't just quiet or timid. She's medicated, I realize. I don't know what she's on, but she's definitely on something.

It makes me feel even worse for her than I already did. It's obvious that

she's sweet, thoughtful, and kind. She's young. She should be going out with girlfriends and shopping at the mall, not hanging around an empty, cold house.

And if she's medicated, maybe her situation is worse than I thought.

"How long have you and Dmitri been married?" I ask, hoping the question doesn't come off as too nosy. But I want to know.

Willow bites her lip, her gaze distant. "A while. He had just graduated from his university, and I was still..."

"You were still in college?"

"No. High school."

I try to keep my face neutral, but inside, I'm horrified. She was pulled out of high school just to marry Dmitri?

I can't imagine giving up years of college, much less high school. I can't imagine being robbed of my chance to learn and be independent. Even if I found a man I wanted to marry and spend my life with, I wouldn't give up my dream or my education. If my husband loved me, he wouldn't ask it of me.

Yet Willow was peddled off as a teenager. Was she even a legal adult?

"That's... wow," I say. It's stupid, but it's all I can muster for a moment. "That's intense. I'm supposed to be married soon. I finished college and I still feel too young."

Willow nods, a look of understanding in her eyes, although it seems like knowledge she's earned through pain. She doesn't look happy that she can relate to what I'm saying. She looks exhausted.

"Marriage is a contract," she says. It sounds like she's repeating someone else's words. "Just remember that."

"A contract," I repeat. "Is that what it was with you and Dmitri?"

"There was a deal that needed to be made between our parents. Our marriage was a promise."

"Did you know that?"

"I knew. My husband's father died before the wedding, but he went through with it anyway. He finished the negotiations with my father."

She's only ever called Dmitri her husband, I realize. She never refers to him by name. I'm not sure what it means, or if it means anything at all. Maybe it's a way for her to keep her distance. Maybe she doesn't want to say his name.

"Well, maybe you didn't come here with a lot of friends in Boston, but

you have one now," I tell her, leaning forward a little.

Willow smiles. Despite all the bad memories I've probably brought up, she seems happy. Maybe I was right. Maybe talking to someone else will help.

"Thank you, Rose," she murmurs.

I bite my lip. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to confide in her just a little. Something I wouldn't mind Dmitri knowing, just in case.

"I'm marrying as a promise too. To keep my father safe."

"I'm sorry," Willow says quietly.

"It's fine. I'm learning how to handle it. And maybe there's still time for things to change."

Willow is quiet for a long minute. I wonder if she thought the same thing when she was engaged. Did she know Dmitri at all? Did she like him?

This line of conversation is depressing the hell out of me, so I return to my original goal of giving us both something else to think about for a while. A break from the endless mafia maneuvering.

Shifting the conversation back to happier times, I ask her about New York, listening as she tells me all about the city that was once her home. By the time an hour has gone by, she looks less strung out and dazed, and her smile seems more genuine.

Then she glances at the clock on the wall, and her shoulders hunch a little as she bites her lip.

"You should probably leave," she says quietly. "Dmitri will be back soon."

"Okay." I stand up, feeling bad for leaving her alone, but also eager not to have another encounter with Dmitri. "We'll have to do this again sometime."

"I'd really like that."

She holds the door open for me, giving me a little wave as I make my way toward the car Aiden gave me the keys to a few days ago.

As I drive home, I can't help but compare her situation to mine. I thought we were in the same boat, and in some ways we are. But in some ways, our circumstances are very different.

Even though I have complicated feelings about marrying Aiden, at least there are the ghosts of real feelings between us. I can't even imagine being bound to someone like Dmitri for the rest of my life. With him, it really does seem like a living hell.

Aiden's car is in the garage when I arrive, and my stomach flutters

slightly at the sight of it. I can't tell if it's from nerves or excitement, and that unsettles me more than anything else.

He's sitting in the kitchen when I arrive, his elbows braced on the island as he holds a glass of whiskey loosely between his hands. He glances up, and his gaze burns into mine. We've been avoiding each other for the past several days, and this might be the first time he's looked directly at me since the gala.

"Where were you?" he asks, his voice a deep rumble.

"I went to see Willow," I say. I don't see any point in trying to hide it. If he doesn't hear it from me now, I'm sure he'll find out soon enough.

His eyes narrow. "Willow?"

"Yes," I reply, squaring my shoulders as his expression darkens. "You remember her, right? You told me the whole story about how she ended up the way she is, and I felt bad. I figured she needed a friend, so I went to visit her."

Aiden's grip on his whiskey glass tightens. "You were at Dmitri's house?"

"Yes," I repeat. "I know you don't like him, but Willow needs a friend. So you can't tell me to—"

"Like hell I can't." Something I can't decipher burns in his eyes as he stands up. "I don't ever want you to go there again. You hear me?"

My brows furrow, but I don't cower. Keeping my gaze locked with his, I shake my head. "No. I won't agree to that."

"Dammit, Rose." Aiden sets his glass down so hard that a little liquid sloshes over the side. "You have to understand. He's not—"

But before he can say another word, his phone rings. Growling under his breath, he pulls the cell from his pocket and glances at the screen.

Once again, his expression shifts, but this time, it's easy to read the look on his face.

Dread.

CHAPTER 20

Aiden

My blood rushes in my ears like a tidal wave as I answer the phone. Dr. Andrews' voice comes through, sounding muffled and distant.

"Mr. O'Reilly. Your mother is crashing again."

Fuck. No.

"I'll be right there," I murmur, my voice thick. Unsticking my tongue feels like ripping skin off.

Dr. Andrews speaks again, and I respond, but I'm barely conscious of any of it. Numbly, I press a button to end the call a moment later, then dial Lachlan.

"It's mom," I say as soon as he answers. "It's bad. Meet me at the hospital."

There's a moment of silence as Lachlan processes my words. When he replies, his voice is thick with the same pain I feel in my own chest.

"I will. Have you told Finn and Connor?"

"Not yet."

He clears his throat. "I'll contact them. We'll meet you there."

He hangs up, and as I put my phone away, I look up to see Rose standing before me. I'm not sure how much she's pieced together from the snippets she's been able to hear, but she seems to sense something is wrong. She doesn't say anything.

"I have to go," I say, my voice strained. "My mother may be dying."

Rose's eyes widen, a small gasp falling from her lips as pity softens her eyes.

I barely even recall what we were talking about before Dr. Andrews called, barely remember the sick feeling of worry that twisted my gut at the

thought of Rose being anywhere near Dmitri.

Everything else has faded away for the moment, and I turn away and start moving toward the garage door.

Rose follows me, and I don't have the presence of mind to stop her.

I don't even know if I want to.

I know I can't do this alone. All these years, all this time, I've kept everything bottled deep inside. I've let the anger out, the despair out, in the deals I've done for my family. I've poured my energy into keeping the club alive.

I never stopped, never allowed myself to think about this moment. Now that it's here, it's blinding me.

The road seems to unravel endlessly before me as I drive. I can feel my stomach churning, cramping, tying itself into knots.

Will we be too late? Will she already be gone when we get there?

Lachlan, Finn, and Connor have all beaten us to the hospital when we arrive, and they turn to look as Rose and I stride toward them.

The painful ache in my chest only intensifies as my gaze scans over the three of them. I look at Finn and see the sheer terror in his eyes, the desperation. He looks like a kid again, lost and panicked.

And Connor isn't much better. I know the pain in his eyes is real. He might have been adopted, but he's always loved our parents with all his heart and soul. He feels this as much as we do.

Lachlan is the worst. His collected posture and calm expression is gone. He's exposed, raw. The weight of everything that's happened over the past several years, the exhaustion of it all, is etched across his face. This has been a long time coming. Everything has been leading us to this moment, as terrible as it is.

No one speaks. Rose is silent, almost invisible, following us into the hospital.

Dr. Andrews is waiting outside my mother's room. He has his hands in the pockets of his coat, his head bent as he listens to a nurse murmur into his ear. She sees us first, her eyes flickering over our group with something like pity.

I hate that look.

Part of me is terrified that it's too late. Another part of me hopes it is, that I can rage and shout later about how I wasn't there. I feel cowardly for even that small part of me.

I know it's normal. I know it's human to want to turn away from loss like this, especially after we suffered through losing our father.

But I have to be here. I have to see my mother one last time, even if it will be the most painful thing I've ever experienced.

"What happened?" Lachlan asks the doctor, his voice low and raspy. It's as close to breaking as I've ever heard him.

"This episode was more severe than the last," Dr. Andrews says. "We managed to handle it, but..."

"How much worse was it?" Finn demands. "How bad is she?"

Dr. Andrews runs a hand over his chin. "Worse. We're having a harder time keeping Siobhan stabilized. It's almost impossible at this point to guess ___"

"Will this keep happening?" I ask, interrupting.

I'm not sure how many times we can survive doing this. Each time feels like the end. It never gets easier. It's like every time we come, we come to mourn and then end up hoping.

The hope is the cruelest part.

"Yes." Dr. Andrews nods once. "It'll get worse."

"How the fuck does it get worse than this?" Connor mutters.

"Listen," Dr. Andrews says, taking a breath. "I believe we've passed the point of no return. I have to ask. Do you want to continue life support and resuscitation procedures?"

Somehow, I expected him to say it kindly. I'm not sure why.

From the beginning, Lachlan and I demanded the truth. Stark, unfiltered reality. We wanted to make our choices based on what was possible.

It seems like this is no longer possible.

The longer this goes, the worse it will be. I know logically that it would be cruel to keep this up. All the resuscitation has put my mother's body through hell. Maybe I'm selfish for wanting to hold on. Maybe it's not love that's keeping her here. Maybe it's just me and my brothers, how unwilling we are to let her go.

God, I fucking hate this.

Lachlan presses his hands to his mouth, his eyes pinched at the corners. I wonder if he wants to answer for us all, or if he can't.

"I'll let you talk," Dr. Andrews says patiently. I watch him withdraw to my mother's room, just at the door, speaking in low tones to another passing nurse. We won't even have privacy for this. Not really. Lachlan shakes his head. "We can't keep doing this."

"No," Finn blurts immediately, a spark of anger in his pained tone. "No, we can't pull the plug. We can't just let her go—"

"Finn, you know it's going to get worse," I tell him. "She's going to suffer if we keep going."

Connor helplessly lifts one shoulder in a shrug. "Do we really want to keep doing this to her? I mean, think about it, Finn."

"It's just more pain," Lachlan murmurs. "All of it, for what?"

Finn shakes his head. "No. No, listen to yourselves. You really want to do this? Just end—"

"It's been the end," Lachlan replies. "We've just denied it."

"It's not denial if there's a chance!"

"I think that chance is gone," I say quietly. Every word feels like a dagger in my throat. I feel like shit, like I've betrayed my mother. Like I'm giving up. But I know it's true.

"Then what have we been doing this for?" Finn asks, his voice shaking.

"Ourselves," Lachlan says quietly. He feels as guilty as I do. I know it. "We've known since the beginning that it was bad. The doctors told us. But we couldn't let go."

I can remember that day clearly. I remember what it felt like, one blow after another.

There was no time. No time to think about what was right. We only did what we could and hoped one day, we'd get back the loss that hit us when we were already down.

We were waiting for something big, and it's happened.

"We've dragged this out long enough," Connor says softly. His hand is on Finn's elbow. I half expect Finn to hit him. "It's not what she would want."

"She'd want to be in heaven, with her husband," Lachlan adds. "With our father."

"Not stuck here in a hospital," I say. "Attached to machines."

We've never said the words aloud. It feels dirty to say these things, to speak about her like some thing and not our mother. Like someone else's loved one, some other body attached to all those tubes and machines.

But it *is* her. It's our mother, with her bright smile and laughing eyes. She is the one confined to the bed, to these walls.

She wouldn't want this.

"No," Finn says, his voice cracking. "Shit. That's all shit. They aren't god. They don't know everything."

"No. But are you okay putting her through this again and again?" Lachlan asks quietly.

Finn blinks away tears. I can see him breaking inside. I know he's accepted this just like us, but he can't let it go so easily.

Connor's hand rests on Finn's shoulder. He squeezes, his own eyes shining. "Finn. You know this is the right thing to do."

"And we do it together," I say hoarsely. "We're family. We have to do this. For her."

Finn presses a hand to his forehead. He looks into the distance, maybe seeing some memory he holds dear. His voice is almost a whisper. "It's not right."

I don't know if he's talking about the choice we have to make, or the situation. Maybe both.

All of us wait in silence, and after several long moments, Finn nods. Just a quick jerk of his head, his expression still tight with pain, but it's enough.

Lachlan steps over to Dr. Andrews to tell him our decision, and they speak in low voices before the doctor gestures the rest of us over.

"I understand this is difficult," he tells us. "I truly am sorry we couldn't do more for her. We're going to shut everything down. You can stay with her as long as you like. It'll be quiet in there."

Lachlan nods. We all wait while the equipment keeping our mother alive is turned off, and then I follow my brothers into the room. It smells like it always does—antiseptic, stark, just barely masked by the flowers we keep on the windowsill.

Connor leans over the bed. He murmurs something, his voice quiet as he presses a kiss to her forehead. Finn is next, taking longer, barely able to tear himself away. Lachlan bows his head, whispering so low that I couldn't hear him if I tried.

When I walk up to my mother, I almost can't tell that she's still alive. Her breathing is so shallow that it's almost imperceptible. I know she doesn't have long.

"I'm sorry," I tell her. I know I'm quiet, but my voice is a roar in my ears. Maybe it's my blood making the noise, raging at me not to do this. "I should have fixed this. I still haven't fixed dad's death."

I can't shut my eyes. I gaze down at her face, trying to memorize every

freckle and every line. To burn them into my mind's eyes so that I can't forget her when she's gone.

"I'm lost," I confess, trying to keep my voice from breaking. "I don't know if you'd be proud of me. But ma, I'm trying so hard. I want to make you proud."

My throat tightens, and I clench my jaw, my eyes burning.

"I wish you could be here. I would have wanted you at my wedding, even if it is arranged. Maybe you would have liked Rose. Maybe you would have known what to do. God knows I don't."

My throat is too tight to say anything else for a long moment, and when I manage to speak again, I say the only thing there is left to tell her.

"Sleep," I whisper. "I know he's waiting for you."

Then my brothers and I sit and watch. There's nothing else to do. The machines are gone, the noises that I never noticed gone. There's no hiss of a ventilator, no beep to monitor her heart or oxygen levels. It's all gone. The room is quiet. We can only hear each other.

I wait until her breathing stops, until something vital leaves her body. It's like the color leaves her face, the luster seeping from her hair.

My brothers and I sit in silence, frozen in time, waiting for another breath that will never come.

CHAPTER 21



In the moment when Aiden's mother dies, it feels like someone leaving the room. It's like a door has opened and closed, one that none of us have the key to.

Standing quietly near the wall, I twist my fingers together, barely even breathing as silence consumes the room. The sense of grief that fills the space is suffocating, radiating out from Aiden and each of his brothers in waves.

I feel like I've been allowed into a space where I'm not sure I belong, allowed to witness something too intimate.

The woman in the bed is so young—too young to have had a cardiac arrest. That's what the nurses in the hallway said as they were leaving, and I agree.

Fuck. I didn't even know she was in the hospital. Aiden never told me.

I keep going back to this, keep circling to the fact that I didn't know. But of course I didn't know. Who would have told me? How would I have known?

I knew Aiden's father died. I picked up bits of mafia business when I spoke to my father during college. Things fell like scattered breadcrumbs, and I would absorb them, storing them away like I had any business knowing anything in the first place.

But I never knew about Aiden's mother.

She has a pretty face. Laugh lines. I wonder what she taught her sons before she left them. I wonder if there was more she wanted to do.

There must have been. God, *she's so young*.

Finn breaks the silence suddenly, a loud curse cracking through the air.

"Fuck!" he shouts, his hands fisted at his sides as tears stream down his

cheeks. He looks the most broken about this, at least outwardly. My heart aches for him as he wheels around and stalks out.

"Sobriety be fucked," Aiden murmurs under his breath. "He's going to get shitfaced."

My heart sinks. I can't even begin to imagine what kind of trouble Finn might get into in the emotional state he's in right now, especially if he gets drunk.

Lachlan is leaning over, elbows braced on his knees and one hand covering his mouth, like he's been keeping in a shouted curse of his own. But he rouses himself enough to shake his head, sitting up a little straighter as he glances at Connor. He jerks his head toward the door, almost imperceptible.

"Will you keep an eye on him?"

"Yeah. I'm on it." Connor stands up, looking strung out and haggard.

They all sound like there's so much they're holding in, so much they're not saying. They're biting their tongues so hard they must be bleeding. So much left unsaid, so much pain being bottled away. I almost can't believe that any of them have lived like this.

How can they survive with all this pain and anger shut away?

I want to say something, to tell them to let some of it out. I know how bad it is to keep everything held inside. It's what I did when Aiden hurt me. I kept it all inside and withdrew from everyone. It made my last year of school hell.

I can only imagine what it'll be like for them if they never talk about their mother, never let themselves deal with the loss.

With a nod to his brothers, Connor steps out of the room, heading after Finn. It's just Lachlan and Aiden now, still hunched over in their chairs as if the weight of what they're carrying is too much.

Lachlan murmurs something, and Aiden replies in a low voice. I try not to listen to their words, feeling like I'm intruding somehow. When Lachlan holds out a hand, Aiden grips it, as if the two of them are sharing their strength, passing support silently back and forth as they each try to survive this moment.

Then Aiden releases his brother's hand and rises, his back straight and rigid. Lachlan stays where he is, but I follow Aiden out, striding after him down the hallway.

He's quiet all the way to the car, and just as silent when we both get in and he starts the engine. His expression is almost blank, but there's a glassiness to his eyes that I've never seen before, a well of indescribable grief brewing within him.

I don't know what to say. I don't even know what to think.

I thought this man was my enemy, but seeing him in so much pain makes my chest ache.

We pull into the garage at his house after several long minutes, and Aiden gets out of the car. I follow him, shadowing his steps, still feeling like the ground is giving way beneath my feet. I can't find solid footing.

When we enter the house, his footsteps slow as he makes his way down the hall, as if he's not sure where to go. After a few more strides, he stops entirely, standing stock still.

He's trying to master his grief. I can see it in every inch of him. I know he's trying to come to grips with it, tamp it down, manage it enough to survive the next twenty-four hours, the next *decades*, without his mother.

I want to help him, but I don't know how.

"Aiden," I whisper.

He doesn't respond, and I'm not even sure he heard me. The sight of his tensed shoulders makes a lump form in my throat, and I take a few more steps and then turn to face him, looking up at his haunted features.

"I'm sorry."

It's not enough, and I know it even as I say it, but he jerks a little at the words, as if they're the first thing that's penetrated the fog in his mind since we got home.

"What can I do?" I ask, taking a step closer to him and resting my hand on his chest.

I don't know why I do it. Maybe I'm trying to ground him, or to ground myself. Maybe I just want to be sure his heart is still beating, that he hasn't let the shock and grief turn him to stone.

His breath catches, and he stares down at me, raw emotion passing over his face. His jaw clenches as he swallows, and then his head tilts toward mine just the slightest bit.

It's like a magnet is pulling me toward him, making my chin tip up as I rise up onto my toes.

When my lips meet his, I'm honestly not sure which one of us closed the distance. And I don't know if I care.

His mouth is firm against mine, and his arms wrap around me like steel bands, pressing me flush against him. He kisses me like the contact of our lips snapped something inside him, some thread of control I didn't even realize was holding him back.

"Rose. Fuck," he groans, sweeping his tongue into my mouth as I gasp.

I'm so lost in the torrent of his mouth on mine that I barely notice as he sweeps me up into his arms. He doesn't stop kissing me as he carries me up the stairs, and the world tilts around me as he shoves open the bedroom door and deposits me on the bed, following me onto the mattress.

I can't decipher his expression, but his gaze never leaves mine as he undresses me, impatiently tugging off my jeans and shirt and underwear. His hands feel like they're on fire, my skin just as hot. I'm burning with the need to feel more of him, be touched by him.

When he sits back and yanks off his own shirt, I stare up at him, breathless at the sight. He's not as lean as he was as a boy. He has more muscles now, hard and firm, the tattoos on his skin like liquid darkness.

"Aiden," I breathe, unable to stop the truth from pouring past my lips. "I want you."

"Need you," he growls in response, the words barely intelligible as his hands grip my thighs, pulling them apart. "Need to taste you."

Liquid fire pools deep inside me, a swirling need brewing as Aiden touches me. I know what's coming, but I'm still not ready. His tongue presses against my clit, and I gasp, twisting in the sheets. He's done this before, but this time is different.

There's something more, some greater heat building inside me.

"God, you're so good," he mutters between strokes of his tongue. "So fucking perfect."

He moves slowly, circling my clit while my breathing comes in shallow bursts. I twist my hands in the sheets beneath me, clinging to them for strength as I feel every move Aiden makes.

I can already feel the beginnings of an orgasm heightening in my bones, a static buzz that intensifies as Aiden works me to the edge of ecstasy. I blindly reach for him, trying to grasp at anything I can find to hold on to.

He has me shaking after only a few moments. He presses two fingers into my pussy and twists them, working me open and plunging deeper as he flicks his tongue. I can't think straight, can only hold on as he pushes me to the edge.

"Oh god," I chant, my fingers delving into his thick hair. "Oh god, oh god..."

"Don't call for god, little dove," Aiden rasps, scraping his teeth over my

most sensitive flesh. "He can't give you what you need. Only I can."

Then he adds a third finger, pressing them so deep inside me that all I can focus on is the feeling of my body opening up for him. I want his cock where his fingers are, want him filling me up and stretching me out.

But even though he promised he could give me what I want, he makes me wait for it. Aiden moves slowly and deliberately, pressing into just the right place as I twist and moan, digging my feet into the mattress. It's too much for me to handle, too much for my body to process.

Another burst of pleasure shoots through me as he sucks my clit into his mouth, and I come hard, arching off the bed as it rolls through me.

"Oh fuck! Aiden!"

He draws it out, fucking me with his fingers as he works my clit with his tongue, making sure I feel every wave of my release until my body finally goes slack.

I'm still blinking past the haze as Aiden drags his fingers out of me and starts to strip off the rest of his clothes. I trap my bottom lip between my teeth as I watch the way he pulls his pants off, his tattoos on full display as his clothes fall to the floor.

Dusk fell sometime after we left the hospital, and he didn't bother to turn on the bedroom light, but I can still make him out in the blue-gray shadows of the room. Ambient light shines through the window, playing across the high planes of his cheekbones.

Holding my gaze, Aiden reaches down to stroke himself. I watch the way his hand moves, the way his cock seems to throb against his palm. I can see how swollen he is, how the tip leaks precum as he looks down at my body.

"I'm going to fuck you," he says, his voice low and deep. "I can't be gentle right now, but Rose..." His nostrils flare. "I *need* to fuck you."

My stomach flutters, a wash of arousal and nerves skating through me. But I nod.

"I don't care if you're gentle. I won't break."

A dark, possessive kind of desire fills his expression, his hand gripping the base of his cock tighter. "I wouldn't be so sure about that, little dove. The things I've imagined doing to you..."

"Try me."

There's a challenge in my voice, and maybe it's stupid. No, scratch that. It's definitely stupid to test this man when I know how on the edge he is, how violent and wild his emotions are right now.

But for some reason, despite everything that's happened between us, I'm not afraid of him in this moment. Whatever he gives me, I can take it.

Aiden makes a noise in his throat, something so animalistic I almost expect to look over and see a wolf standing in the corner of the bedroom. Then he leans over me, his body hot and close. I feel boxed in, in the best possible way. He's heavy and present, holding me down as he lines his cock up with my entrance.

I moan when I feel him start to stretch me open. I open my legs wider, trying to tilt my hips toward him. I can't wait any longer. I feel like I'm going crazy.

"Please, Aiden," I whisper.

His hips press forward another inch, jerking as if he's losing what little control he has left.

"Listen to you," he groans. "I just told you I'd break you, and you're still begging for it. For *me*. Fuck, I've never known anyone like you, Rose."

And then he bottoms out inside me in a single hard stroke.

I gasp, my eyes almost closing as pleasure and a bite of pain roll through me. I feel my arms move suddenly, muscles stretching as Aiden's heavy hands grip my wrists. He pulls my arms over my head and pins them to the bed, holding me in place. I barely notice, too distracted by the way his cock fills me, the pressure of it almost too much to handle at first.

He feels so big and hard that it's almost like he's cracking me open. My heels dig into the bed, but there's nothing to hold on to, no way to get a grip. All I can do is take gasping breaths and shake as Aiden remains buried inside me.

"That feel good?" he asks. His arm flexes as he holds himself in place. "How does it feel? Tell me."

"Good," I gasp. "Fuck, Aiden—"

"That's right, you're doing so well, little dove," he murmurs.

He finally starts to pull out as he speaks, slow and torturous. I whimper, my legs shaking. As intense as the stretch of having his cock rooted inside me is, I don't want to lose it. I don't want to lose this feeling. I try to tighten around him, dragging him back in, and Aiden groans a little when I do.

Breathing raggedly, I manage to gasp out, "Wait—"

"No. Stay right where you are."

I shake my head. I try to string words together, try to figure out how to tell him I don't want him to pull away. I can't stand the way he's leaving me.

I feel empty without him filling me up.

"Please," I moan. "Please, I need—"

"I know what you need. Look down," Aiden demands, his voice a low rumble. "Watch the way your body takes me."

Stars are dancing at the edges of my vision, and I barely have the presence of mind to follow his command.

When I finally do, my breath catches. Aiden's cock slides slowly out of me, and the sight of it is both obscene and erotic all at once. He's slick and hard, the veins along his shaft standing out beneath the smooth skin.

I can't stop watching even as he pushes back into me, filling me once again. A moan gets trapped behind my lips as I press my mouth closed, and Aiden shakes his head.

"Don't stop it," he tells me, his voice hungry. "Let me hear. Let me hear how much you want me."

I'm panting as he starts to move faster, slamming into me harder and harder each time. I can see myself clench around him, and I cry out, sparks of electricity setting my body on fire. It's so *much* that I can barely take it.

I try to keep my focus on that connection point between us, try to watch as he fills me each time, but eventually, I can't. The world spins as I twist my hands in the sheets, gasping out wordless sounds of pleasure. I can feel him reach deep inside me each time he thrusts, his cock hitting places that make me whimper.

Aiden curses low by my ear. I'm not sure if he's still talking to me, or if he's just as lost as I am. I barely have the energy to cling to him as I ride out the waves of pleasure, the feeling of him inside me.

His thrusts start to lose their rhythm, and he grunts savagely.

"Fuck," he mutters, his grip on my wrists tightening. "So tight—"

"Please." I'm openly begging now, trying to jerk my hips up to meet his thrusts. "Aiden, please!"

He moves faster, his hips snapping against me as he slams into me harder. I cry out, heat bursting through me as he fucks me into the bed.

I can't remember the last time I had sex like this, if I ever have. This feels like falling off the edge of a cliff, spiraling through pleasure and toward a white-hot climax.

"Come for me," he chokes out. "Rose, I'm close. Come for me. Fuck!"

He leans down to kiss me, his mouth searing against mine. I gasp into the kiss and feel his tongue press deeper, almost like he wants to fuck my mouth

at the same time as my pussy. Our lips crash together, teeth and tongues as rough as the way his cock is slamming into me.

When I finally fall over the edge, he devours every one of my cries as they pour into his mouth, driving into me faster.

My clit throbs as the orgasm rises and peaks, my pussy clenching hard as I take every inch of him. I feel raw, the slam of his cock so rough that I feel like I might break. It feels so fucking good.

"Yes," he growls. "Fuck, yes."

The last word ends in a grunt as he comes hard inside me, and the feeling sends another rush through my body. By the time he finally goes still, I'm shaky and sated, waves of pleasure still rolling through my body. All I can do is cling to Aiden as I recover, the ecstasy gradually sapping away.

I can't remember the last time I felt so complete, so satisfied. Aiden's body is warm against mine, reassuring and firm as I lie on the bed beneath him.

For a moment, there are no thoughts at all in my mind. No worries in my heart. But as the hazy feeling of pleasure finally starts to seep out of me, I blink up at the ceiling, swallowing hard.

What did we just do?

We've just crossed a line that can't be uncrossed, and I have no idea if it will save us... or ruin us.

CHAPTER 22

Aiden

My heart is still pounding out an even rhythm as I feel Rose stiffen beneath me.

I can already feel her walls going back up, feel her pulling away from me, distancing herself. Maybe she's thinking about what we've done, what this might mean. Maybe she's wondering what I think. Does she think I don't care? That I'll pretend it never happened or tell her to get the hell out?

I understand why she might think that, given my past behavior toward her.

And maybe that's what I should do. After all, the woman I'm sharing a bed with is the daughter of my enemy.

But I don't give a fuck about that anymore.

Antonio *is* still my enemy, but Rose doesn't have to be. I pushed her away for her own good, and then I pushed her away because I blamed her for her father's actions.

But I'm done pushing her away. All I want to do right now is pull her closer. Before I can do that, though, she needs to know the truth. She needs to know what I've kept hidden from her all these years.

Pulling out of her, I go to the bathroom and grab a towel, then return and clean up the cum that leaks from her, spilling down her thighs. Rose jerks slightly, looking down at me with wide eyes, as if she's surprised by my actions.

Fuck. Of course she is. She thinks I'm a monster.

When I finish, I stretch out on the bed beside her, holding her gaze as she turns to meet my eyes.

"I have to tell you something."

She bites her lower lip, her cheeks still flushed and a few fine hairs sticking to her forehead. "What?"

"In high school..." As I start to speak, I feel Rose stiffen even more, and it sends a pang through my heart. But I keep going. "I fell for you. Hard."

She clears her throat, looking away. "Aiden, it doesn't matter anym—"

"Yes, it does," I insist. "I cared for you more than I'd ever cared for anyone, and I wanted to protect you. From Dmitri."

"Dmitri?"

Rose's voice is heavy with confusion, and I shut my eyes for a moment as a rush of memories surge through my mind.

"Yes. His father was looking to set up a match for him, a connection with a mafia family. It was the most important thing to the man. I don't know if he knew he would die soon or if he was just... like that."

And? Rose doesn't say anything, but the question is clear in her eyes, so I continue.

"Dmitri's father was adamant. He was hunting for a wife for his son, and Dmitri had his sights set on you."

Rose makes a small noise of shock, a wordless exhale. "Me? Why?"

"I don't know. Our families had no grudge against each other, so I don't think it was about me. I'm not sure why he decided it had to be you. I just know that he wouldn't stop. He would talk about it all the fucking time."

"About marrying me?"

"No." I grit my teeth, trying to force myself to calm down before I speak again. The words are bringing memories back. Bad ones.

Dmitri knew I was with Rose, even though we kept our relationship mostly a secret, not flaunting it around the school. But he didn't give a shit that she was taken. Didn't care that she didn't want him.

"What did he talk about then?" Rose presses. "If not about marrying me, then what?"

I almost don't want to say it, but I do.

"He talked about what he'd do to you *after* he married you," I grit out. "It made me want to fucking kill him."

I could have her begging on her knees. Dmitri's voice floats through my mind, smug and taunting. Have you seen her mouth? It would look damn good with my cock in it.

I nearly fucking killed him for saying that. But I couldn't. It would've set off a war between our families and possibly gotten my brothers and my father

killed.

"The Raven Syndicate was powerful enough that if he wanted you, he could have had you," I say. "His father was prepared to make any offer to get his son the wife he wanted, and..." My jaw clenches so tight my teeth ache. "Dmitri was obsessed with having a virgin bride."

Horror and understanding bloom across Rose's face. "Oh my god. So you..."

"I did something unforgivable," I say shortly. I swallow past the lump forming in my throat and push on. "Like I said, Dmitri was obsessed. He wanted to... *break a woman in*. Like a goddamn animal."

"Fuck. Oh god."

I can feel Rose shrink into herself, repulsed by the thought. I remember the first time I heard Dmitri say the words that made me realize he wouldn't stop.

I'd like to see her bleed for me, he said. She has to be broken in. House trained, so she knows the minute I get home, I want her to have her legs spread. She'll be mine, anyway. Mine to fuck as hard as I want. As many times as I want.

It made me sick. He didn't give a shit about Rose. He just wanted someone to use as a toy, and he wanted the power and control of ruining something precious.

A nice cunt to warm my cock, Dmitri said once, laughing. That was the last thing he said before I lost control and drove my fist into his jaw.

"He was fascinated with the idea of taking his wife's virginity. I knew he wouldn't want anyone he thought was less than that," I say thickly. "He wouldn't want someone who was... damaged goods."

The words burn on my tongue, and I hate myself more in this moment than I ever have.

But I did what I thought I had to do.

"So I ruined you," I say quietly, holding Rose's gaze as I speak. "I took what he wanted most, and I made sure everyone knew it."

"Aiden..." Tears gleam in Rose's eyes, pain passing through her features, but she doesn't say anything else.

"We got into a fight after that day," I continue. "Almost killed each other. Dmitri was beyond angry. He was beyond rage. He went at me, and I fought back. But in the end, he stopped looking at you. I won. I wanted him to never look at you again. I wouldn't let him have you. Wouldn't let him hurt you."

Rose is quiet. I can almost hear her heartbeat. I wonder if this will mean anything to her. I know I don't deserve forgiveness, and if she won't give it, I'll have to fucking live with that.

I've done it this long.

But I desperately want her to understand. After all this time spent keeping the truth from her, I want Rose to know why I did what I did. I want her to know that I didn't feel like I had a choice. I just wanted her to be safe.

After my father's death, I almost let my rage turn me into a monster just like Dmitri, but I could never be that kind of man. Even when I hated Rose the most, even when I tried to hate her, I could never truly hurt her. I could never let the beast inside me harm her.

Dmitri, on the other hand, would've tortured her with a smile. I couldn't let him do that. Even thinking about it now makes fury bubble inside my veins.

"The gala," Rose finally says, her tone subdued. "This explains what happened that night."

I shut my eyes. "Yeah. I was furious. I saw him talking to you, and it all just came back."

"Willow." Rose's eyes widen, her voice tinged with horror. "She took my place. She's the one he married because he didn't want me anymore."

"Yes. And she became a shell," I say quietly. "I saw it happen. I saw the way he broke her, the way he wore her down from what she was. He took every good thing from her and made her like this. It could have been you."

Rose shakes her head. "Everything you did. That night we spent together... the sheet... it was all because of him?"

"I know. I know I wrecked everything we had," I say, trying to force as much strength into my voice as I can. It's still not enough to cover the despair. "The worst part was hurting you so badly. But I believed it was the only thing I could do, and I thought that mattered more than anything else."

Even now, I don't know if it could have been different. I want it to have been different. But would anything else have worked?

Sometimes I wonder if I could have spoken to my mother. Maybe she would have convinced my father to make a deal with Dmitri's father, to give him some concession in exchange for releasing his claim on Rose. Maybe they would have arranged something for Rose and me, had us engaged to stop Dmitri's claim.

But that didn't seem like an option at the time. I'd heard Dmitri, seen the

way he flaunted his plans. Would he even have cared if his father had told him no, or would he have kept pushing?

Would he have done something to hurt Rose anyway, just to get what he wanted?

I don't know. I'll never know.

"I would have... I would do anything to save you from that life," I say quietly. I correct myself because it's true. No matter what else has happened between us since then, that will never change.

I would try to save her again and again. Any way I could.

"I can't believe you thought that was the only way," Rose says, her voice strained.

"Believe me, I did." I exhale sharply as I think back to that day in the cafeteria, as I held the sheet in my hands, the future I wanted just out of reach. "It was all I thought I could do."

"But in front of everybody? And without saying anything?"

"I know."

It wasn't right. I left her out of the decision, kept her ignorant to something so dangerous that she was directly involved in. She had a right to know.

Rose had a right to know that Dmitri was after her. She had a right to know why I seemingly threw away a perfect relationship. But I was a teenager, a young man trying valiantly to protect someone he cared about.

I was stupid. And I'm paying for it now.

"Poor Willow," Rose murmurs, and I'm sure she's imagining how haunted the other woman looks. How drugged she is. She shudders a little, her body shaking against mine.

"My father would never have agreed to it," she adds after a moment, her voice firm.

I clench my teeth again, my jaw tensing. I know how much she loves that man. I know she thinks the world of him. I can see it in her eyes any time she talks about him.

But fuck Antonio Donovan.

He's proven himself to be a liar and a double-crosser, and it's clear he doesn't have the strength to protect his daughter when it comes down to it.

If he did, she wouldn't be engaged to me now.

"I wasn't sure about that," I say. "I'm still not."

Rose doesn't argue, just shakes her head, her eyes going unfocused as she

gets lost in some private thought.

"I never wanted to hurt you," I say again. I don't know if I could ever say it enough. "Everything between us was real. I believed it was. I still do."

Rose blinks, dragging in a shuddering breath as she looks at me, her green eyes shadowed in the darkness.

"You *did* hurt me," she whispers softly, and I swear my heart cracks open at her quiet words. "I wish you had told me. I wish you hadn't kept the truth from me. But if what you've said about Dmitri is true..." She shakes her head, wrapping her arms around herself. "Then you saved me too."

"I'm sorry," I murmur, unable to stop myself from reaching out for her. She doesn't resist as I pull her into my embrace, wrapping my arms around her as our naked bodies press together. "I'm so sorry, little dove."

She doesn't speak again, but she lets me hold her, a tangled mess of emotions swirling between us—grief and regret and need and exhaustion all rolled into one.

I know things aren't fixed between us. She may understand why I did what I did in some sense, but it doesn't undo the hurt I caused her. It doesn't change my complicated feelings toward her family.

Still, as we lie together in bed, a growing certainty fills my heart.

Rose is mine.

Not the way Dmitri wanted to make her his. Not a toy to be played with, broken, and tossed aside. But *mine*, body, heart, and soul. She's the only woman I will ever want.

And somehow, I'll find a way to make her see that.

CHAPTER 23



Over the next several days, something seems to shift between Aiden and me. Even the air in the house feels different, less fraught with tension—or at least, full of a different kind of tension.

Aiden and his brothers begin to make funeral arrangements for their mother, and I do my best to help with what I can. The men are all grieving, and the next time I see him, Finn looks like he's been on a serious bender.

But they're all still alive, all still pushing forward, and it's clear they have each other's backs.

Aiden and I have still been sleeping in the same bed, but we haven't had sex again since the night his mother died. I want to—fuck, I can't stop thinking about the way it felt to have him inside me—but after everything he told me that night, I've had a lot to sort through in my head.

Everything he did, the way he hurt me... he said it was to protect me. I hate that he thinks I can't protect myself, hate that he chose to hurt me because of what could've happened. I hate that he never told me the danger I was in. As if ignorance was any better than what he did.

But at the same time, every time I think of Willow and her hollow eyes and listless demeanor, I can't help feeling a rush of relief that it isn't *me* walking through the world like a ghost.

Aiden did the one thing he could think of that would end Dmitri's sick obsession with me—and it worked. Dmitri moved on, and I was able to leave Boston, go to school, and live a normal life. My heart may have been broken, but at least my body and spirit weren't.

It's still hard to forgive Aiden, but at the same time, knowing the truth gives me a sense of peace, as if the wound in my heart has been lanced and

can finally start healing properly.

And I don't know what it means that he told me now.

Does he want our marriage to be more than a sham, more than a business arrangement or a wedding in name only? Does he want something real with me, or was his confession just a result of his turbulent emotions after losing his mother?

I spend days turning those thoughts over and over in my head, and by the end of the week, I join Aiden and his family at the St. Joseph Catholic Church for Siobhan's funeral.

There are Assembly members here, a few people I vaguely recognize occupying seats apart from everyone else. My father is here, and Dmitri and Willow are too, sitting with the other important people near the front.

Since the night the O'Reillys negotiated with Dad for the marriage contract that would bind our families together, I've spoken to my father a few times. I've tried to reassure him that I'm okay, but I know he still blames himself for what happened. For not being able to prevent it.

If I told him that I'm no longer sure I even want to get out of this marriage arrangement, what would he say? Would he believe me?

Would it change any of the animosity between him and the O'Reillys?

I'm not sure it would, and now isn't the time to stir up mafia grudges, so I just spoke to him quietly for a few minutes before the service, then gave him a quick hug and returned to Aiden's side.

As the funeral begins, I hold tight to Aiden's hand. I don't know if that small gesture will be welcome, but he doesn't push me away, threading his fingers through mine and gripping tightly.

I listen to the words that people speak, the way they talk about his mother. It's poignant. Everyone loved her, or so they say—and I really believe it. People are crying, really crying, like they've lost someone irreplaceable. Important.

When the service ends, Aiden goes to stand with his brothers and accept the words of the mourners. I slip away to give him some room, and as I do, I catch sight of Willow hanging around near the pews.

After glancing around the church quickly, I make my way toward her. Dmitri makes my skin crawl now that I know the truth about him, but I feel even worse for Willow. She isn't just a sad addict anymore. She's a sad, abused addict. I've only had a glimpse of what she must suffer, and I can imagine just how bad it probably is behind closed doors.

"Hey, Willow," I say, giving her a small wave as I approach.

She looks up, her reaction a little delayed. Her eyes are hazy. "Oh, Rose. Hello."

"Thank you for coming." I gesture around us with one hand. "I'm sure it means a lot to Aiden and his brothers to have so many people here."

Willow nods vaguely, and I have to resist the urge to pull her into my arms and try to get her out of here. She seems more doped up than usual, and I wonder for the first time if she's self-administering whatever it is, or if Dmitri deliberately got her hooked on it. Either way, it's awful.

"We've been busy with the funeral arrangements, and then there's the wedding coming up," I add. "But after that, I'd love to hang out with you again sometime. If you're up for it."

"Yes. I'd—"

Before she can finish the sentence, Willow breaks off abruptly, looking down at the floor. A moment later, the hairs on the back of my neck prickle as Dmitri walks up and drapes an arm around his wife's shoulders.

He doesn't speak to me, just gives me a look that makes my skin chill, then turns and leads her away. She goes without resistance, not even saying goodbye to me or looking back over her shoulder.

I swallow hard, my hands curling into fists.

Fuck, I hate that man. I never liked him in high school, but I never thought of him much back then, having no idea all the things he was saying about me and planning for me. But now? I despise him with every fiber of my being.

The next hour passes in a blur, and by the time we finally leave the church, I can tell Aiden is worn out. I know what it's like. Even though I was a child when my mother died, I remember that her funeral was exhausting. It wasn't just a physical drain, either. It took something out of me emotionally, making me feel like a wrung out rag.

We pull into the garage and head into the house, and as soon as the door shuts, Aiden turns to me, pressing me up against the heavy wood.

I expect him to kiss me, but instead, he just rests his forehead against mine, his entire body leaning into mine as if I'm the only thing holding him up.

"Thank you," he whispers raggedly. "For being there."

His words hit me right in the chest, and I nod as much as I can without breaking the contact of our foreheads. "Of course."

Aiden's crystal blue eyes drop closed, and for a long moment, we just stay like that, sharing breath in the silent stillness of the entryway.

Then, slowly, his lips find mine.

It's soft at first, careful and exploratory, as if he's trying to remind himself how to do this. How to feel anything but grief. Then he makes a noise in his throat, hitching me tighter against him as everything intensifies.

He kisses me heatedly, his mouth searing mine, his hands shoving up the hem of my dress as if he's an addict who'll die without his next fix.

Part of me feels like I should push him away. I've been so careful to keep some semblance of the walls up between us, to try to keep myself from surrendering to my cravings for him. But in this moment, I don't have the strength to stop what's happening.

He needs this so much.

I can feel it in the way he groans against my lips, groping me roughly.

And the truth is, some part of me needs it too.

So just this once, I let myself have what I need.

Kissing him back, I lift my leg closer toward his hand, pressing my thigh against his body. He slides his hand along my skin, his fingers digging into my flesh as he yanks me closer.

"Aiden," I whisper, my breath already choppy.

He kisses me like fire, and I melt under his hands, my leg hooked around his muscled waist. I hold him tight to me as he grinds against me, his bulge pressing against me beneath his pants.

I reach for his shirt and push my hands under it, gliding my fingertips over his heated skin. I need to feel him, his hard muscles so warm and firm beneath my touch.

"Fuck, Rose," he grunts, sounding strung out as his fingers dig almost painfully into my thighs, gripping me like he'll never let me go. "Fucking hell. I'm so—I need—"

Without finishing his sentence, Aiden shoves the hem of my dress all the way up to my stomach. Holding the fabric there with one hand, he unzips his pants, shoving them down and out of the way, and I'm vaguely aware of the sound of his belt smacking the floor.

"Get the fuck up here," he mutters, hoisting me into his arms as I grab the fabric of the dress, taking over the job of holding it out of the way.

He presses me up against the door and rubs his cock against my pantycovered pussy, hard and hot. I moan with pleasure, rocking my hips to keep pace with him.

"Dammit."

The curse is low and gruff, as if he's just realized I'm still wearing panties. Rather than setting me down so he can pull them off and slide them down my legs, he hooks one side of the delicate lace and yanks at it. There's a ripping sound and a sharp snap, and then he pulls the shredded fabric away from my body, baring me to him completely.

So needy for him that I've forgotten every reason why this could be a bad idea, I reach down to guide him in to me—but Aiden grabs my wrist, pulling my hand away.

"No," he growls. "Not yet."

Keeping one hand under my ass, holding me up and bracing me between his large form and the door, he pins my wrist against the door with his other hand. My arm stretches above my head as he rocks against me, biting my neck as he moves. It feels dirty and rough, like I'm riding out a storm that might pick me up and spit me out in a completely different state.

"A-Aiden..." I breathe.

I can't speak. I want to say something, to beg him for more, maybe. But I can't. It's all I can do to breathe as his cock slides against me, tantalizing but still so far away from where I need him.

"You fucking vixen. How do you do this to me?" he demands, breathing hard as he grinds against me.

I barely manage to hold on to Aiden as he suddenly hauls me away from the door, taking several long strides and then pressing me to the large window on the adjoining wall. The glass makes a dull sound as my back thuds against it, and my breath catches. No one is outside to see us—or at least, I don't think they are. And even if someone saw us, I'm mostly clothed, so it's not like they'd see a whole lot.

But still, it feels borderline public.

I've never considered public sex before, but Aiden has driven every rational thought out of my mind. I'm thinking about things I never would, fantasies I would probably have otherwise been startled by. It doesn't seem so crazy when I have Aiden right here, nipping and kissing my lips as he rolls his hips, shoving his cock through my folds where it's sandwiched between our bodies.

"You're wet," he grits out. "After all these years, your pussy is still so greedy for me. Jesus, Rose. You wreck me. Gonna fuck you now."

His words are barely more than grunts, his sentences clipped and half formed, as if he's lost the ability to say more than that. I hitch my legs around his waist just as he thrusts into me, gasping and digging my fingers into his jacket.

"Fuck," he groans, breaking our kiss to rest his forehead on the window next to me. Our cheeks are pressed together, and I can feel the muscles in his jaw working, as if he's trying to get ahold of himself. Trying to regain some kind of control.

In that small pause, I scramble to shove the dark jacket off, then hold his shoulders for purchase as he starts to move.

With a guttural growl, he begins to fuck me, each thrust sharp and fast.

"So tight," he grunts. "So wet. Take my fucking cock."

His words are halfway between a command and a plea, and I wrap my arms and legs around him, clinging to him as he slams into me over and over. I keep feeling like I'm about to fall to the ground, like he might run out of energy and melt into a puddle, but it never happens. My mind and heart might be a wreck, but my body is insatiable for this, so starved for more of Aiden that I feel like someone who's been dying of hunger suddenly being offered a three course meal.

I tighten around him, trying to keep him inside me longer. The push of his cock is hard and hot, my pussy stinging with the pleasure and force. It makes my entire body feel electric, like I'm crackling with energy.

I don't know how long he fucks me. I know I'll be sore.

Aiden slams into my body as I feel sweat gather at the small of my back, the dress I'm wearing tearing somewhere I can't see. I don't care.

His mouth is on my collarbone, leaving marks I know I won't be able to hide. I think about his marks on me, about other people seeing. It makes heat curl low inside me. I think about what they might think when they see.

Will they know I'm his? Will they think he left these marks softly, lovingly?

Or will they know he fucked me hard, made me feel endless pleasure?

Aiden's cock is slick inside me. He's so hard I can't believe he hasn't come yet. I'm so close, the rush gathering inside me. I almost want to make him slow, make him ease off before we come too close. I don't want this to end.

But I don't have the strength to stop this. I want all of him now.

We both come hard, almost at the same time. I feel Aiden's heat inside

me and then I'm hit by my orgasm, slammed almost as hard as he fucked me into the window. One of my hands slaps against the glass, my palm slick with sweat.

My entire body contracts, my legs shaking as he empties himself inside me. I shudder through the orgasm, and Aiden pants against my neck, his arms strong around me.

The way he holds me is like he'll never let me go. Like he wants us to be intertwined forever.

And for the first time, I hope so too.

CHAPTER 24



It's been a week since the funeral. Time seems to slip through my fingers like sand. The days blur, almost all the same but so wildly different from what they were before.

Aiden and his brothers are all still grieving. They had time to prepare themselves for what was coming, since their mother had been in a vegetative state for months, so some part of them had already grieved her loss.

It's not easier because of that. Just shorter, rougher. It hurts, I can tell. I see it in Aiden's face.

Finn parties too hard. I know Aiden doesn't approve, but the others seem to think that letting it out of his system is best for now. I'm not sure what to think. I can see how much Finn is hurting, how much of his behavior is driven by pain.

For the first time, I care about what happens to someone outside of just Aiden. I care because of Aiden. I care because I want his family to be safe, not just for them—for him.

And Aiden?

Things are good between us.

I'm not sure I would ever have expected this. I'm getting used to being in his house. I don't miss the last step on the staircase. I don't forget where to put books back in the library. I remember where to replace the knives in the kitchen.

I'm used to waking up next to Aiden in the morning and looking at his dark hair, his blue eyes when he wakes up. Blue like the morning sky.

I'm getting used to expecting the sex at night.

It's intense, enough to wear us out and send us to sleep. It's hot, sweaty,

sometimes dirty. I'm getting more of what I never really looked for before.

I'm getting used to my clothes smelling like Aiden. I know how he likes his coffee, know the sugar he buys and where he keeps it.

I've seen the side of my soon-to-be-husband that he keeps closed off from most other people, and it makes everything seem more real. Our relationship, the impending wedding—it feels more true than it did before, more honest. Not just a business arrangement, but something else.

Aiden is still busy with the mafia. That won't go away, I know that much. But he's making time to be around, not like when he'd disappear for almost the entire day. He comes to me as much as he can, in more ways than one.

It's like he's making up for the time we missed out on, the days we would have spent together before Dmitri destroyed everything. Before the betrayal that rocked our worlds and the losses that changed us.

It's strange to me sometimes, when I think about how far we've come since our first reunion back at the restaurant.

But still, I can't help but be grateful for the change.

On Wednesday, I'm sitting in the library reading a romance novel by one of my favorite authors. Aiden already has a massive collection of books in his library, but ever since I admitted to him that I have a weakness for romance, he's taken to buying me paperbacks and stocking the shelves with those as well.

I'm curled up on the large, plush chair near the desk, my legs tucked up on the seat cushion, when Aiden strides into the room. I look up at him, my entire body going on alert.

His presence has always had an effect on me, but now that things have changed between us, I feel like it's even more intense. I'm aware of him in a way that feels almost supernatural, as if I can sense him before he even steps into a room.

Heat flashes through me like it always does as he looks over at me, our gazes locking. If I thought fucking him as many times as we have by now would get him out of my system, I was dead wrong. If anything, knowing how intense and good it can be between us only makes me crave that with him more.

Aiden walks closer to stand a few feet away from me, leaning lightly against his desk. He tilts his head when he looks at me, like he's committing me to memory so he can paint me, and the intensity of his focus sends a shiver of pleasure up my spine.

"Would you like to go to the ballet? I'll be attending this weekend with my brothers, and Jamie and Tristan."

I blink, surprised. "Ballet? Your brothers?"

I can't really fathom the image of a bunch of Irish mafia men at the ballet. That might be judgmental of me, but having met all of them, I still can't fathom it.

Maybe they're all hiding secrets.

Aiden laughs, as if he's guessed the exact direction my thoughts just took. "Violet is dancing. She's known us for years. She's practically an honorary sister."

"Oh." I nod. That makes a hell of a lot more sense.

"It's not our preferred form of entertainment," he says with a wry smile. "But we like to show our support."

I can't help the small laugh that escapes me. I still can't get over the image of the burly, tatted up O'Reilly men at the ballet. That, I would love to see.

"Sure," I tell him. "I'll go."

"Good." Aiden smiles at me, then glances at the book in my hand. "What are you reading?"

I lift it up to show him the cover, and he nods. Then he cocks his head, a smirk playing at the edges of his lips.

"You seemed to be very engrossed in it when I walked in," he comments. "Must be a very good book."

A flush of heat creeps up my cheeks. It *is* a good book, with an amazing story that's had me laughing and crying. But it just so happens that this particular scene—the one that had me so engrossed, as Aiden pointed out—is about a very steamy encounter between the hero and heroine.

"Um, it is," I murmur evasively, angling the book a little so he won't see what's in it.

Of course, I should've known that would backfire. Aiden picks up on what I'm doing immediately and plucks the book from my hand, arching a brow as he scans the pages. He reads in silence for a long moment, his expression indecipherable. Then he lowers his hand, holding the book out for me to take back.

I grab it from him, pretty sure my cheeks must be beet red by now, but before I can do anything else, Aiden nods toward the book.

"Keep reading. Aloud."

My jaw drops open a little. I feel like I might very well burst into flames right here in this chair, incinerating my clothes and the upholstery all in one go. I hesitate for a second, but Aiden doesn't move or give any indication that he's going to let this go, so I finally lift the book and find the last sentence I read, continuing on from there.

"'Her heart beat harder as he hooked his fingers at the waistband of her panties and slowly drew them down..."

My voice is strangely breathy as I read, and as I continue on, I have to pause once or twice to lick my lips, which feel too dry. My gaze is focused on the page, but all the rest of my attention is on Aiden, who's still standing over me, his dominating presence consuming the space as he listens intently.

I describe how the hero begins to trail his lips up the heroine's leg, starting at the ankle and finding the sensitive places that rarely get any attention, and Aiden makes a noise low in his throat.

As I start to read the next sentence, he drops to his knees in front of me, and a second later, my legs are tugged out from under me, my feet planted on the floor.

"Keep going," Aiden murmurs, and I realize that I've broken off midword.

"Right," I mutter, doing my best to keep my breathing even. "Goosebumps prickled across her skin as..."

Large hands slide up my thighs, and Aiden's dexterous fingers find the button and fly of my jeans, working them down before tugging at my pants and panties. I lift my hips to help him, sliding down farther in the chair as he pulls me closer to him, dragging my pants all the way down my legs. He gets them off me and tosses them aside, then pushes my knees open wider, making my words stutter.

I'm wet. I know I am. I was already a little turned on from what I was reading when he came in, but everything got pushed up to eleven the moment he started making me read aloud, methodically undressing me at the same time. The air is cool on my heated, flushed skin, and I can feel the slick arousal coating my pussy lips.

My voice shakes, but I keep reading. The hero is eating the heroine out now, driving her wild with his tongue, and as I start to describe everything he's doing... Aiden does the same.

His tongue circles my clit, teasing me and working me up before he stiffens it and thrusts it inside me, fucking me with it while his teeth scrape my sensitive bundle of nerves.

"Fuck," I breathe when Aiden clamps his lips around my clit and sucks, and he pauses for a moment, looking up at me.

"Is that in the book?" he asks, his voice a low growl.

"No," I stammer, trying to refocus on the words as I hold the book with one hand. "No, but—"

"Then keep reading," he commands, his hands gripping my thighs. "I want to know what happens next."

My clit is throbbing hungrily, and I'm positive that if I stop reading, he'll stop doing what he's doing too. And if he stops, I'm pretty sure I'll die. So I gather all the concentration I have left and pick back up.

"'She cried out when he thrust a finger into her, and'—ah!"

That last part isn't from the book either, but I can't help the noise I make when Aiden slams a finger into me as if he's just been waiting until I reached that part of the book. He fucks me with it, still sucking and lapping at my clit, until the hero in the story adds a second finger. Two thick digits slide inside me roughly, and my voice grows halting and strained as sensations barrel through me.

I keep reading, my hips moving of their own accord to meet his strokes, riding his hand and grinding against his face—

—but then I stop.

Aiden looks up sharply as my voice breaks off. His lips are wet with my arousal, his cheeks slightly flushed, and his nostrils flare as he gazes at me.

"Keep going," he says gruffly.

"I... this next part won't work," I say, heat creeping up my cheeks again. "There are toys involved, so you don't have to—"

"Let me see."

He jerks his chin, and I turn the book a little so he can see what's written there. His tongue slides out to drag over his lip as he reads, and then he nods, rising to his feet.

"I'll be right back," he tells me. Then something shifts in his expression, hungry dominance shining in his eyes as his gaze tracks over me. "Don't move. Stay just like that."

He turns and strides from the room, leaving me sprawled out on the chair, bottomless, my pussy bared and my clit throbbing. I'm half tempted to take over where Aiden left off, but I don't, just holding the book and shifting my hips a little as anticipation swells inside me like a growing tidal wave.

Is he really going to...?

When Aiden returns a moment later, my gaze snaps up to him immediately. He smiles down at me, predatory and ravenous, as he stalks toward me. And when I see what he's in his hand, I swear my stomach turns to liquid fire. My eyes widen a little, bouncing between his face and the object he's holding. It's shaped like a teardrop, smooth and shiny, with a small jeweled disc at one end.

"Why do you have that?" I ask, staring at the butt plug.

He smirks, the heat never leaving his expression. "Why do you think? Because one day, I'm going to fuck that pretty ass of yours, and I want you to be ready when I do." His smirk widens. "I didn't know today would be the day we'd use it for the first time, but it turns out your books are a lot more interesting than I thought."

My heart is racing, my mind so wrapped up in what just happened—and what's about to happen—that I can't put together the words to respond to him.

But Aiden doesn't seem to need me to say anything. He steps closer to my chair, bracing one hand on the arm rest as he drops his head to kiss me. It's fierce and heated, his tongue swiping across my lips and delving into my mouth as if he's trying to eat me alive. When we finally separate, I'm breathing hard, my entire body buzzing with growing arousal.

Aiden nips my lower lip, dragging it between his teeth before he reaches down and grips my hips. He flips me over in a smooth motion, setting me back down as that I'm on my knees in front of the chair, my upper body braced on the seat and my ass out, presented to him like a gift.

"Fucking beautiful." He groans, running his hand over the curve of my ass cheek. Then he pulls his hand back and spanks me lightly, just hard enough to make me hiss a surprised breath. "Keep reading," he murmurs.

Fuck, I don't know if I can.

It's almost impossible to keep going as I read the next several passages aloud, struggling to keep my words coherent as he mirrors the actions of the hero in the novel, dribbling lube between my ass cheeks and then working the plug into my tight back hole. My eyes keep rolling back, making it hard to keep my gaze on the page, and Aiden has to spank me twice more to make me refocus.

When the plug is finally buried all the way inside me, he twists it from side to side, and my toes curl, my hand shaking right along with my voice as

I hold the book in front of my face.

"Good girl," Aiden murmurs when I pause to take a breath. "He's going to fuck her soon, isn't he? With her ass stretched around the plug, he's going to take her pussy and fill her up so much that she won't be able to think about anything else. Isn't that right?"

"Y-yes," I hiss out, bumping my hips back against him as he slides his hands possessively over my ass and thighs. "Yes. And I want you to do it too. I want you—I *need* you to fuck me. Please."

"Keep reading, little dove," he growls softly. "And I will."

It takes a monumental effort, but now that I know what my reward will be, I force myself to keep going. Squirming in his grip, my clit throbbing and my ass aching pleasantly from the stretch, I start reading aloud again.

When I get to the part where the hero finally slides into the heroine, Aiden tightens his grip on my hips, driving into me so hard and fast that it knocks the breath from my lungs. He's always big for me, but with the plug nestled tightly in my ass, he feels even bigger. My walls stretch to accommodate him, and I can almost feel the head of his cock brushing against the spot where only a thin wall separates it from the plug in my ass.

"Oh fuck!" I half gasp and half scream, one hand clawing at the seat cushion while the other hand drops the book. It slides sideways and falls off the chair, and Aiden draws back and slams into me again.

"Bad girl," he grunts out, his voice strained. "I didn't tell you to stop reading. Now we'll never know what happens." He slams into me again, his hips slapping against my ass and making me cry out. "I guess we'll just have to make up our own ending."

"Yes," I gasp, nodding wildly as my cheek presses against the soft fabric of the chair cushion. "Fuck, yes, please. Just don't stop."

"Couldn't if I fucking tried," he mutters, his hands digging into my hips with each heavy thrust. "You feel so goddamn good. You look so good like this, your ass and pussy both stuffed full."

"God..." I writhe in his hold, my entire body burning up as desire crashes through my veins. "More."

My clit is throbbing insistently, still swollen and sensitive from when he was licking me earlier, and I shift my hips a little, trying to press against the chair to get some friction on it. When that doesn't work, I start to reach down to slide a hand between my legs. But before I can, Aiden growls out a warning, tugging me back into a punishing thrust.

"That's my job," he says tightly. "*I* make my girl come."

Heat shoots through me, and I don't know if it's from the promise in his voice or the way he just called me his girl. I don't know if I should like it as much as I do, but I can't help the effect it has on me.

"Please, Aiden," I whimper. "Please."

"I've got you."

His thrusts slow a little, and I'm aware of some movement behind me as he reaches for something. Then I hear a faint buzzing sound, and he slides something smooth along my stomach, letting me feel the vibrations emanating from it.

When the small vibrator reaches my clit, my pussy clamps down around him, my head lifting off the seat cushion as my back arches.

"Fuck!" I scream.

I'm already so worked up that the burst of sensation pushes me over the edge, and I come hard, shaking and trembling as Aiden rides me through it.

Part of me expects him to toss away the vibe and start fucking me in earnest now, chasing his own release. But instead, he eases off just a little, moving the vibrator slightly off center of my clit to give me a second to recover. Then he starts to tease me with it again, working it around my little bundle of nerves as he fucks me with long, even strokes.

My ass is clenching around the butt plug, and if it weren't for the stopper at the end, I'm sure I would've dragged it even deeper inside my body. My pussy flutters around Aiden every time he bottoms out inside me, and as the vibrations from the small device in his hand push me toward another peak, I turn my head and bury my face in the chair cushion, biting my lower lip to stifle my breathless cries.

"Don't hold back," Aiden demands, gripping a fistful of my hair and lifting my face away from the pillow. "Let me fucking hear you. Every scream. Every gasp. Every whimper. I want them all, Rose. They're mine."

The sting in my scalp from the way he's tugging lightly on my hair joins the torrent of sensations ricocheting through me, overloading me with pleasure. He adjusts the vibrator on my clit, and I come again, a full throated scream pouring from my lips.

"Fuck, yes," he bites out. "Again. Give me one more, little dove."

He barely gives me a chance to recover this time before he's circling my clit with the vibrator again, dragging it over my soaked flesh until I feel like I might just combust instead of orgasming again. My body is worn out and

strung as tightly as a piano wire at the same time, and I shake from head to toe as something burns low in my belly.

The feeling expands outward, and I let out hiccupping sobs as I try to ride the wave of it, afraid that if I don't, it will swallow me up.

"Fuck, fuck," I chant, almost like I need to the word to ground me. "Aiden! Oh, god, I'm—"

I come again, but it's unlike anything I've ever felt before. That hot tension coiling low in my body releases, and I buck against Aiden as pleasure cracks through me like a whip. I'm vaguely aware of wetness seeping from me, leaking out from the place where he and I are connected with every stroke of his cock.

It trails down my thighs, and my cheeks flame as I realize I just... gushed.

Holy shit. That's never happened before.

"Fuck, Rose. God, yes, baby." Aiden groans, sounding tortured. "Soak my fucking dick."

Some of my embarrassment melts away at the obvious heat in his voice. As messy as we both are now, he clearly loved it. He switches the vibrator off and tosses it onto the chair, grabbing my hips with both hands to steady me as he drives into me hard and fast.

A few more choppy strokes, and he explodes inside me, the hot spurts of his cum joining the slick release that still drips from me. He drags himself in and out a few more times, slowly coming down from the high, then leans over me, pressing his forehead to my back.

"Fucking hell," he groans. "That was..."

"Better than anything that happened in my book," I finish for him.

He chuckles, slowly dragging his spent cock out of me. More wetness slips out and begins to trail down my thigh, and a sound rumbles in his chest as he reaches down, scoops some of it up with his fingers, and shoves it back inside me. Satisfaction fills his voice as he presses a kiss to my shoulder.

"Yes, it fucking was."

CHAPTER 25



On Saturday night, I walk up the steps of the large, beautiful building that houses Boston's ballet company with my arm looped through Aiden's, wearing a gown that fits like a glove.

The dress is more modest than the others I've worn to events with him, more appropriate for the ballet. But it still makes me feel beautiful, especially after seeing the way he couldn't tear his gaze away from me when he first saw me in it.

Aiden's hand is firm at the small of my back. His body is tilted toward mine. He angles himself to block me from view, block other people from approaching.

Protective. Possessive.

The place is incredible. The entryway has ornate gold mirrors so clear they're like windows. I catch a glimpse of myself as we pass through—the way my hair is pulled up into an intricate knot at the back of my head, the dangling silver earrings with winking gems by my neck. The dress is deep green, the neckline elegant and draping.

I look like I belong. It's the first time I've felt that way.

We take our seats without much conversation. From what I gather, the brothers had a busy day. They meet us there, their conversation slow and thin. I can tell they're all still affected by their mother's loss. This must be the first thing any of them have done since the funeral.

Violet is incredible. The charisma I saw in her at the gala is amplified on stage, especially as she's the centerpiece of the show.

I glance over at Aiden's brothers, curious, and find that they're watching with rapt attention. Even Finn is staring, though I can see him slide a hand

into his jacket for a flask. The sip he takes is small, so maybe that's progress.

I turn back to the ballet after a moment, losing myself in the beautiful movements and the haunting music. The show is long, but the time flies by, and when it ends, we all gather in the lobby to wait for Violet. Finn distractedly scans the crowd, a grin breaking out across his face when Violet comes around the corner.

"Hey!" Connor calls, catching her attention. He grins and waves her over. "Congratulations!"

She's already carrying a few bouquets. She smiles, her brown hair gleaming under the auditorium lighting, which brings out a few of the reddish highlights as well.

"Thanks," she says, smiling widely.

Each of the O'Reilly brothers and their cousins pull her in for a hug, pride clear on all of their faces.

"Congratulations," I say when it's finally my turn. "You were incredible." "Thanks. I'm glad you were able to come," Violet replies.

Her blue eyes dance as she looks at me, and the way Aiden is holding me close to him.

I feel oddly accomplished to have some kind of approval from her. I don't usually hang on anyone's approval, but it feels nice. Violet is like their sister. If she's happy about me sticking around, maybe things aren't that bad.

Lachlan says something about a bar, and in a whirl of movement, we're leaving. The crowd is still thick, but we navigate it well enough to escape in a few minutes.

The bar we end up at is fancy and dimly lit, with music playing in the background. As soon as we settle at a table in the back, a cocktail waitress comes to take our drink orders. Aiden and all of his brothers and cousins order whiskey, and I decide to join them, but to my surprise, Violet just asks for a sparkling water.

"You don't drink?" I ask, glancing over at her.

"Not often," she says, wrinkling her nose. "Not part of the diet!"

I shake my head. "I can't even imagine what lengths you must have to go to, to keep yourself in shape for what you do."

Finn speaks up, maybe overhearing us. His eyes flicker with amusement and he turns to lean in, like he's joining a secret club.

"You'd be surprised what lengths Violet goes to."

"Well, now I sound psycho," Violet says sarcastically, slapping his arm.

He arches a brow. "Oh. *Now* you do?"

"You're a dick."

He shrugs as if in agreement, and she laughs. The banter and easy conversation continues as our drinks arrive, and I can't stop glancing around the table, listening to them all. The closeness of the group is obvious, and despite the recent tragedy in their lives, everyone seems happier and more relaxed than I've seen them in a while.

They all needed a night like this, even Aiden. He sits with his hand on my knee, and I can't stop thinking about how warm it is.

"Remember when you told me ballet looked easy?" Violet asks slyly, gesturing at Connor with her glass of water.

Connor groans. "Hell, Violet—"

"You said it looked so easy, so I said fine. 'Try to do some, then.' I made you do the easiest move in the book."

Aiden chuckles. "Yes, you did."

"And he fell on his ass just trying to get into second position!"

Connor laughs. Despite his groaning, he clearly doesn't mind being given shit by Violet. I can't imagine what he would have done if it was someone else doing the teasing.

"I don't need second position," Connor says, waving a hand dismissively. "I have plenty of experience with the ones that matter."

Violet laughs even harder at that, and I join her.

As the evening wears on, I realize with a start that for the first time since I was forced into this engagement with Aiden, I don't feel like an outsider around him and his family.

I almost feel like... I belong.

It's a disconcerting thought, pleasant and strange at the same time.

Maybe, even though this isn't how I would've ever imagined it happening, I'm right where I'm meant to be.

CHAPTER 26



I feel like I've been sprinting through the weeks. I know it hasn't been all that long, but it feels like forever and a day at the same time.

And now, the day that's been hanging over me has finally arrived.

My wedding day.

The huge Catholic church where the funeral was held is apparently the family favorite. I stand alone in the small room that's been designated as my bridal suite, my hands twisting nervously together. There's a long mirror at one end, with a vanity and a smaller mirror to the left of it.

Hanging on two hooks at the back of the bathroom door are two separate dress bags.

Two...

Why two?

My brows draw together as I step toward the garment bags to look closer. There's a note stuck to the outside of the bag on the left, and I pull it off and read it quietly to myself, taking a seat by the mirror.

Rose,

I will be here today, no matter what it is you wear. I understand why you chose the dress you did. Why you chose red.

But I want you to know that I've always seen you this way—beautiful and perfect, even when I fucked up everything by trying to protect you.

This is your choice. Your decision.

Red or white, I'll take you as my wife.

Aiden

A lump forms in my throat, and I swallow hard. Then I set the note aside and stand up to unzip the bag on the right. The red dress. It's beautiful, but I

hesitate, wanting to at least see the other one.

When I open the other garment bag, my heart stops.

The dress is white, but more than that, it's the one I looked at and chose not to try on. The one I passed over because I didn't want to wear something I loved too much to this wedding. I told myself I would wear a dress I loved later, when I got away from Aiden. If anyone would still want me in the future, if whatever version of myself survived and escaped this arranged marriage would still be capable of love.

But now?

The dress sits peacefully in its protective garment bag, a perfect combination of vintage and new styles. It isn't fully white, the color a little closer to ivory, prettier than the blue-white tint of the other dresses I saw.

Biting my lip, I breathe in deeply, then exhale.

This is my choice.

One the one hand, it doesn't matter. They're just dresses, meant for an arranged marriage that was hastily planned and executed. But I know what it could mean if I choose something different for myself. If I choose my own path.

After hesitating for one more second, I pull the white dress off the hanger. It's the one I loved. The one I wanted.

I want to choose the future I saw for myself when I was young, when I trusted and loved Aiden. I want to acknowledge how close we've come to that moment in time over the past few weeks. We may not be teenagers anymore, we may be damaged and broken in many ways, but we're together now.

This white dress will symbolize a fresh start. A new beginning.

I don't want to cling to the anger and hurt of the past anymore. I'd prefer to let myself be happy, and to move forward.

There's a knock at the door a few moments after I finish dressing. I turn toward it, calling, "Come in!"

The door opens, and my father enters.

A pang stirs in my chest, a bone-deep ache that makes me swallow hard. He looks like he hasn't slept well, the lines around his eyes making him look tired.

"Hey, Dad," I murmur, stepping toward him. "Is everything set out there?"

"Yes. It's almost time." He nods stiffly, then hesitates for a moment

before saying, "I never meant for you to get mixed up in this."

Guilt is clear in his expression, and I shake my head, hating the way it seems to be eating him up inside. "It's okay, Dad. It's not your fault."

His mouth goes tight at the corners, his shoulders tensing. He looks like he might say something else, but then he just pulls me into a tight hug, holding me close.

"If you want out of this, I'll get you out," he whispers. "You can run. Now. I'll cover for you."

My heart lurches. I know what he's offering. If I leave, he'll pay the price for going back on his deal with the O'Reillys, and that won't be pretty. No matter how much Aiden seems to have softened toward me over the past weeks, I know he still doesn't like my father. I know how this kind of shit works in the mafia.

"No." I pull back, meeting my dad's gaze. "No, it's okay. Maybe this will be for the best. With our families bound together, maybe things will get better."

My father looks like he's not so sure about that, but he presses a kiss to my forehead, holding me against him for a long moment before finally stepping back.

"You're as brave and beautiful as your mother was," he murmurs. "She would've been proud of you."

"Thanks, Dad. I love you."

"I love you too."

I smile at him, feeling tears burn my eyes. He hesitates for another moment, then nods and leaves the room. I return to my preparations, working on my hair and makeup. Someone else knocks as I finish my eyelashes, the mascara wand in my hand trembling.

"Come in," I say, standing up.

Willow slips into the room, and I turn toward her, surprised. I knew she was invited to the wedding, but I didn't expect to see her back here. She looks just as strung out as ever, her cascading hair hiding the shadowed edges of her face.

She looks around the room as she comes in, tentative, like she thinks Dmitri is hiding in a corner, ready to haul her away.

It's horrifying. Disgusting, that she has to exist in this constant state of dread.

"Rose. I hope I'm not interrupting."

I glance around the empty room. "No. It's good to see you."

"You too." She smiles as she approaches me. "I have something for you." "Really?"

"Here."

She unclasps her hand and holds a necklace up. It's a thin silver chain with a pale blue stone at the end, dangling and flickering in the light.

My eyes widen. "Oh, wow."

"For luck," she says. "I wanted you to have it."

I wish I could tell Willow I don't need luck. I know Aiden will treat me well. He won't do to me what Dmitri has done to her.

But it's horrible to even think that. I can't tell her. I'm in a good situation, a lucky one, and Willow is living through a nightmare.

So I just take the necklace, giving her a quick hug as I say, "Thank you. It's beautiful. I'll be sure to wear it."

Willow smiles faintly as she pulls away. She steps toward the door, turning to look back at me once before she leaves.

Gazing at my reflection, I put on the necklace, watching the way the blue stone glints. It reminds me of Aiden's eyes, and that thought makes me smile.

Weeks ago, I looked forward to this day with nothing but dread. But now, as I stare at the bright blue stone and think of my husband-to-be, a smile spreads across my face.

It's almost time.

Aiden

There's been an electric sort of feeling in my veins all day, some unfamiliar energy vibrating through me.

The feeling intensifies as I walk down the aisle and stand by my brothers, facing the doors to the church as I wait. The world narrows to that door, the ornate wood and the building around it. It's all I can see.

I watch and wait. I almost don't hear anything else, don't see anyone else. Then the door opens, and Rose is there, her blonde hair pulled away from

her face, pinned into a knot near the base of her neck.

She chose the white dress.

She's fucking stunning in it, more beautiful than anything I've ever seen. She looks like she's floating down the aisle, the skirt silent behind her as she walks. Her gaze meets mine, and she doesn't look away.

I still hate her father. That hasn't changed. But as much as I hate him, I can't hate her. It's impossible.

I wanted her as vengeance on her father. I wanted this arrangement the way it is for the pain it would cause. I wanted it for all the worst reasons.

It's more than that, now.

This is more real than I ever imagined it would be.

Our vows are traditional, Irish Catholic. The handfasting comes next, and it's a blur that passes in the blink of an eye. I can't look away from Rose the entire time. The fucking Pope could walk in, and I wouldn't see him.

All my focus is on Rose.

My wife.

The only wife I will ever have, the woman I'll spend the rest of my life with.

I almost can't believe any of it is real.

Is this the woman I saw for the first time in years only weeks ago, sitting at her father's table, her eyes wide with surprise? The one who looked at me with shock? I saw the memories in her eyes that day, the hurt and hope. I saw everything crumble when I took her home with me. But now, it feels like we're rebuilding what once existed between us.

The priest drones on in a low voice, and I only tune back into what he's saying as he pronounces us husband and wife. I've barely heard his last few words, but I hear those as if they've been stamped onto my soul.

And I hear his next words clearly too.

"You may kiss the bride."

Before he's even finished speaking, I pull Rose into my arms and kiss her. It's different than before—not passionate or fiery, but a promise. It is a promise as deep as the ocean, as true as gravity. I kiss her until she's breathless, and I think there's applause from the gathered guests, but I don't fucking hear it.

In this moment, nothing else feels important. I'm not thinking about business or betrayal, deals or decisions. I'm here with Rose, her delicate body pressed against mine as I kiss her in a way that's far from appropriate for a church. I'm only thinking of her.

Because this is it for me.

She's it. My forever.

CHAPTER 27



I break away from Aiden, breathless, my mind whirling. My heart pounds against my chest, the hammering drowning out the sounds of the crowd.

Desire sparks in his eyes. My body is burning, flickering to life as I feel the same thing.

We're married. He's my husband.

Aiden turns, taking me by the arm. We walk down the aisle hand in hand as the gathered guests applaud.

"Come with me," he murmurs as we step through the large double doors that lead out of the nave.

There will be a reception afterward, but it will take a while for everyone to leave the church and gather for that, so I don't protest when Aiden tugs me toward the room where I got ready before the ceremony.

The red dress hangs in the corner, partly covered by its bag. I barely glance at it as Aiden pulls me into his arms.

"Fuck, you look so beautiful," he groans, his lips finding my neck.

"You clean up pretty good yourself," I shoot back with a grin, gasping as he lifts me up and sets me down on the vanity in the corner. His rough hands shove at my dress, pushing away layers of fabric to reach me.

"Maybe you should have chosen a different dress," I say, laughing breathlessly.

Aiden's gaze shoots up to meet mine, his eyes dark. "No. This one is perfect. But I'll rip it off you if I have to."

I shiver at the look in his eyes, and then my own eyes roll back as he finally pushes the heavy fabric out of the way enough to get what he wants. He kisses me as he sinks his fingers into me, and I groan against his mouth,

my nails digging into his shoulders.

"Aiden," I whimper, my hips jerking toward his hand.

He keeps me held in place, his lips ravenous on mine and his free hand on my thigh. My hips buck against his hand as he works to open me, fast and messy. I know we have to be fast if we want to make it to our own reception in time, but part of me doesn't care.

Aiden adds a third finger inside me, and I moan, my legs lifting farther, knees bent as I try to open myself wider for him.

"Come here," he growls.

Dragging his fingers out of me, he grips my waist and lifts me off the vanity, planting my feet on the floor before turning me around. He grabs my wrists, guiding my hands to the top of the small table.

My palms flatten on the smooth wood as he drops to his knees behind me, shoving my dress up around my waist. Tugging my panties aside, he buries his face between my legs from behind as I struggle to stay upright.

"Oh fuck!"

My legs wobble, and I grip the edges of the vanity, the wood biting into my palms.

He's never eaten me out from this angle before, and there's something about the feel of it that heightens my awareness of everything. It feels dirty and wrong and erotic as hell, all at the same time.

"You taste so fucking good, *wife*," Aiden grunts, gripping my back cheeks and spreading them wider apart to give him more access to my pussy and ass.

I whimper, bucking against him as the pleasure in my veins spikes and I come hard. It didn't even take five minutes, and he's got me shuddering and shaking.

"That's right. Come for me, little dove," he mutters, lapping at me and fucking me with his tongue until the last aftershocks finally fade from my system.

Then he surges to his feet, tearing my delicate panties off with one sharp tug. Aiden's hand slides across my neck, up toward my chin. He pulls it up, makes me look into the mirror as he thrusts into me without warning. I gasp, my heels rising off the floor.

I can see my eyes widen in the mirror, watch my mouth open into a circle of pleasure as he thrusts inside me. The fabric of my dress is bunched around my waist, the top just barely hanging on, my breasts threatening to spill out.

Reaching around, he shoves a hand under the fabric at my chest, rolling my nipple in his fingers.

"Fuck," I gasp, my hands curling tighter around the corners of the vanity as sparks dance in my vision.

Aiden's fingers dig into my breast, possessive and firm. He leans over and bites my neck before licking away the sting.

"Look at yourself," he rumbles. "I want you to watch."

"Aiden," I beg, unable to say anything else.

My face is red, cheeks flushed with color. My wedding dress is half off, a disorganized mess as it hangs out of place on my body, the layers of white shoved aside as Aiden fucks me from behind.

One of his hands is on my chest, grasping my breast and massaging it as he fucks me. His other hand is on my neck, fingers spread across it. He holds me like I'm his, and the sight of him makes me even wetter, makes my pussy clench around him like I can keep him inside me forever.

Suddenly, his pace changes. Aiden moves hard and slow, teasing me as I cling to the vanity.

"How do you look?" he demands. "Well fucked? Or do I need to do more?"

I can't say anything, wordless moans escaping my lips as he fucks me harder. I watch my chest bounce with the impact, watch Aiden's hand hold my chin in place. He puts his fingers in my mouth, and I pant around them.

When he finally withdraws his fingers, we both watch in the reflection as he slides that hand over my ass. He slips a finger into my tight back hole, then leans over me.

"I'll fuck you here too, one day. Soon. Do you want that, little dove? Want me to claim you? Fuck you like this, hard?"

"Yes," I breathe, barely more than a whisper, the sound low and hungry.

Almost as soon as the word is out of my mouth, I come hard again, my entire body contracting as I feel Aiden's cock pulse inside me, emptying every last drop.

"Fuck," he growls, driving his finger deeper along with his cock. "So good. So perfect."

I groan weakly as I drape against the table, sated and complete. After a long moment, he drags his finger out of my ass, making me hiss a breath. His cock leaves me next, and I feel empty as he steps back and grabs a tissue, wiping up some of the cum seeping from my core and tossing it away.

Then he helps me straighten. I let my skirt fall back down, pressing my hands over the fabric as I rearrange the top.

When I'm a bit more put back together, Aiden grips my chin between his thumb and forefinger, tilting my head up so my gaze meets his.

"I want you to go through the reception with no panties on, your pussy hot and wet," he murmurs. "Your thighs slick with arousal. Thinking about the next time your husband will be inside you."

All the breath leaves my lungs in a rush, and my core pulses needily. I nod, my heart thundering. I don't know why the things he says turn me on so fucking much, but there's something about his dominant possessiveness that never fails to get me wet.

With a satisfied smile, he kisses me once more and then leads me from the room.

Thankfully, we're only a little late to our own reception, and although I'm sure I look just as freshly fucked as Aiden said, no one comments on it.

"Congratulations," Lachlan says as he steps forward to greet us, his gaze shifting from me to Aiden. He's not as cold toward me as he used to be, although he's still hard to get a read on.

Connor is the loudest, as usual. He's cheerful, slapping Aiden on the shoulder and winking at me. "Do your best not to run him dry, eh? We need him in working condition."

I laugh, a flush creeping up my cheeks as Aiden smirks.

Finn raises a glass when he greets us. I don't know if he's drunk or not, but he seems lucid. He smiles, and it feels genuine.

"Good luck with the crowd," he says. Aiden takes his drink and polishes it off in one go.

I grin. "We'll manage."

The reception is a blur, a mix of business and pleasure as Aiden and I greet other Assembly members and guests. The night might be about Aiden and me, but everyone here is celebrating something different. I know some of them are celebrating the business arrangement. Others are celebrating the end of a struggle between families.

As the evening wears on, my eyes find Willow and Dmitri at the edge of the room. Willow is still in her pale dress, ghostly and almost nonexistent. I feel a pang of sorrow and guilt. She's stuck where she is, and I'm here, celebrating the best version of what she could have had.

She looks so fucking sad and beaten down. I don't know if I could even

help her, but I don't have time to wonder about that now. Someone else comes up to congratulate us, and I'm swept up in the celebration all over again.

The party lasts for hours, and through it all, Aiden never leaves my side.

CHAPTER 28



It's dark outside, the sky nearly black and the stars blinking overhead. I look out the window as we pull into the garage and wonder if the world is tilting or I am.

There wasn't much time to eat at the reception, but there were plenty of drinks passed into my hand. I'm just tipsy enough to be pleasantly drifting, the world fuzzy and soft.

Aiden walks around the back of the car, approaching me slowly, smiling. He looks fucking good. He discarded half of his suit at some point. All that's left now is a half-unbuttoned white shirt, tailored black pants, a thin cross on a chain around his neck. His sleeves are rolled up to his elbows, his tattoos inky black against the white shirt.

All I can think of is the last time he touched me in the dressing room at the church.

It's almost overwhelming how much I want him, how much I want this. I'm not thinking about how I got here, how this was supposed to be business. All I can think about is how we're going to spend the next few hours.

He grins, a half-smirk that looks good on him, and I barely have time to realize what's happening before he picks me up, one arm under my legs and the other at my back.

"Honoring old traditions never hurt," he says, his grin widening. "You prepared for this?"

I laugh, breathless. There's something impossibly sexy about the way he's holding me, and I already know what I want next.

"Yes. I'm ready."

Aiden carries me, pausing for just a moment at the door. I feel my heart

kick into overdrive as he steps over the threshold.

Once we're inside, he sets me down, and as soon as my feet touch the floor, he turns me around to face him and kisses me. I kiss him back, my body buzzing pleasantly, and let him guide me backward into the house.

When we reach the living room, Aiden slows as I come to stand before the couch. He pulls away from me after pressing a lingering kiss to my lips.

I chase his mouth with mine, wanting just one more kiss, one more taste. But he shakes his head before settling onto the chair behind him, leaving me standing before him. He reaches for a bottle that's been left out on the small table beside him, pouring himself a glass of whiskey and taking a sip.

With his gaze locked on me, the whiskey glass held loosely in his fingers, he lifts his chin.

"Why don't you strip for your husband?"

My stomach flutters, heat and nerves dancing through me. Just like back at the church when he called me *wife*, hearing him say *husband* does something to me.

I slowly undo the fastening at the back of my dress, then push it down, working it slowly over my hips.

Aiden takes another sip but he barely tips his glass, eyes fixed on me. The dress pools at my feet, and I step out, slowly unhooking my strapless bra and letting it fall to the floor.

I'm still not wearing underwear, so I'm already completely bare for him besides the necklace, my body on display for his hungry gaze.

"Touch yourself," he commands thickly. "Spread yourself open for me. I want to see."

My heart races even faster. I feel like it's not even beating, like I'm not breathing. I take a step around my dress and sit on the long couch across from Aiden.

I tilt my head back against the sofa and spread my legs.

There's something vulnerable about this. It makes me nervous but excited, the prospect of what I'm about to do making me giddy.

Slowly, I circle my clit, teasing a little. I'm wet as hell when I let a finger slide lower, and I let my breathing grow heavy, let my lungs fill so my chest rises and drops. I can see Aiden watching the way my breasts move, the way my fingers slip into my pussy. I wonder if he's imagining himself there.

I know I am.

Finally, I slip a finger in just a little, just enough for me to inhale sharply.

My eyelids flutter as I run my other hand along my thigh, imagining Aiden's hand there. I start to press harder, sliding deeper into my pussy. I gasp and move my other hand farther up my body, trailing up to my breast.

Aiden's eyes darken when I press that hand against my breast, my fingers brushing against my nipple. I add another finger inside, feeling how wet I am. I'm tilting my hips, moving to fill myself more.

"That's good," he praises, his voice a deep rasp. "You look so fucking gorgeous like this, Rose."

I moan a little and move my hand up to my neck. I can barely keep my eyes on Aiden, but I see the way he leans forward. I know he's thinking about his hand being where mine is, touching my neck, sliding against the skin there.

Aiden undoes his pants as he watches me. I wonder if he's about to touch himself and the thought somehow displeases me. I don't want him to feel anything right now that isn't me. I want to be the one who touches him, the one who gives him pleasure.

I slowly pull my fingers out of my pussy and rise from the couch, then drop to my knees in front of his chair.

"My turn," I whisper.

I press my tongue against his cock, taking in the earthy scent of his skin. God, *I want him inside me*.

Aiden inhales sharply, his hand pushing over the top of my head, fingers sliding through my hair. When I take his cock in my mouth and suck, his hand tightens. He pushes me down his shaft, and it's almost too fast, too intense all at once.

But it turns me on.

It's turning me on more than I expected, more than I've felt before. I let Aiden pull my hair, lifting and lowering me on his dick as I taste the salt of his skin. I can hear the sounds I'm making, the way I suck him off, the way I pop off the head of his cock to take a deep breath before diving down again.

"That's right, little dove," he grunts. "Take all of me."

His cock is hard as steel on my tongue. I imagine it inside me and I want to touch myself, but I keep my hands away from my pussy. I don't want anything but him inside me.

Aiden breathes harder and faster as I press my tongue against the base of his cock. I groan against him, and his hand clenches in my hair. I know he can feel the vibrations in my throat against his cock. I hold on to his body as I suck him off, my fingers digging in as I ground myself with his body.

"Fuck," he bites out. "Rose—"

I hollow my cheeks, moving faster of my own accord, desperate to feel that thread of his control break. After a few more heartbeats, Aiden comes hard, exploding down my throat as I try to breathe through my nose and swallow. My chest heaves, my heart pounding as I take it all in.

His hand tightens in my hair as he pulls me off, and I gasp when I lean back, licking my lips.

Aiden's eyes are dark as he watches me. "Stand up."

I rise on shaky legs as my husband reaches for the whiskey glass beside his chair. He tips it against me, right at my collarbone. The amber liquid spills down my front, and he follows it with his tongue, sucking at my skin until he gets down to my pussy. His tongue presses briefly against me before he switches our positions in a flash, spinning me around and pushing me back onto the plush chair where he was sitting.

As soon as my back hits the seat, his face is between my legs again.

"You still taste like me," he growls, a possessive heat in his voice. "Like cum and whiskey and arousal. My perfect little wife."

I gasp when Aiden works me open, his tongue and fingers pressing into me. The pleasure comes fast, my whole body euphoric as an orgasm fills me from head to toe. Finally, Aiden draws back, and I watch dizzily as he shoves off the rest of his clothes.

"Ride me," he demands, lifting me up again as he sits down on the chair, then tugging me onto his lap.

My knees brace on either side of his hips, and he groans as I rock against him. I'm still so fucking wet, so hungry for him. I need him inside me now.

"I wanna come again," I tell him, my words breathless. "I wanna come with you, Aiden. You want that?"

His hands slide over my thighs, digging into my ass as he guides me along.

"I told you what I wanted, didn't I? Will you let me? Let me fuck your ass and make you come that way? I want to watch. I want to hear you scream my name."

There's a flicker of nerves, an uncertain flip in my belly when he says it. But I know he won't hurt me, that he'll be careful.

And I want him.

"Yes," I whisper.

I grind against his cock as he uses his fingers to prepare me, using my own arousal as lube as he works to open me up.

The stretch is foreign. I've never felt something like this before. He works me slowly while I ride him, my clit rubbing against his cock. I can feel how hard he is, and I would barely believe he just finished in my mouth if I couldn't still taste him on my tongue. I know he'll come fast, and I will too.

When I whimper softly as sensations overwhelm me, Aiden kisses me, the gentleness of his lips a counterpoint to the way his fingers stretch me open.

"Shh," he murmurs. "Just trust me, little dove. I'll take care of you."

After slowly dragging his fingers from my ass, he lifts me, then brings me down to meet the crown of his cock. I feel his smooth head press against me slowly at first, then harder. He stretches me more than I expected, despite the preparation from his fingers, and I breathe heavily, my heart racing.

It hurts and feels good all at once, sensations overwhelming me.

"Big!" I gasp out. "You're too big."

"Not for you," he tells me, his voice low and certain. "Not for my wife. You were made to take me, little dove. In any hole I want."

The confidence in his tone grounds me somehow, and I nod, biting my lower lip as I try to relax my ass. "I can take you. *Fuuuck*."

I focus on breathing as Aiden fucks me, slow at first and then faster. I barely have the presence of mind to touch myself as he lifts me and brings me down again. I finger myself, pressing against my clit, and the pleasure that bursts through me makes me moan.

I do my best to keep up with his pace, playing with myself while he bucks his hips, driving up into my ass. I come hard like that, everything blinding white as I gasp against Aiden's neck. He follows me over the edge a moment later, groaning as he sinks into me one last time.

Wrung out and exhausted, I collapse against his chest, my face nestled against his neck.

Aiden's fingertips drift down my spine, and his lips brush the shell of my ear. The gesture is possessive and tender, and it sends goosebumps scattering over my skin.

"Can't... move..." I murmur sleepily, pressing a kiss to the warm skin of his neck.

He chuckles, the sound vibrating against my chest. "That's all right, little dove. I'll carry you upstairs. You're my wife now, and I'll always take care

of you."

The simple honesty in his voice makes my heart thud harder.

He means it.

This is the beginning of our forever. And for the first time in a long time, I'm hopeful about what the future might bring.

CHAPTER 29

Aiden

I can't remember the last time I had exactly what I wanted.

Since my father's death, everything has been focused on a singular goal —to rebuild our empire and to maintain our spot at the table in the Assembly. There was no time for anything else. No room for joy or pleasure.

But with Rose in my bed, with my ring on her finger, everything feels different.

In the days after our wedding, we can't keep our hands off each other. Those moments between us in the church before the reception, and even our first night as newlyweds were just a precursor. Just a fucking warmup.

I feel like my cock might give out, trying to get enough of her. Every time I see her, it makes me hungry for her all over again, and she seems to feel the same way. Every time I slip my fingers into her tight pussy, I find her wet for me, her body responding to me in ways I never imagined.

It's perfect.

She's perfect.

A few days after the wedding, my brothers appear at the door. They gave me a bit of time off, which I'm grateful for, but real life can never wait for long.

I lead them into the living room, walking past the kitchen where Rose is sitting at the table, drinking a glass of water. My brothers nod at her in passing, and she smiles somewhat stiffly, her gaze darting to me as if I'm her anchor when she's agitated. I like that, although I also want her to feel comfortable around my brothers. I hope that day will come soon.

"The Messinas are getting agitated," Lachlan says as we settle in the living room.

Connor grimaces. "I see we're getting right down to business, then."

Lachlan raises an eyebrow. "What else did you expect?"

I nod, breaking up the banter. "We have to deal with them sooner rather than later."

"Our alliance is already proving useful," my oldest brother continues. "We have a large shipment, and we have a new warehouse we'll store it for now."

"Well, that's good," I muse. "But the Messinas are..."

"Petty?" Finn interrupts, snorting.

"I was going to say 'particular'."

Connor chuckles. "That's very politic of you."

"He's not wrong," Lachlan says shortly. "They're already tense. Especially after the remark at our last meeting."

"Shit is tense at meetings," Connor agrees. "Trust is in short supply. I can't remember the last time things were so tense between everyone. The entire Assembly."

"Things could slip further," Finn says. "There's a grudge between the Volkovs and the Devil's Disciples, isn't there?"

"Territory breaches," Lachlan explains shortly. "Same as ever with them, but it's going on longer than it ever has. Something is changing."

"If it's changing, do we take a stance?" Connor asks. He frowns, cracking his knuckles. "I mean, it could work in our favor."

"No," I say. "It's not worth it. Not now."

"The Messinas already have issues with our spirit of cooperation," Lachlan says dryly. "We should stay neutral while we sort out our problem with them."

We spend another hour discussing the state of affairs and coming up with a plan for how to deal with Enzo Messina. Once we've made as much progress as we can for now, Lachlan nods, and my brothers all stand.

"We'll see you soon," Connor calls to Rose as I lead them back toward the door.

She rises from the kitchen table, giving him a small wave and a smile. "See you."

Lachlan gives me a nod as my brothers all file out the front door, heading toward his car. I nod back as Rose comes to stand at my side.

"You guys talked for a while. You must have a lot of work to do," Rose says as I close the door.

"I do," I agree. Then I pull her close to me, watching the way her eyes flare with desire. "But before that, I intend to fuck you."

Rose

My blood heats at the promise in Aiden's voice.

I know he's got a lot on his plate and a lot on his mind, but when he looks at me the way he is now, I feel like nothing else exists but the two of us. It's something I never expected out of this marriage, this union that I walked into grudgingly at first, before finally admitting to myself that it was something far more real than just a business transaction.

Memories of listening to the group of girls I hung out with on my college campus talk about the guys they were dating filter through my mind. I remember them venting about how they never felt like they came first, how their boyfriends always seemed distracted or never made time for them.

As I gaze up into Aiden's penetrating blue eyes, I realize in a rush that I can't relate to their complaints at all.

Things between me and this tattooed beast of a man have been like a rollercoaster at times, volatile and unpredictable, full of ups and downs that make my heart rush up into my throat and my head spin. But throughout it all, even when he was pretending to ignore me, I've always been keenly aware of his attention on me, as hot as the sun and as bright as a spotlight.

There's never been a moment when I haven't had his complete focus.

Never a moment when he hasn't had mine, even when I might've claimed otherwise.

"You intend to fuck me, huh?" I ask, my core already clenching in anticipation as I grin up at him. "Care to be more specific? What did you have in mind?"

His blue eyes seem to darken a shade as desire passes over his face. His jaw clenches, and he loops an arm around my waist, hauling me up against his body and holding me there. I go up onto my tiptoes, my chest pressed tightly to his as he drops his head to brush his lips over the shell of my ear.

"I want you spread out and naked on my bed. Legs splayed open for me. Gorgeous tits heaving as you try to remember how to breathe with my head between your thighs and three fingers stuffed inside you. I want to hear you moan. Then I want to hear you scream. And the only fucking thing you'll be screaming is my name."

The warmth of his breath teases my ear as he speaks, and he darts his tongue out to trace the shell of cartilage up at the top—but neither of those things are what makes goosebumps scatter across my skin.

No, it's the heated promise in his voice that does that. The knowledge that he means every single word he just said. That it wasn't just dirty talk, it was the absolute truth.

"I like the sound of that," I whisper back, curving my neck a little to nuzzle against his face.

"Good."

His voice drops to a lower register, and a second later, everything spins around me as he moves like lightning, wrapping his large hands around my waist and hefting me over his shoulder like I weigh nothing.

I barely have a second to orient myself before he's walking, his confident stride carrying us toward the stairs. One arm stays looped around me, keeping me in place on his shoulder, and I feel like I've gone back in time ten thousand years and found a real life caveman.

But even as I roll my eyes at him, I can't help the way arousal slicks my pussy lips, my clit pulsing lightly with every jostling footstep as he carries me up the stairs.

When he reaches the bedroom, he tosses me down on the bed, towering over me and watching as I sprawl out on the soft mattress. He palms his cock through his pants, but when I reach down to start tugging off my clothes, he releases himself and smacks my hand away.

"That's for me to do, wife," he growls, lingering on the last word as if it turns him on to say it. "I said I want you bare for me, and I intend to peel off every damn thing you're wearing."

He's already moving as he finishes speaking, and he wastes no time doing exactly what he said. Starting with my shirt and working his way down, he tugs off my clothes, only allowing me to help him by raising my arms or shifting my weight. His mouth follows the movement of his hands, laying hot, wet kisses all over my breasts, stomach, and thighs.

When he's got me completely naked just like he said he would, he undresses quickly himself, tossing his clothes away as he stares down at me. As soon as he's naked too, he settles between my legs, scraping his teeth

along the sensitive skin at my hip while his hands reach up to play with my breasts.

"These are so fucking perfect," he mutters, not bothering to lift his head as he gropes and massages them.

His fingers pluck at my nipples, pulling on them and tweaking them until they go diamond hard, and then he clamps them between two knuckles of each hand, making me hiss out a breath.

"So responsive," he groans.

His mouth and hands keep toying with me, devouring me thoroughly but so slowly that I think I might die from the anticipation. I'm starting to work my hips, grinding against him a little as he explores the outer edges of my pussy lips with his tongue, when the room spins around me again, just like it did downstairs.

I blink as everything comes back into focus again after the sudden movement, realizing that I'm now kneeling on the bed with Aiden beneath me.

Or, more specifically, Aiden's *face* beneath me.

He wraps his hands around my thighs, dragging his tongue up my slit in a long lick.

"I know what you want," he growls. "What you need."

Without waiting for an answer, he puts his mouth on me again, teasing my clit before dragging the flat of his tongue over me in a long, slow lick. It feels so good that for a second, I lose myself in it completely, grinding against him the way I was trying to do when I was lying on the bed and he was worshipping me.

Pleasure courses through me, and only belatedly do I realize that I'm about to smother him. I sit up a little, using my thigh muscles to hold myself above his face, and Aiden lets out an angry sounding growl.

"You were doing so good, little dove," he grunts. "Come the fuck back here. I wasn't done eating, so I need you to sit back down."

"But I—"

"Sit," he barks. "If I'm still breathing, that means you're hovering. I said sit."

A flash of stubbornness rises up inside me at the commanding tone of his voice. He just issued a challenge, and I've never been the type of girl to shy away from that. Letting my eyes drift closed, I allow myself to chase the pleasure his tongue is bringing me, settling back down and rolling my hips

against him as he laps at me.

"Fuck," I whimper as electric sparks of pleasure shoot through me.

Aiden groans something unintelligible, which I guess means I'm doing just what he wanted me to—smothering his face with my pussy.

He scrapes his teeth over me, sucking and licking and biting at my sensitive skin, until I'm openly grinding against him. My toes curl, my back arching as my heart rate picks up, and I let out a sobbing cry as I come on his face.

Using his grip on my hips and thighs, he lifts me up. I assume he's trying to give himself access to a bit of oxygen, so I'm surprised when he turns me around and then pulls me right back down on his face—only facing the other way this time.

"I'm still hungry," he murmurs gruffly. "But I want your mouth on me too."

God, yes.

He doesn't have to say more than that. I never particularly liked going down on guys before, but with Aiden, it's different. His cock is like a fucking work of art, long and thick and veiny. But more than that, it's the noises he makes and the way his control seems to hang by a thread when I put my mouth on him. *That's* what's so damn addictive.

Leaning forward, I brace one hand on the bed as I drape my body over Aiden's, wrapping my fist around his length and holding his cock still while I drag my tongue over the tip. Salty precum hits my taste buds, and I moan softly as Aiden grunts, his thighs tensing.

"Fuck yes. Like that, baby," he growls before he goes back to lapping at me, swirling his tongue over my swollen clit like he's trying to memorize me.

The pleasure building inside me urges me on, and I start to suck him in earnest, sliding my lips up and down his shaft as he eats me out. I'm already close to coming again, my body primed and ready for it as I whimper around his dick.

And then the world spins again.

This time, Aiden doesn't pick me up. Instead, he rolls us both to one side, switching our positions on the bed. My lips are still wrapped around his cock, his face buried between my thighs, but he's on top and I'm beneath him.

A spike of adrenaline shoots through me at the feel of his large body hovering over mine. From this angle, he'll be the one in control of how deep he goes, fucking my mouth as he licks my clit. Maybe he can feel the way I tense up, because he draws back for a moment, tilting his head to look down at me between the lines of our bodies.

"I won't give you more than you can take, little dove," he rasps. "Do you trust me?"

That's a complicated question, one I'm not sure I'm ready to answer with words right now. But I *do* know that I trust him to take care of me in this moment, to make this good for me even if it pushes the lines of what I thought I could handle.

So instead of saying anything, I just nod. And in case he didn't see that small movement, I lift my head off the bed, sliding my lips along the length of his cock until his crown hits the back of my throat.

I gag a little, trying to relax around him, and he curses.

"Fuck. Lie back, baby," he commands. "Put your head down and just relax. I'll take care of you."

Slowly, I back off, my lips gliding along his cock until just the rounded tip is left in my mouth. For a moment, Aiden stays like that, his mushroom head resting on the tip of my tongue as he eats me out with an almost feral hunger. He attacks my clit with his tongue and teeth, and as sharp bursts of pleasure start to make my breath come faster, he finally starts to fuck my mouth.

He goes slow at first, sliding in until I start to tense up and then drawing back again. As I relax my jaw and open wider for him, he starts to go faster and deeper. He hits the back of my throat, and I push down my gag reflex, swallowing around him before he drags himself back out.

"So good," he groans, his words muffled as he traces circles around my clit. "So fucking good for me. Let me in, Rose."

And I do, allowing him to take whatever he wants from me as he gives me pleasure right back, creating an endless loop between us. My fingers dig into his muscled ass cheeks, urging him to go harder, faster, as he thrusts in and out of my mouth.

I let out a strangled noise as he closes his lips around my clit and sucks hard, sending sensations rocketing through me. My body shakes as my muscles all go rigid, and then, like a rubber band snapping, another orgasm breaks through me.

My body bucks beneath Aiden's large form, a scream vibrating around his cock as my fingernails gouge crescent shaped marks in his ass.

"Goddamn. You come so fucking well," Aiden growls, keeping up his

almost vicious assault on my clit until the pleasure finally peaks and then begins to recede.

Precum coats my tongue, and from the way he's getting harder in my mouth, I can tell he's close to following me over the edge. But rather than burying himself between my lips and coming down my throat, he draws back with a tortured sounding groan.

"I want to fill you up," he mutters, switching positions again so that he's hovering over me with his hips settled between my thighs, his mouth poised above my face instead of my pussy. "Want to feel you take my cum."

I nod wildly, pulling him down into a messy kiss as he notches his cock at my sopping entrance and drives into me, stretching me out and filling me up in a single hard thrust.

The burn of accommodating his massive size is eased by how wet I am, and I kiss him harder as my body scrambles to adjust to the sudden intrusion. Our kiss is tinged with the taste of both his arousal and mine, and the flavor is like a pure, filthy aphrodisiac, making me moan into his mouth.

"Won't last long," he grunts when our lips finally break apart, resting his forehead against mine as he fucks me hard and deep. "Can't. Oh fuck. Oh... *fuck*."

His thrusts take on an almost frenzied power, the bed rocking beneath us and the headboard slapping against the wall as he fucks me into the mattress. There's nothing I can do but hold on, arching against him as he finally buries himself inside me, drawing back and slamming in a few more times as his cock pulses out his release.

My arms wrap around his shoulders as he rests against me, his lips moving lazily over my shoulder and neck. We're both breathing hard, and the air is full of the scent of sex.

"So *that's* what you had in mind," I say, grinning up at the ceiling as I trail my fingertips over the tattoos that grace his shoulders and upper back.

"Believe me," Aiden groans, his voice the kind of deep gravel that goes right to my clit, "when it comes to my wife, there are so many things I have in mind that it would be impossible for me to do them all in this lifetime."

I squeeze around him, relishing his reaction and the way his body tenses up all over again in response. "I like the sound of that."

"Good. Because I'm not done."

I'm about to ask him what he means by that, since even though he's got an impressive recovery time, I can tell that his cock is spent for the moment, slowly softening inside me. But before I can say anything, he pulls out, moving down my body and pushing my legs open until he's settled between them again.

My head shoots off the bed as I feel his tongue nudge my clit, my eyes flying wide open.

"What are you doing?" I gasp.

"What do you think?" Aiden drags his tongue over my clit again, making it throb harder.

"But..." I flush, biting my lip. It takes a lot to get me flustered, but Aiden lapping at my pussy while his cum leaks out of me definitely has my cheeks heating. "You just came. I didn't think you'd want to—"

"—go down on my wife? Find out how she tastes when she's been stuffed full of my cum? Why the fuck would you think I wouldn't want that?"

As if to prove his point, he trails his tongue lower, delving it inside me before returning to my clit. I moan, tossing my head back and forth as my oversensitive nerve endings scream with awareness.

Aiden keeps going, working me up again as my hands fist the sheets. It doesn't take him long at all to send me crashing over the edge, and I let go of the blankets to grab on to his hair instead as I come once more.

"Oh, god!" I gasp, the words yanked forcibly from me. "Fuck, Aiden!"

He growls and keeps working my clit, making sure he's wrung every last bit of shuddering pleasure from me before he finally stops. I've gotten so lost in the connection between us that I've forgotten my earlier embarrassment, but the reality of what Aiden just did strikes me all over again when he dips his tongue into my soaked pussy, gathering our combined releases.

Crawling up my body, he palms the back of my head and lifts it off the mattress as he kisses me, transferring our cum to my mouth as his tongue strokes against mine.

My entire body burns, heat blooming through my veins as I reach up to cling to Aiden.

If I thought him carrying me up the stairs on his shoulder was caveman like, this is a hundred times more so, a gesture so possessive and dominant that it makes my heart skip a beat.

It's filthy.

It's raw.

It's perfect.

CHAPTER 30



Two weeks have passed since my wedding day. Aiden is back at work, back to doing whatever it is he did before I came into his life again.

He's told me he would love to stay home and fuck me every minute of every day, but it's just not possible. I know what he means. Life has a way of making itself known, and it pushes everything else to the side.

I don't mind all that much. I like life, like the plans and goals I had before everything was derailed. But it doesn't feel like they're gone anymore.

It feels more like I took a roundabout path.

I wake up on Saturday morning to find Aiden awake, propped up against the pillows. He looks down at me as I blink up at him, his eyes soft.

"I'm taking you somewhere today," he tells me, his voice still rough from sleep.

"Okay."

After we both shower and dress and grab a quick bite to eat, he leads me out to the car with a hand at my lower back. We drive through the streets of Boston until we reach a museum.

A thrill of excitement overcomes me, met by a soft ache in my heart. He brought me here because he knows I want to be a curator. He must have known about this place and wanted to share it with me.

It feels like when I was in college, walking through art museums alone, imagining myself there. Somehow, it's more special now. It feels closer.

"Oh, god," I say as we walk in. It's gorgeous.

The entry has two curving staircases on either side, white stone and gold details. There are pale, cream colored drapes hanging over the high doorways, announcing a new exhibit.

Aiden stops at the coffee shop on the bottom floor, and we walk with our drinks through the halls. I can't stop looking at everything. It's like eye candy to me.

"This one is pre-Raphaelite," I say. We're standing in front of a painting with pink flowers, the color soft. There are people in the image, one nearly buried in flowers. "Alma-Tadema. When he was a student, they told him he was terrible at rendering marble. So, he spent his career becoming good at it. He became known for how well he could paint marble."

We keep winding through the halls. I talk about pieces I recognize and Aiden listens intently, his hand on the small of my back, his eyes roving over the art we stop in front of.

I tell him about the marble statues and the way they were repaired. I tell him about Waterhouse and symbolism, about the pigments used in a specific landscape and the way the study for another painting was almost as famous as the finished piece.

This is like a home to me, like a church. It's where everything I love is, one place where the world is quiet and perfect and full of history. Full of beauty.

It's more than just beauty, though. It's the stories. I know about the artists, their loves, their struggles. It makes the art special.

Aiden is listening to me go on and on, and I can't help but laugh.

"I never knew you loved art so much," I say, pausing to take a sip of my cold coffee.

He tilts his head. "I don't know much about it, actually. But I do love hearing you talk about it."

I pause, surprised. I don't know what to say. My mouth moves, but nothing comes out. What do I say? How do I even respond to that?

Aiden nods to himself, almost not watching me.

"I love how much you know. How excited you get."

Suddenly, I remember the ballet. I remember the way I laughed about the O'Reilly brothers going in the first place. I remember feeling guilty for being so judgmental.

But I think I missed the point.

It's not that they all love ballet, or that Aiden loves art. It's that Aiden and his family are so dedicated to the people they love. They went because they love Violet, because they wanted to support her.

Aiden is here for me. Because I love art.

And he loves me.

We haven't said that word yet. It hovers on the tip of my tongue, full of potential. I know it's backward to marry before saying *I love you*, know it would make some of my friends in college gasp. I've never been someone to get carried away with a man, carried away at all. It's not me.

But our relationship has never been conventional. This isn't the strangest thing about us.

So maybe it's fine.

I haven't said it yet, but I can feel it happening. I'm falling for him.

Aiden

As we walk out of the museum, Rose turns to look up at me.

"It's my turn," she says, smiling. "I want to take you somewhere."

I'm surprised. I can't imagine where it might be, what she might have in mind, but I nod anyway. "All right."

We get in the car, and Rose directs me, turn after turn. I recognize where we're going, but it doesn't click until I pull off the road, parking just beside the underpass.

We used to come here when we were in high school. When it was just the two of us. This is where the spark of our connection became so much more.

Rose takes my hand and we walk beneath the underpass, navigating the cement and grass. It's the same as it ever was. Time hasn't moved here, and it feels like walking into the past. I wonder if I could just reach out and stop my younger self, what we'd be like now.

Would we have married after high school? How much more time would we have?

I stop Rose when we're beneath the underpass, pressing her gently back against the stone wall as I tuck her hair behind her ear.

"We were here, once," I murmur.

Her eyes are locked on mine. "We were."

Something heavy and meaningful passes between us, and I lean in closer to Rose to whisper in her ear.

"I'm not just here for this moment, or the next," I breathe. "I am here for

the future, and I want you as long as you'll have me. Always."

Rose's hands curl into the front of my shirt. She tilts her head, and I drop my head to kiss her. It's slow and deep, filled with all the memories of our past and all the hopes we have for the future. Her lips are soft and warm, and I'm certain I could kiss her like this every day for the rest of my life.

Rose breaks away suddenly, gasping for breath. When she looks up at me, there's something searching in her gaze.

"How do you always do this to me? How do you know what I need? What I want?"

"Because I know you," I say simply. "You're mine."

Rose's eyes are locked on mine, shining with something deep and warm. Her small hands grip my shirt, tightening around the fabric as she nods.

"You're right. I am."

I pull her way from the wall. I want to stay here, but I know if I do, we'll end up doing something I don't want to do right here. The words that just came out of her mouth, the acknowledgement of the connection between us, echo in my mind, making me desperate to get her home so I can fuck her again.

"Come on," I say, pulling away from her and taking her hand.

She doesn't resist as I lead her to the car, and I wonder if she feels even a fraction of the urgency and desperation I feel. Already, I'm wondering why we had to leave the underpass, why I couldn't have just pushed her up against the wall and fucked her there. Never mind that we could've been caught and arrested for public indecency.

Right now, it feels like that would've been a risk worth taking.

Neither of us speaks as I lead her toward my car. When we reach it, I hold her door open for her, allowing her to slide gracefully into the front passenger seat. Then I walk around to the other side and climb into the driver's seat.

I slam my door closed, and as soon as it shuts, Rose leans over the center console toward me, her lips seeking mine.

Hmm. So maybe she does feel the same kind of desperation I do.

Satisfaction blazes through me at that thought, but still, I reach up to cup Rose's delicate face, framing her jaw with my hands as I stop her and hold her in place several inches from my face.

"What are you doing?" she asks, her brows furrowing. "I was just going to—"

"I know what you were doing, little dove," I say, clenching my jaw as

desire surges through me. "It's the same thing I wanted to do back there beneath the underpass. And it's the exact reason I brought you back to the car. My control is hanging on by a thread, and if you kiss me—if you even *touch* me—I'm going to fuck you right now."

Her breath hitches. I can feel the way her jaw goes slack under my palms, and my cock rages against the constraint of my pants as it stiffens and throbs. For a moment, her wide green eyes stay locked on mine, her entire body going completely still, like a prey animal that's suddenly realized it's standing exposed on a barren plain.

Then something shifts in her expression.

Although her eyes are wide, her breath coming faster, she no longer looks like prey at all as she reaches across the small space that separates us.

There's no fear in her. No uncertainty.

Just pure, unfettered desire.

Watching me carefully with a smile tugging at the corners of her lips, she brushes her fingertips lightly over my clothed cock. The gesture is almost teasing, but her expression is serious—and I was absolutely fucking serious when I warned her what the consequences of that would be.

With a rough growl, I shove her hand away from my crotch, then lean over and loop one arm around her waist, hauling her over the center console and depositing her on my lap. It's a bit of a tight fit, so I reach down with one hand to slide the driver's seat back, wrapping the other hand around Rose's hair and tugging her head back.

"I fucking warned you, didn't I?" I growl, banding my other arm around her and pulling her close against my body. "You should know by now that I don't joke around. And I never make idle threats."

"You've told me that before," she shoots back with a grin, spreading her legs a little on the seat so she sinks down onto me a bit more. "But maybe I don't want your threat to be idle."

The full meaning of what she's saying registers in my mind in a flash, and I crush my lips to hers. Releasing my grip on her hair, I slide my hand down her body, groping possessively at her tits before dropping my palm to her thigh and sliding it up under her skirt.

My fingertips trail over her smooth skin, arousal burning in my veins. When I reach the spot at the apex of her thighs, my hand freezes, my jaw clenching.

"You're not wearing any panties, little dove," I say, my voice such a low

rasp that I barely recognize it. "Have you been like this all day?"

"Yes." She licks her lips, her pupils expanding as I slowly drag one finger through her wet folds.

"And have you been wet for me all day?" I demand, dipping my finger inside her to gather some of her slick arousal.

"Yes," she breathes, her head tipping back and her small breasts pressing against my chest as she rolls her hips against my hand.

"Have you been craving this ever since we got out of bed?"

I plunge my finger deeper inside her as I speak, curling it to tease her gspot before drawing it out and circling her clit.

"Fuck, Aiden!" She cries out, her inner walls clamping around my finger so tightly that it makes me groan.

"Oh, we're getting to that," I promise darkly. "There's no fucking way you're leaving this car without coming all over my cock. Goddamn. If I had known you weren't wearing any panties, I would've pressed you up against the wall of the art museum and fucked you right next to one of those fancy paintings you love so much."

She's riding my hand now, sliding up and down on my finger, and part of me wants to just make her come over and over like this. To feel her coat my entire fucking hand in her release as I make her squirt like she did that time in my library.

But whatever else I may be, I'm a man of my word. And I told Rose exactly what would happen if she teased me and pushed me too far. She teased me on purpose, playing with fire like a goddamn pyromaniac hoping to get burned.

And if we're about to go up in flames, then I want us to do it together.

I keep fucking her with one finger and then two, pushing her right up to the edge of her release. When she starts to shake, her lips quivering against mine as she kisses me, I slide them out of her tight pussy. Pulling my hand out from beneath her skirt, I offer her my fingers, gazing down at her face intently.

"Suck," I command.

She obeys immediately, wrapping her lips around my fingers and swirling her tongue over them, reminding me how fucking good she is with her mouth.

"That's right, baby," I growl, lifting my hips to grind against her again. "You like how you taste, huh? I don't blame you. Your cream is the sweetest

fucking thing I've ever tasted."

She whimpers, undulating against me, riding my cock through the barrier that separates us and smearing her wetness all over the front of my pants as she does. I can feel her arousal soaking into the fabric, and it demolishes whatever shreds of self-control I have left.

"Get my cock out," I demand, still holding my fingers in her mouth.

Her teeth scrape over my knuckles as she reaches down between us, fumbling quickly with the button and fly of my pants. She tugs my zipper down, and I choke out a grunt as she reaches beneath the waistband of my boxer briefs and wraps her delicate fingers around my throbbing shaft.

"Just like that," I encourage, dragging my fingers out from between her lips and gripping her jaw. "You didn't wear panties, because you wanted to be ready for my cock, is that it? You wanted to make it as easy as possible for me to fuck you. Anywhere I want to. Any way I want to. Yeah?"

"Yes..."

She closes her eyes, her hand tightening around me.

"Then get on my dick, baby girl," I murmur, before kissing her hard.

Her lips move against mine, little mewls and whimpers pouring into my mouth as our tongues slide together. She rises up, lifting her skirt a little so that it covers both of our laps, and then angling my cock so that the tip of it nudges her entrance. She sinks down slowly, working herself open on my shaft, taking me deeper each time she lifts up and drops her hips again.

When I'm almost fully buried inside her, she slams her hips down the rest of the way, gasping at what's probably a mixture of pleasure and pain. The sound goes right to my goddamn balls, making them draw up tight, and I rest my forehead against hers, doing my best not to blow my load right here and now.

"You feel so fucking good," I rasp. "Never felt anything better than this." "Me neither," she whispers back.

Our foreheads stay pressed together, our breaths colliding and our noses brushing as I grab her ass with both hands, dragging her up and down on my cock. There's not enough room for her to ride me hard, but the way my dick stays mostly buried in her wet heat as she clenches drives me fucking crazy.

She lets out soft, plaintive noises, and I can tell she's getting close when she drops her head, burying her face in my neck as her inner walls clamp tight around my cock like a damn vise.

"Fuck, yes." My fingers dig deeper into her ass cheeks, my shaft pulsing

angrily as I grit my teeth, trying to hold on for a few more seconds. "Fuck."

"Aiden!"

She half whispers and half screams my name, the word muffled against my skin, her whole body locking up as I impale her as deeply as I can. My stomach clenches as I fill her up with my cum, grinding against her as my cock throbs.

I empty myself completely, and even after I've given her everything I have, I don't let go of my hold on her. My arms wrap around her again, keeping her pressed to me, all delicate softness to my hardness.

When she lifts her head from the crook of my neck, her cheeks are flushed, her pupils still so large that they nearly overwhelm the green of her irises.

She looks like a fucking goddess.

Like the kind of angel that brings out the devil in men like me.

She looks freshly fucked and wild.

But most of all, she looks like *mine*.

"You're going to sit with my cum in your sweet little pussy all the way home," I tell her, not bothering to hide the possessiveness in my voice. "And as soon as we get back, I'm going to fuck you properly. There's not enough room to maneuver in this goddamn car."

"I don't know." She grins, her eyes dancing. "I thought we managed it pretty well."

The teasing tone of her voice makes me grin too, even though I meant what I said. I couldn't resist taking her right now, but as satisfying as it was, I want the luxury of more space so that I can undress her and take my time devouring every inch of her before I make her come again.

Lifting her up with a firm grip on her hips, I help her clamber back across the middle console and settle into the passenger seat, taking a kind of savage pride in the knowledge that my cum and hers are smearing over her inner thighs as she sits down and buckles her seatbelt.

She glances over to find me watching her like a hungry wolf, and instead of shrinking away or turning cold like she once would've, she leans over and kisses me, soft and light and so fucking tempting.

I like her like this. So open and easy.

It's as if we've both finally come around to the idea that we truly are going to be together no matter what. Every step we took away from each

other just led us around a circular path that brought us right back to each other.

Everything feels right now that Rose isn't denying what she feels and I'm not pretending I hate her. We're past fighting this, because there's nothing to fight. This thing between us? It's *real*.

I know it's real when we get home and I kiss her, pushing her against the front door as I taste the skin of her neck. I know it's real when I trace her body as I undress her, guiding us through doors and over steps as we make our way upstairs.

I know we're meant to be when Rose pulls me onto the bed and we don't leave for the next few hours.

It's still unbelievable how much has changed. Hours later, I listen to her even breathing as we relax in the sheets, and I think about how much we've gone through to get here.

I'm falling in love with her.

Seeing Rose in my space has only made me realize how much I want her to be here, always. She's smart but stubborn, beautiful and sexy at the same time. She's everything I could ever want in a woman.

The sky outside is almost dark, though, and I know I have to leave. As much as I want to spend every minute with my new wife, there's business waiting for me.

I leave her in bed as she dozes lightly and head to Tír na Nóg. I know if everything is sorted with the Messinas, I'll have more time for Rose. For our future. There's so much I want to do, so much I want for us.

As I step into the club, the pulsing music rises to greet me. The strippers are at work already, some of the drunk men by the booths cheering them on. I don't pay much attention to any of the people beneath the neon lights as I walk, only glancing over the crowd enough to pick up a problem if I see one.

It's a typical night. It feels like a while since I've been here.

I figure I can settle in to do some work in the back, so I shut the door and try to focus. The faster I'm done, the sooner I get to see Rose, but I'm not rushing anything. Good work means a strong family.

Less than an hour passes, and I'm going over a spreadsheet when my phone rings. Connor's name flashes on the screen as I lift it to my ear.

"Connor? What is it? Are you at the—"

"Aiden!"

He's out of breath. I sit up straighter, my pulse already kicking into high

gear as the tone of his voice sets off alarm bells in my head.

"Aiden," he repeats, grunting as if in pain. "There was an attack on the warehouse. It's bad."

CHAPTER 31

Aiden

I leap out of my seat. I can hear Connor panting on the other end of the line, his breath ragged. My mind races, my chest tight with anger and worry.

What the fuck?

"We'll be right there," I say. "Hold tight."

There's no time to think. I hang up and then send a distress message to Lachlan and Finn, and they meet me outside a moment later.

"What the fuck is happening?" Finn asks, ducking into the car as Lachlan gets behind the wheel. He barely shuts the door as Lachlan peels away from the curb in a blink and we speed away from the club, street lights flashing by while we race to the warehouse.

"I don't know," I say shortly. "Got a call from Connor. He said there was an attack at the warehouse."

My entire body is tense, my pulse drumming a harsh beat in my ears.

What the fuck *is* happening?

There are a thousand things that could have happened in the time since Connor called. Even before that, I don't know what led to this apparent attack. Is it still happening? Was it large? Small?

Was it a bomb, or people?

I can't think of a reason for anyone to hit the warehouse, no matter how I rack my brain. No one but our people even knows about it.

So, what is this?

We race through the streets of Boston, and after a few moments, the building comes into sight on the horizon. I can hear the leather creak as all of us collectively lean forward in our seats, desperately trying to get a better view of what's happening.

It's not on fire, so that's good.

Lachlan stops just short of the building. Finn is halfway out before the car even parks, his gun drawn. Lachlan slides out after him, his own weapon in his hand as he scans the dark building.

Suddenly, I catch sight of Connor in the distance, stumbling a little. He looks like shit. He's weaving away from the warehouse door, one hand on the wall to keep himself steady.

"Fuck. What happened?" I demand.

Rage heats my blood as I step forward to meet him, Lachlan and Finn covering me. I wrap an arm around him, half dragging him to the car before I deposit him into the backseat, keeping the door open to shield us as I crouch in front of him. He slumps against the seat, still out of breath, his brow furrowed.

"What happened?" I ask again.

Connor winces. "Came to check on our stock, just like you asked me to. I brought a couple men with me, but just as we were wrapping up, someone opened fire on us. They took down Vince and Michael. We shot back, but they were too fucking fast. They got a jump on us."

He trails off, his eyelids drooping.

"Don't shut your eyes," I say sharply, snapping my fingers in front of his face. He blinks, his gaze wandering before it locks on me.

"Don't yell at me."

"I'm not fuckin' yelling. Can you hear?"

"Ringing in my ears," he mutters. "Annoying."

"Shit." I press my fingers against his jaw, turning his head to look. There's some blood by his ear, but I don't think it's damaged. It looks like he was grazed by something.

"Did you get hit?"

"From behind. Coward bastard."

Connor winces, and I lean back, looking around the door. Finn and Lachlan are sweeping the area, looking for any sign of the attackers.

"It's clear," Lachlan finally announces, stepping back toward us. "They're gone. Two of ours dead, but no sign of anyone else."

"This should never have happened," I growl.

Lachlan shoves his hair back from his face. It doesn't hold. Strands fall over his forehead, framing his eyes as they glint like emeralds.

"Damn right it shouldn't have," he says, his voice rough and low. "No

one knew we were using this warehouse."

"What the fuck was this about?" Finn snaps. "How did they know? Did they know Connor was here? Was this a deliberate attack on him?"

Fuck. If that's the case, this just got a hell of a lot more serious.

The Assembly isn't made up of angels. When the separate families or criminal organizations have disagreements, they go after each other from time to time. But they're usually all low-level attacks, shit between sellers and buyers. Small businesses vandalized, some lackey's family threatened. A well-placed symbol. Money lost.

This is not that.

This is huge. Killing Connor would be a major hit. No one in their right mind would do this to a family in the Assembly. No family would do it to one another.

Our father was an exception. One that never should have been made.

Whoever did this, it has to be someone with nothing to lose. Someone who doesn't give a shit about the rules.

Dmitri wouldn't pull shit like this, as much as I hate the fucker. He's the head of his family. If he were caught doing this, he'd be killed. The Assembly would take pleasure in it. He would die, leaving his family syndicate broken for good. Willow's so strung out, she couldn't lead them if she wanted to.

So it's not him. But who else could possibly have something to gain by nearly killing Connor?

My jaw clenches as a name burns into my mind. A name that's haunted me ever since my father's death.

Antonio fucking Donovan.

Rose

Aiden is gone for the night. I'm alone in the bathroom where I've been for the past ten minutes, pacing back and forth between the sink, bathtub, and door. I haven't done anything yet. I can't. My stomach is doing somersaults. I bite my lip, worrying at it with my teeth, then force myself to let go and take a deep breath.

Reaching into my purse, I pull out the pregnancy test I bought earlier, when we were out together and I had a moment to myself. I've had a growing suspicion and I need to confirm it.

I've been on the pill, but I know nothing is one hundred percent effective —especially considering how much sex we've been having.

Trying to keep my breathing steady, I pee on the stick and then set the test on the counter. I set the timer on my phone, but even though I know it hasn't been long enough, I keep glancing over at the little plastic stick.

Could I really be pregnant? How will I feel about it if I am?

I don't know if we're ready for a family yet. Our relationship is just finding its way onto solid footing, and I don't know what a baby will mean for that.

How will Aiden feel? Should I have waited for him to be here when I took the test?

My churning thoughts are interrupted by the alarm on my phone, and I jump, startled. Then I peer down at the little window in the plastic test, and my heart skips a beat.

It's positive.

I'm pregnant.

Aiden and I are going to have a baby.

I press a hand to my mouth, letting out a sob and then a laugh. I don't know what this mix of emotions in me is, so many feelings rushing through me at once that I can barely process all of them. I rest a hand on my stomach, placing it over my lower belly as I imagine myself growing round and pregnant.

An image appears in my mind's eye, vivid and bright. For just a moment, I feel as if I can see the future. I imagine having a little baby, raising him or her with Aiden, and all the beautiful moments that would come with that.

Oh my god, I want that. So much.

A wave of happiness floods me, and I'm lost in that vision when something thuds downstairs. It startles me out of my fantasy, and I almost drop the test.

Aiden. He's home.

Dropping the test onto the counter, I whirl toward the door. My heart races as I dash out of the bathroom, only remembering to slow down when I

reach the bedroom. I need to stay calm.

The grin on my face stretches so wide that I know I'm going to give the surprise away before I can even set him up for it.

God, I can't wait to see the look on his face. I can't wait to see what he says, what he thinks. I wonder if he'll keep it a secret or if we'll tell everyone. Will we have a party? Will I walk through the halls of his house with him, deciding what room will eventually be repainted and furnished to become a nursery?

I'm almost all the way down the steps when Aiden comes into view, and I stop short before I reach the bottom of the stairs.

His eyes are dark, anger and agitation lingering on his features, his hair wild as if he's been running his hand through it.

The wild pounding of my heart turns from elation to worry, my stomach clenching as I meet his gaze. I don't know what's happened to make him look like this, but whatever it is, it's bad.

Something is very wrong.

"What is it?" I ask.

"There was an attack." His voice is low. "Two of our men were killed, and Connor almost died too. Bullet grazed him, but didn't hit."

"Oh my god!" My mouth drops open, my hand flying to my chest. "Are you all right? Were you there—"

I move quickly down the last few steps, about to walk toward Aiden, but he takes a step back, holding a hand up as if he's warding me off.

"Have you talked to your father recently?" he asks.

My brow furrows. I still feel like I'm playing catchup, my mind reeling as I try to process the instantaneous shift from excitement to worry in the past few moments. "Um, not that recently. Why?"

"Did he ever ask you about the warehouse my brothers and I talked about that day they came over? After the wedding. You were in the kitchen, so I know you could've heard us talking."

I blink, shaking my head. "What are you talking about?"

"Did your father tell you to spy on us? Did he ask you to find out what we were planning and report back to him?"

"No." I run a hand through my hair, tugging at the light strands as I gaze at Aiden with confusion. "Why would you think that? I know you've never liked him, but—"

"Why do I think it?" Aiden laughs harshly, his features contorting with

anger. "I think it because your father has gone after my family before. Because he *killed* my father. Ambushed him like a fucking coward and burned his body afterward, trying to cover his tracks. Because he's a liar and manipulator. That's why."

My jaw drops open, all the breath seeming to leave my lungs in a rush. I feel like I've been punched in the chest, as if the words Aiden just said have slammed into me like a physical force.

What the fuck is he talking about?

"No." I shake my head again, letting out a breathless, disbelieving laugh. "No, that's not true. He would never—"

"Of course it's fucking true," Aiden growls, his harsh voice rising over mine. "Goddammit. I shouldn't have kept it from you. Shouldn't have tried to spare you from learning what kind of man your father really is. He's a fucking snake. He's probably been trying to play you against me this whole time. Taking advantage of the fact that I've fallen in love with you. Using you like a goddamn pawn."

Something about his words pierces my heart like a knife, and I stumble back a step, my throat going tight.

"I'm no one's pawn," I say, my voice shaking. "I'm my own person. And you're wrong about my father."

Aiden scoffs, anger turning his eyes ice cold. "You're a fool if you think that."

"I was a fool for thinking a lot of things," I shoot back, clenching my hands.

My pulse is racing, my stomach twisting over and over around itself as if I swallowed live snakes. Something hot and acidic is burning up the back of my throat, and I feel like the walls are closing in around us.

I can't be here.

I can't be here right now, staring up into Aiden's angry, cool eyes. I can't breathe. I can't think.

Get out. Get out, Rose.

A little voice in my head repeats those words over and over, rising above the cacophony of disordered, half-formed thoughts that bounce around my brain.

"Rose."

Aiden's voice still has that hard edge to it, and he takes a step toward me, but this time, I'm the one who holds up a hand.

"Fuck you," I whisper. "You don't know my father. And if you really think I would betray you after everything, then you don't know *me*."

My voice breaks on the last word, and I duck around Aiden, walking blindly toward the door as I grab the keys to the car he gave me before our wedding. The same car I took to visit Willow all those weeks ago. It's waiting outside, and I stride toward it quickly, not even bothering to see if Aiden is following me.

I don't know if he'll try to stop me, or what I'll do if he does, but when he doesn't emerge from the house, I climb into the car and start the engine, gunning it harder than I mean to as my churning emotions get the better of me.

Taking the car out of neutral, I back out of the garage and peel away from the house. My heart is pounding so hard in my chest that it physically aches, and I rub at my sternum with one hand, yanking the wheel to turn a corner with the other.

I try to stay focused, but there are tears in my eyes. I don't want to break down now, but it feels like my whole world has been flipped upside down again.

Dragging in a shuddering breath, I turn again, heading down a larger street that leads away from Aiden's neighborhood.

I have no destination in mind. All I know is that I needed to get away from Aiden's accusatory stare, from the words he was saying that rocked me to my core.

Where am I going to go?

I don't want to go to my dad. Even if Aiden's clearly not thinking straight, he thinks my father killed his father before whatever happened tonight. It's an old wound.

And what if... what if it's true?

That thought makes a sob rise up in my throat. If what Aiden accused him of is true, I can't face my father right now.

Fuck, I don't know who I can trust anymore.

Hot tears sting my eyes, and I blink them away, lifting a hand to my face to brush at my cheeks.

I don't see the car that runs a red light up ahead until it's too late.

Headlights veer toward me, and my heart clenches. A gasp escapes me as the bright light nearly blinds me. My body reacts on instinct, my foot stomping on the brakes even as I twist the steering wheel. Panic shoots through my body, a surge of adrenaline so powerful that it makes me feel ill.

In the half-second I have left to process what's happening, I already know it's too late.

I hear a sound, crashing and shattering all at once, then the world flips on its head. Everything tumbles before my eyes like a washing machine gone wrong. I have the fleeting thought that time is elastic, snapping but stretching at the same time.

It's all wrong. This is wrong. This isn't how it's supposed to end.

A loud screech is the last thing I hear before everything goes black.

Aiden

Fuck. No!

My heart lodges in my throat as I see the car run the red light, veering across traffic in a collision course with Rose's vehicle.

It only took me a few moments after she left the house to shake off the haze of anger and frustration clouding my mind and go after her. I remember pulling out of the driveway just as she turned a corner at the end of the street, my head a mess as I cranked the wheel to go after her.

Even though I wasn't sure where she planned to go, I knew I couldn't let her leave.

But I was too far behind her to stop the crash.

All I can do now is watch it play out.

It all happens so fast. It's not like a movie scene, not in slow motion, not dramatic and glittering. It goes by in the blink of an eye, and it feels like it tears my heart out with it. Rose's car is t-boned by the oncoming vehicle, the sound of metal on metal as loud as a clap of thunder.

"Fuck!"

I slam on my brakes, stopping in the middle of the road before throwing open my door. I sprint out of my car, racing toward her as terror infuses my limbs.

The car is totaled. It skidded, turning to its side before stopping at a tree.

It's not wrapped around the trunk, thank fuck. Neither of them was driving fast enough for that. The truck that hit her is still in the intersection, turned slightly as if the driver realized their mistake and tried to correct their course, but it was too late.

Too late.

Too fucking late.

When I get to her car, the door is stuck. I can't pull it open.

The window is crushed, most of it shattered out of the door panel. Rose's blonde hair is tangled, thrown over her face from the force of the crash. I reach through the broken glass of the window and push it away.

She's breathing, unconscious but still alive. There's blood and something black on her face, marking her cheek. Her breaths are shallow, and there are flecks of glass in her hair, blinking like diamonds. It's a perverse twist on the way she looked at the gala.

My heart sits in my throat as I fumble for my phone and call for an ambulance. Everything is a blur as I remain by her side, listening to the slow approach of sirens in the distance.

Please, god. Don't let them be too late too.

The ambulance pulls up alongside us, lights flashing. Someone pulls me away from Rose, and my hands curl into fists. I'm on the verge of hitting whoever tried to take me from her side, but I'm vaguely aware of someone telling me I can ride in the ambulance. I have to stand back as they pull her from the car, a brace wrapped around her neck, her bright green eyes hidden behind closed lids.

The ride to the hospital is agonizing, and I can't stop staring at Rose's pale, still face the entire time. When she's finally wheeled into the emergency room, I'm left standing in the waiting room, feeling as if my heart has left my body. As if all that's left is an empty, vacant cavity in my chest.

Lachlan arrives a few moments later, and I look up sharply as he claps a hand on my shoulder, blinking at him.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, my voice rough.

His brows draw together. "You texted me. Remember?"

Fuck. No. I don't. Everything since the moment I saw Rose's car crash has been a blur, and I can barely recall any of it.

Lachlan jerks his head toward the doors that lead deeper into the hospital. "How is she?"

"I don't know." I swallow, my jaw tight. "I'm not sure. She was

unconscious when we got here."

He blows out a breath, running a hand through his dark hair. "Fuck."

Other parts of this evening start filtering back into my mind, reminding me what led to my confrontation with Rose—the one that sent her running out of the house.

"Connor still all right?" I ask.

"Yeah. I left him with Finn. None of his injuries were serious. And I added extra security to the warehouse, in case whoever hit it the first time comes back. We need to be ready in case another attack comes."

Unable to keep still, I move agitatedly around the small waiting room. "I told Rose about her father. I thought for sure he was using her to get information from us, that that's how he found out about the warehouse we've been using. But she denied it. Said she hasn't told him anything."

Lachlan's gaze follows me, his expression serious. "And do you believe her?"

I stop moving suddenly, staring at the wall ahead of me. But I'm not really seeing it. Instead, I'm seeing Rose in my mind's eye. It's as if every moment we've ever shared, everything that's happened between us over the years, flashes through my head in a single instant. And without even having to consider my answer, I nod.

"Yes. I do."

My brother blows out a breath, contemplating my words for a moment. Then he purses his lips. "I think you're right. If Antonio is targeting us, it's not through her."

I blink, surprised by his words. I almost expected him to tell me I'm blinded by love, that I've let my feelings override my better judgment.

As if he's read my thoughts, Lachlan shakes his head. "I've seen the way she looks at you, brother," he murmurs. "I don't believe she would betray you. That woman loves you."

A sharp pang shoots through my chest. I don't feel worthy of her love at the moment, don't feel worthy of her at all. I never thought that she was actively working against us, but I hate that I accused her of being a pawn. I hate that I told her the truth about her father in the heat of the moment, hurling it at her like a cruel barb.

Lachlan rests a hand on my shoulder. "Whatever the fuck is going on, we'll figure it out, I promise. Our family will survive this. Connor, Rose—they'll both be okay."

I nod, but before I can respond, a doctor comes down the hallway toward us.

I tense as he nears, my shoulders going tight. I know the accident wasn't as bad as it could have been, but I'm still worried. I've gotten used to hearing nothing but bad news in hospitals, and I can't help the feeling that this is going to be bad too.

"How is she?" I ask immediately, not waiting for him to speak first.

"She's fine," he says. "She was lucky."

Something in my chest relaxes, making a rush of air leave my lungs. "Thank fuck."

The doctor nods, ignoring my vulgar words. "She's got a few bruises. No major injuries. So don't worry, she'll be all right. And the baby should be fine as well."

My stomach flips, my gaze snapping to his. *Baby?*

CHAPTER 32



My mouth feels like cotton, stuffy and dry. There's a strange taste on my tongue.

As I slowly emerge from unconsciousness, I'm so groggy that it takes a long moment for me to process where I am. I'm lying in a hospital bed. There's a plastic bracelet on my wrist, a thin plastic tube trailing from my hand.

Memories of the accident come back to me in pieces. Flashes of steel and the sound of screeching tires drift through my mind.

God, I'm lucky to be alive.

I keep my eyes shut for another long moment, focusing on my breathing as I try to steady myself.

When I finally open my eyes, I find Aiden at the side of my bed. A surge of emotion and adrenaline shoots through me as I see him, a thousand thoughts swirling through my head.

I open my mouth to speak, but he raises his hand to stop me. Then he leans down slowly and kisses me. I don't know why, but it's bittersweet, and I hold my breath, unsure of what's happening.

When he pulls away, his eyes are bright.

"I'm sorry," he rasps.

Tears sting my eyes at his words, and at the raw pain in his voice. I blink them away, but more keep coming in their place.

"I didn't tell anyone," I say. I feel like a broken record, but I have to keep saying it. "I didn't tell anyone about the warehouse."

Aiden's jaw is tight, but he nods immediately. "I believe you. We're still trying to figure out exactly what happened, and whether your father was

behind it or if it was someone else, but I believe that you didn't pass information to him. We'll find out who was responsible and make them pay."

Anger flashes in his eyes as he speaks, but it's clear that it's not directed at me.

I know what he must have felt when he found out about the attack, how afraid he must have been. The brothers are all close. If Connor was in danger, if he almost died, there wouldn't be any rational thought left in Aiden's head. I can understand the pain he was in. And I understand what he might have thought, given what he told me about my father.

I still don't know if Aiden is right about what he suspects my dad of doing, but...

"I had no idea you thought my father killed yours," I start, swallowing hard. "But if that's true—if my dad is truly guilty of what you say—then he committed an act of cowardly violence. I won't support that. I'm on your side."

Aiden's eyes widen. His eyes are dark, but it's not anger or despair in them now. It's the weight of everything that's happened between us, the heavy implications of what I just said.

I've chosen my side. Chosen my place.

I will no longer be a pawn to anyone, but a queen in my own right.

"Thank you," Aiden breathes, his voice rough.

My heart feels like it's breaking and healing all at once. I can't believe how many things my father kept from me, and it hurts to realize that maybe I never really knew him as well as I thought I did.

But at least I'm not alone.

I close my eyes, letting a few tears leak from beneath my eyelids. It feels like my entire body is melting, all the tension and fear bleeding away. I exhale and tilt my head back into the pillows, letting everything leave me at once. I don't want the fear or uncertainty anymore. I'm done being scared.

Aiden's hand rests on my head. He leans over me, kissing the top of my head, his body warm against mine. It feels like a shield.

I want to sink into him, to let his warmth and strength protect me while I rest. Me and the...

My stomach flips.

Suddenly, the rest of the night floods back to me, and I press my hand to my belly. A spark of panic heats within me and I almost shove Aiden away, fingers tight in the sheets.

But as if he's read my thoughts, his hand slips over mine. I freeze when he holds my hand carefully, lifting it to kiss softly.

"The doctor said the baby is okay."

A small sob of relief escapes me, and I press my free hand to my mouth. "Oh, thank god."

I realize I sat up from the pillows in my moment of panic, and my body aches a little in protest, but I don't lie back down. Aiden holds me where I am, supporting me as I let the tears come again.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, sniffing. "I wanted to tell you. I wanted it to be special."

"Shh. It's not your fault," he says quietly. "I know now. That's all that matters."

I hold Aiden as tight as I can without pressing on my bruises, breathing shakily. It's so good to hear the words from him. His hand strokes my hair, the motion steady and reassuring. His voice is low and calm when he speaks again.

"I'll keep our child safe, no matter what. I promise."

Aiden

That night in the hospital passes more easily than I expected it to. Lachlan returns home, but I stay with Rose. She wakes occasionally, sleepy green eyes searching for me.

I'm always right beside her.

In the morning, the doctor stops by. He's smiling, the first time I can remember seeing a doctor smile in years. It's always bad news. It doesn't seem like that's true this time.

"Everything looks good," he says, nodding at Rose as he fills out a chart on a clipboard. "She has some minor abrasions, but that's about it."

I know about all the scrapes and bruises. I've seen them. They hurt me every time I see them. My heart clenches as I think about the part I played in this. It might have been an accident, but it could have been avoided if I just

hadn't jumped the gun.

Never again.

"You can go home," the doctor says, flipping the clipboard around and holding it to his chest. "You'll probably be sore for a week or two, but that's about it. If you start feeling dizzy or disoriented, you can give us a call."

"Thank you," Rose says, smiling faintly.

"You were lucky. Maybe take it easy, eat some ice cream. It won't be long before the baby starts telling you what you can and can't eat."

Rose can walk, but I still keep an eye on her every second. We leave the hospital and I barely take my eyes off her, helping her into the car and making sure no one comes too close.

The drive home is slow. I avoid every bump I can see, going slow just in case. I keep glancing at her out of the corner of my eye. She dozes on and off, still tired from the accident.

I keep thinking about what happened at the warehouse. What started it all.

My brothers and I need to figure out what the fuck happened. We need to know who did this.

Even with a clear head, a day away from the incident, I still can't come to a conclusion. I suspected Antonio right off the bat, but we have no proof of that. And Lachlan hasn't called me since he left the hospital last night, so it means he probably doesn't have any leads yet. We're all lost.

I can't bear to imagine the possibility that any one of my brothers or our men would have given up the information. It's impossible. No O'Reilly would throw away family for money or power. Not a fucking chance. It wasn't one of us.

Rose stirs, blinking in the morning sun. "We're not home?"

It makes me painfully happy to hear the word on her lips. *Home*.

"Not yet. We need to go slow."

"I'm fine," she says, smiling faintly as she looks over at me.

"You were in an accident," I say, my hands tightening on the steering wheel. "I'm not taking a chance."

Rose is quiet. I stop at a light, letting the silence hang between us. A lot has happened in the past twenty-four hours. I still don't know if I've truly earned her forgiveness.

"Thank you for coming after me," Rose says quietly. "If you hadn't been there, I have no idea how long it would've been before the ambulance came."

"Of course I came for you." My throat tightens with emotion. "I always

will. I never should've let you leave like that. I shouldn't have said that shit to you."

"It's okay. I'm glad I know. It was just a lot to take in. Honestly, I'm still processing it. It's hard to believe, but part of me wonders if that's just because I don't *want* to believe it." She lets out a shuddery breath, then looks over at me. "What happened to the other driver? Was he okay?"

"No." I shake my head, starting forward again as the light turns green. "He died."

"Oh no." Rose bites her lip, looking pained.

I don't say anything. She's a sweet enough, kind enough person not to wish death on the man who almost killed her, but I can't muster up the same emotion in myself. If he'd survived the crash, I'm not sure he would've survived much longer than that anyway.

I reach over for Rose's hand and hold it tightly. She brushes her thumb over the top of my knuckles and I exhale slowly, tension leaving me almost immediately.

The house comes into sight after a few more moments. As I roll up the driveway, I catch sight of a figure by the front door.

Willow.

What the fuck?

I park the car, and Rose glances at me, looking lost. I shrug and step out, then open Rose's door and support her as we walk over, watching Willow.

She's sitting on the stoop, her hands over her mouth. When she finally hears us, she looks up, eyes wide and uncertain. She jumps to her feet almost immediately.

"Dmitri doesn't know I'm here," she says when we come close. She swallows, licking her lips. "I had to come."

"How are you sure he doesn't know?" I ask. I cast a quick glance over the yard. I don't see his car, don't remember seeing one on the street when I arrived.

Maybe she's right, but I don't trust Dmitri. I know what he's like.

Rose worriedly tugs her sweater shut over her chest. "What's wrong? Did he do something?"

Willow's lips are pressed together, her eyes bright. I realize she's trying not to cry. Her bottom lip is red, like she's been biting at it for hours.

How long has she been here?

"It's been eating away at me," Willow finally says, her voice breaking.

She presses her hands to her eyes, as if she's trying to force the tears back, but they keep streaming down her cheeks.

"What? What is it?" I ask, stepping closer.

When Willow looks up, she doesn't meet my eyes. She looks at Rose.

"He spied on you. He gave me that necklace at your wedding and told me to give it to you. It had a bug planted in it."

Rose's eyes widen. Her hands fly to her chest, right where the necklace was—but it's not there. She's not wearing it now, but I've seen her wearing it often in the days since our wedding.

Willow is crying harder, her voice uneven, sobs racking her chest. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, I was so afraid. So—"

"It's not your fault," Rose says, moving closer to Willow to hug her.

I'm furious. My jaw is tight, my teeth grinding together. The anger is indescribable. I want to lash out, but I know Willow isn't part of this. She's not at fault and she never has been. This isn't about her at all.

It's Dmitri. He's the one I want to kill.

"I'm fine," Rose says, holding Willow close. "See?"

"No," Willow says, choking on her tears. She pulls herself away from Rose and continues. "I've been afraid for my life since I met him. I've been terrified. But I never should have done it."

"I understand, Willow. I get it."

Willow shakes her head. She's trying to say something else. I calm myself just enough to speak again.

"Tell me," I say. "What else?"

Willow takes a deep breath. The fear in her eyes is muted, replaced by something darker. Something serious. She's not just unburdening herself. She's ready to burn Dmitri to the ground.

"Dmitri is the one who killed your father. He framed Antonio for it."

It feels like I've been shot in the stomach. I have to look down just to be sure I haven't, that Dmitri isn't hiding somewhere with a gun.

The edges of the world are red, bleeding. They threaten to block everything else out.

But I can see Rose looking at me, horror and sorrow mingled in her eyes. I know what she's thinking about, and I know what this revelation means.

I'm almost knocked to the ground. All this time, all those things I thought were true—and they're shit.

It's all lies. It was never Antonio.

It was fucking *Dmitri*.

"Why?" I ask, my voice shaking with anger. "Tell me why."

"He's been planning it for years," Willow replies quietly. "He has a plan. He wants to destabilize the Assembly. Pit the families against each other, let them pick each other off." She drags in a breath, then looks up, her wide eyes meeting mine. "He's going to swoop in and claim power when a vacuum opens up. Game over. He'll become king of Boston."

Not if I can fucking help it.

I'm shaking my head, I realize. Willow watches me and the determination in her gaze melts a little. The strength I saw in her earlier looks like it's slipping away. All that's left is the reality that Dmitri is more dangerous than anyone realized, and he's the one with all the power in her life.

Willow swallows, hesitating for a moment before speaking again.

"He's been undermining every family. He's breeding anger and distrust. That's his game. That's what he wants. And he won't stop."

CHAPTER 33



Dmitri.

So he's the one behind all of this.

My jaw clenches, my shoulders going so tense that it makes my abused muscles ache. I can believe that Dmitri would do anything to get what he wants. I believe he'd throw people away like trash for power or money. The fact that Willow couldn't tear herself away to tell someone the truth for years is a testament to that.

I only just learned that Aiden suspected my father, and now I know the truth. I can see how deep this goes. Dmitri is just one part of the Assembly, but he's trying to take the whole thing down. He wants more than he has. He wants everything. And just like when I was in high school, he'll stop at nothing to get what he wants.

Aiden's father was just the first casualty in Dmitri's fucked-up plan.

Willow is silent. She's spoken all the words she came to say, maybe even more. She looks even smaller now, empty almost, like she's been drained of all the strength she found to bring her to Aiden's door.

"I have to go," she says quietly. "Before he realizes I'm gone."

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. I want to tell her to stay, but what do I know? Can we even protect her?

I know that if Dmitri finds out what she did, he may kill her. I might never see her again. She's the one who gave Aiden the closure, the truth, and she's going right back to the one man that could kill her without hesitation.

"I'm sorry," Willow whispers. She looks at me like she's looking at someone else, or maybe a mirror.

I wonder if she sees something in me. Maybe she can see a life she never

got to have, or maybe it's just in my mind that I think that. Maybe all she sees is me and what Dmitri has done to me. To Aiden.

Willow slips away.

I watch her go, then look to Aiden. He's still watching her, pain and anger brewing on his face. I can't imagine what he feels right now.

Aiden finally turns, a hand on the small of my back as he guides me inside. This moment feels heavy. I know he's in pain. I follow him silently, shutting the door behind us and curling onto the couch in the living room as he sits.

He's beside me as he calls his brothers. He tells them what happened.

I can't hear their voices, but I know they're agreeing to make Dmitri pay. Aiden's words are quiet, hollow. He's exhausted from the revelation. He answers their questions and no more, like it's too much for him to handle right now.

I don't know how long this will burden him, but I know I want to help.

We've both stumbled over the years. We know what a fall feels like. This has been painful for Aiden—it's shown him that he hated the wrong man, that he mistrusted me for no reason. It's shown him that he underestimated a man he thought he knew everything about.

Dmitri had bigger plans than just a wife. He had more in store than marrying me or Willow. He wanted more than to just undermine the O'Reilly family because of what Aiden did back in high school.

Aiden hangs up, and I watch him push his phone away, digesting his brothers' words. I know nothing will happen tonight, and I know it's all so much to handle. All I can do is be here for him now, help him remember that he has support.

He turns to me, and his expression softens a little, the flint in his eyes changing when he looks at me. He lifts his hand and traces my face, his skin warm and his touch soft.

"I should have known better," he says quietly.

I shake my head. "You couldn't have known."

"I should have known to trust you." He tucks a lock of hair behind my ears, pressing a kiss to my temple. "I always will, from now on."

He picks me up carefully, and I lean into his chest, my arm around his shoulders. I need the warmth of his body against mine right now, need his comfort. He takes me upstairs and sets me on the bed slowly, shifting me as carefully as he can.

"You need rest," he says quietly. The lights are still off in the room, and with the curtains drawn, it's nearly dark.

I can still see his face. He's in pain, brought down by these last two days, but I know he'll make it through.

And he's handsome even now, his eyes heavy-lidded and his jaw sharply highlighted by the small bits of late afternoon light coming through the window. I can see how strong he is, the muscles of his arms as he pulls back from depositing me on the bed.

He's right that I need to rest more, but I'm not badly injured, and I don't want him to leave. I swallow and hold on to the front of his shirt, stopping him from pulling back too far.

"I'm not hurt."

"Rose..."

"I'm not," I repeat softly. "And I don't want you to go."

I don't want to lose this closeness between us. It feels tenuous like a spiderweb, like it could break if I nudge him too hard. I feel like I need to take care with this. With us.

We're like a broken mug, dropped and then glued back together. There are cracks, but it's still beautiful.

I still want to keep it. It's precious to me.

Aiden is precious to me.

I pull him down to me, then wait a moment before I kiss him. I need him to know I've thought about this, thought about us.

And I want this.

Despite everything, I still want him.

I can't forget what we've been through. It would be irresponsible and stupid. But I want to move into the future with Aiden, beyond all the pain and confusion. None of it matters as long as we're together. We can face everything if we're doing it together.

Aiden kisses me back, his mouth hot against mine. I can feel something burn deep within me, a growing need tempered by the pain and sorrow we've both been caught by. This is bittersweet.

But we have each other.

We're comfort enough right now, blocking out the world in each other's bodies.

I pull Aiden closer to me, and he kneels on the bed, holding himself carefully above my body. He doesn't want to hurt me.

I don't need the roughness of other nights or the pure desire, either. This is a slow fall, a burning love between us that goes further than just a flurry of lust. This is deeper.

Aiden's hands slide up my legs. He's slow when he pulls my clothes off, taking his time with my pants and then my shirt. He kisses a trail from my collarbone to my navel, pulling my panties and bra off before dropping them over the side of the bed.

I'm just as slow when I pull his shirt and pants off, exploring every inch of his skin. I linger over the hard curves of his muscles, reminding myself that this is the body he swore he'd protect me with. He said he would keep our child safe, and I believe him.

It's just the two of us, naked, completely bared before each other. I still need him, but this isn't about that. This is about us. How far we've come, how far we want to go.

Aiden leans down to kiss me again, and I meet him halfway. He kisses me deeper, tongue pressed to my lips before I moan, my mouth parting for him.

He has one hand between my legs, his fingers slow as he teases me. All I can hear is the sound of our breathing in the dim room. There are no sounds in this space, only us.

I slide a hand over his arm, feeling the strength hiding beneath his skin. I hold his hand in place as he fingers me, my hips pushing up toward him, gasping in pleasure when he presses inside me. He lowers his mouth to my neck, and I can feel the heat of his breath.

I try to focus, one hand lowering to wrap around his cock. I stroke it slowly, feeling how hard he already is. He touches me as I touch him, drawing him closer to me. I'm already so wet, and I can feel him leaking, precum beading at his tip.

Fuck, I need to have him inside me. I need to know that we're still fine, that we can make it through this.

"Please," I gasp, shuddering as Aiden's hand moves faster. "Aiden—"

"Shh," he whispers, his mouth pressing against mine. "Let me take care of you, little dove."

I start to speak, but he turns me over and then his cock slides against me, teasing. I gasp as I push myself up onto my forearms, leaning back against his body. My legs shake, but he doesn't move just yet, the heat of his cock pressing along my clit.

I can feel how wet I am, how rock hard he is as he teases my pussy. He slides against me again and again without pressing inside, and I lose myself in the hot glide for a while... but it's not enough.

"Please," I whimper. "I need more. I know you'll be gentle. Just—please!"

I reach back for him, grasping at his wrist, but he stops me.

"Let me," he says, his voice low. Then the head of his cock presses against me as he enters me in one firm push.

"Yes," I gasp, hands grasping for something to hold. I knot the sheets beneath my palms as he drives inside me.

I feel like lava inside, burning as Aiden fills me deeper. I can barely breathe, holding on to the sheets for dear life as he starts to move again. He pulls out slowly, and I make a noise of protest, but his hand presses against my ass and holds me in place.

He thrusts inside me once again, still slow, and I shudder as pleasure rolls through my body. This is slower than we've ever gone before, sweeter, hotter. I'm panting like I've run a mile, the energy of keeping myself in place starting to burn me out.

We could fuck hard until we come, but it's not what either of us needs or wants right now. This is right. This slow pace is everything.

I can feel every inch as he moves, and it burns me from the inside out, like a fire that's turning everything down and making something new from the ashes.

"Aiden," I gasp as ecstasy starts to build inside me. "Let me see you."

I need to see his face. He pulls away, his cock sliding from me before he rolls me onto my back again, holding my legs open as he fills me once more. His eyes are burning with need, love, and raw desire. He stares down at me like he wants to memorize my face, to remember every detail as he makes us one.

"Close," I whisper, my arms wrapping around his shoulders. "I'm close. Come with me, Aiden. Please."

"I'm with you," he groans. "I'm right here. God, Rose."

We both come in a burst, Aiden groaning as his lips press against my neck. I cry out as I orgasm, everything drowned in a bright, white light.

I can feel every pulse of his cock. It throbs deep inside me, filling me with heat as I clench tighter around him. We both breathe heavily as it ends, everything slowing to a crawl as we rest in each other's arms.

He doesn't pull out even as his cock starts to soften, and I don't want him to. I never want to lose this, never want to let go of the connection between us.

After a moment, he rolls us so that we're side by side, my body molded against his. I lie next to Aiden as my eyelids drift shut, letting comfort seep into my bones. This is all I've wanted with him, all I've ever needed. No matter what's happening in the world outside of us, we have each other here.

And for right now, that's enough.

CHAPTER 34

Aiden

Rose dozes for the rest of the day and falls asleep early with me by her side, and in the morning, I don't want to leave.

She doesn't stir when I carefully crawl out of the bed, sliding off the mattress as cautiously as possible. She's fast asleep, her chest slowly rising and falling.

I know there are things that must be done, but all I want is to stay here. I keep thinking about what could have happened. I could have lost Rose, could have lost everything I'd dreamed of. It could have been the end.

I lean over her and kiss her goodbye. She smiles in her sleep, and I brush her hair away from her face.

She needs rest. I take one last look at my sleeping wife and then leave, hoping it won't be long before I'm back.

I know that's probably not going to happen.

Yesterday, I told my brothers the truth. I told them what Dmitri did, and they agreed—we have no choice, no alternative but to go before the Assembly and speak. We can't let this go.

Lachlan has already requested a meeting for today, so the entire Assembly will gather in our usual meeting place.

As I drive, I think about the future waiting for me at home. Rose is pregnant, and she's safe. She's alive. I can protect her, and I will protect her. I'll keep her safe, and I'll keep our child safe too.

When I arrive, my brothers are just driving up. I park beside them and watch their faces as I walk over. They look how I feel—determined, furious. It's in their eyes.

"This is going to be rough," Lachlan says quietly as I meet him. "Are you

ready?"

"More than ready."

"I hope he fucking burns," Finn says, the words hissing between his teeth.

Connor presses a hand to Finn's shoulder. "Keep it in. It won't help our case if we go shooting our mouths off."

"It's stupid. We should drag him out into the street and shoot him like the dog he is."

I laugh shortly. I feel the same, but I know better than to agree.

"We could," I reply. "But that's not how this works. Let the Assembly see what he is. Then we can have what we want."

Lachlan pulls the door open and we fall in behind him. We head up to the top floor, and I can hear low voices farther down the hall as we walk. I slip my hands into my pockets and try not to ball up my fists.

I want Dmitri to pay.

Lachlan enters our code on the keypad at the door. When we enter, the other heads of families are milling around, voices low as they discuss things. Their conversation trickles off as they watch us enter, their expressions guarded but curious.

"What is this about?" Nikolai asks, arms crossed.

Lachlan holds his hand out, inviting the others to sit. "Please. We have much to discuss."

The men glance at each other but eventually sit, arms crossed and hands steepled as they wait for us to begin.

When we're all settled, Lachlan glances around the room.

"What we have to speak of, we don't speak of lightly. This is a serious matter that took time and consideration for us to bring before you all."

"You called a meeting," Nikolai replies, unimpressed. He shrugs nonchalantly. "So you must have something to say. Get to it already."

Lachlan dips his chin in acknowledgment. "We've learned disturbing information about a member of this Assembly. We see it as our duty to present this."

I can see Nikolai and Kade exchange a glance. They think this is about Antonio, but for once, they're wrong.

"We have all been misled," Lachlan continues slowly. He lets the words sink in. "One of us has plotted against the Assembly for years. Has done everything in their power to upset the balance."

"How?" Nikolai asks.

"This person has sown seeds of mistrust. They've arranged death and injury to members of the Assembly and their associates. All in the name of taking control."

I can't help myself. I can't hold my tongue any longer.

"Dmitri Sharpe has done nothing but foster animosity in an attempt to take control," I say, trying to keep the simmering anger at bay in my voice. The words are still edged with fury. "He wants us to turn on each other, all for his benefit."

Dmitri's face changes. I can see it happen before the rest of the Assembly turns to him. There's a flicker of anger in his eyes, a cool calculation as he considers his choices.

He's trapped, and he's trying to find his way out. I won't let him.

The others turn to Dmitri as his face morphs into an expression of disbelief and outrage. He holds his hands up.

"What is this? What—"

"You plotted to kill our father and frame Antonio Donovan for it," Lachlan continues, his words falling like stones. "You surveilled Aiden and his new wife, Rose. You have worked to destabilize the Assembly and watch it fall, all for power."

"I have not," Dmitri replies, his voice sharp. He looks around the table, eyes glittering with anger. "This is insane. Where did you even hear such vicious lies? Who is telling you these things about me?"

"Your wife told us," Connor says conversationally. I glance at him, noting the way his fists are curled just beneath the table. He's thinking about Willow.

I am too.

We knew it was a risk to speak. It's a risk to Willow. She lives with Dmitri and is always there as a subject of his wrath. This will only make things worse for her.

But if we catch him now, he may never return home. I have a feeling she'd thank us if that were the case.

Dmitri relaxes. His hands lower, a smirk twisting his lips. "My wife? It's a wonder she managed to get enough words out to say so much."

I bite my tongue so hard I taste blood. I want to throw my fist at his face, watch him crumple to the ground. I want to hit him once for every time he's hurt me, my family. Willow. *Rose*.

Instead, I have to wait. I wait as Dmitri seems to relax, his fake

astonishment evaporating.

"We can clear this up now," he says, holding his palms up calmly. "These men say my wife came to them with these allegations. Ask her yourselves."

He looks around at the Assembly. One by one, the gathered members nod, agreeing to allow him to make his case. I grit my teeth, sharing a look with my brothers.

Dmitri jerks his head at his second, who nods and leaves the room.

The meeting grinds to a halt as we wait for Dmitri's second in command to return, and the tension that fills the space hovers over me like a cloud, making me itch to stand up and drag Dmitri out into the street like Finn suggested earlier.

Finally, the door opens again, and Willow is guided inside.

She looks terrible.

She's clearly drugged up, moving slowly like time doesn't make any sense to her. She keeps her head down, avoiding eye contact, and with the way she holds herself, I can imagine she's bruised beneath her heavy sweater. The way she curls in on herself makes me want to dive across the table and grab Dmitri by his throat.

Willow is guided to the end of the table, to a chair right beside Dmitri. I watch her sink into it, her body stiff, unrelaxed.

Antonio is the first to speak.

"We have heard disturbing things about your husband, Dmitri," he says. "We only want to ask you some questions. Do you understand?"

Willow blinks slowly. Her eyes are fixed on the table. It takes her a few seconds to say, "Yes."

"Has Dmitri confessed to you that he killed Callum O'Reilly?" Nikolai asks, straightforward.

Willow's brows furrow. I can see confusion in her eyes, along with a flicker of fear.

"No," she says, her voice unsteady. I watch her gaze flick sideways, taking in Dmitri before snapping away like a skittish animal. "He... he doesn't talk about his business with me. Why would I need to know?"

"So, he's never told you anything?" Kade presses. "Maybe that he wanted more power?"

"Has he expressed disdain? Dislike for the Assembly?" Enzo asks.

They think it's all a lie, everything we told them. I can tell.

Willow swallows, shaking her head. She closes her eyes, squeezes them,

then opens them again. Her gaze wavers. Whatever drugs are in her system, they're strong.

"No. Nothing like that. I swear."

"And have you spoken to the O'Reilly brothers about your husband?" Nikolai asks.

She shakes her head. "No. Never."

"We will put this to a vote," Nikolai says, waving a hand vaguely over the group. "A vote to decide whether he has violated our code, or if there is enough proof to move forward with this."

I barely listen. My ears are ringing. I know what's coming.

They vote. I watch their hands rise, but just like when we were seeking vengeance against Antonio for what we thought he'd done, it's not enough. It's never enough. They don't want to hear this, don't believe it. They'll never accept the truth.

Antonio votes for us, but it still isn't enough to press our case against Dmitri.

"That's it," Nikolai says, the last hand coming down. "I believe this meeting is adjourned."

I watch Dmitri take the outcome graciously. Then he catches my gaze and smirks.

It sparks something in me that goes beyond pure rage. It's blinding. I have to curl my hands around the table until it bites, drawing my mind away just a little from the man sitting across from me.

He's not even a man. He's a piece of shit. A black spot on the Assembly. Bastard.

Dmitri slips away as the rest of the Assembly rises. I watch him yank Willow, her face a hazy, drugged mask. They disappear and I am left with my brothers, our anger brewing in our chests.

"Let's go," Lachlan says, his voice tight. "We have work to do."

His *work* sounds more like *death*. It sounds like retribution. Justice. Good.

Whether the Assembly is on our side or not, this time, we won't let it go.

We follow Lachlan outside, then all of us head back to my house. We need a plan, some way to make Dmitri pay without getting ourselves killed in the process.

I slam my door when I get out of my car. Finn steps out of his own car and immediately shouts at the sky, his *fuck* echoing through the trees.

"The bastard is going to pay," Connor mutters darkly as I approach. "I'm going to personally take a piece."

"You and the rest of us," I reply, slamming the buttons on the lock pad so hard I can hear the plastic click. "And we will. But first, we figure out how."

I open the door and let them in. Rose isn't in the kitchen. I stow my car keys and slide my jacket off.

"I'll be right back," I say, taking the stairs two at a time.

I'm furious. I almost don't want to see her like this. I don't want this anger, this energy, confronting her. But I also need to be near her. It will tame the beast inside me a little, enough for me to function.

When I get to the bedroom, it's empty. I peer into the bathroom, but the shower is empty too.

Something uneasy settles in my gut.

"Rose?"

I call her name as I walk down the hall, checking the other rooms. I call her name again, but there's no response, so I take the stairs two at a time again, speeding through the downstairs rooms. I almost run into Lachlan as I round a corner.

"Aiden? What's wrong?"

I ignore him and walk into the library. "Rose?"

The chair is empty. No books lying out.

I keep searching, vaguely aware of my brothers calling her name too.

But she's not here. Rose isn't here.

She's gone.

It feels like there's fire in my lungs. My heart pounds so hard I can feel my pulse in my neck, hot and fast. Standing in the entryway, the windows illuminated by the sun, I'm nearly blinded by the light and the fear that suddenly invades me.

Rose has been taken.

She's gone, stolen, and I know exactly who the fuck did it. That fucking son of a bitch Dmitri.

I'm going to kill him.

"We need a plan," Lachlan says shortly, walking around the corner from wherever he was looking. "All of us, now."

"We can't go to the Assembly," Connor says, pushing a hand through his hair. The marks on his skin from the attack the other night have faded a bit, but they're still visible. "They just exonerated Dmitri."

"If we go after him and kill him, we'll be defying the Assembly," Finn adds uneasily. "They won't stand for that."

"We could lose everything. Our empire and our lives," Lachlan murmurs.

"I don't care." I stare at the front door and imagine what it must have been like for Rose.

Was she asleep when they came?

She was supposed to rest. She would have been resting, waiting for me. Maybe she was waiting to eat too. Maybe she was just lying down, one hand on her stomach, thinking about the future the same way I did. Maybe she was smiling to herself. Maybe she was thinking about baby names.

And then Dmitri's people came in and stole her. They took her from me.

"My wife is in danger," I say quietly. The rage is like poison in my voice, dripping dangerously as I speak. "I'm going to protect her. I'm going, damn the consequences. She's my wife."

My brothers are quiet.

We all know what this could mean. We know the reality, the consequences. If we do this and we're condemned, we'll have to run. If we even survive, we'll have to run so far they can never find us.

"Then we go," Connor finally says. I knew he would be the first. I know he likes Rose. He has a soft spot for women in need, maybe more than the rest of us.

Finn nods. "We go."

Lachlan glances between the two of them before turning his gaze to me, and then he nods once.

"We all go," he says, his voice steady. "We protect our own. Rose is one of ours. So we'll do whatever we have to."

She's family. She is my woman, my wife. It's not a question. This happens now.

"Thank you," I say. It's all that needs to be said, a hundred things contained in those two words.

We descend to the basement as we discuss our plan of attack. There's a locker down there, with weapons and other things stocked in the cold space. We're all tense as we prepare, our minds on the task ahead. We aren't stupid. We know what we might face when we go. We know the resistance we'll meet.

"Call in Jamie," Lachlan says, tightening his belt and the holster at his hip. "We'll need him."

He's not wrong.

As much as I don't want to involve more people, we could use Jamie. I dial his number without looking and stand in front of a polished black metal cabinet, waiting.

I can see myself in the metal. My reflection is dull but there, a tall, rigid figure. I look ready. I feel ready.

I may have never expected this to happen, but I knew it was a possibility. It always is. The world I've lived in has never been safe, never been easy. I've been taught to embrace violence when necessary since the day I was born.

We might be facing the end of everything, but if we don't stand for our family, then our empire is worthless anyway.

Jamie answers after the second ring. "Aiden."

"Jamie. I have something to ask of you. I cannot tell you to do this. It's a choice."

There's a moment of silence before he asks, "What is it?"

"Dmitri's taken Rose. We're going to get her back."

"He took her?" Jamie's voice is low, shaking almost imperceptibly. "That fucking bastard, that spineless piece of shit threatened your wife? No. We go now. I'll meet you there."

"I appreciate it, Jamie. I'll see you soon."

I know what he must be thinking about. He lost his wife too. The thought of this must make him livid. He knows what the loss feels like. He knows how underhanded, how weak it is to attack a woman purely as a power play. It's the most cowardly thing Dmitri could have done.

He could have faced us with dignity, with strength. Instead, he chose to kidnap my wife.

He'll pay for it.

I'm going to bring Rose back, and I'm going to fucking kill Dmitri.

"You're closer," Connor says.

I come back to reality and realize he's standing next to me, adjusting the holster he's wearing across his torso.

"What?"

"You and Rose. You're closer now."

"What do you mean?" I pull the cabinet before me open, the doors swinging open wildly before I grab them and stop them, then begin rooting around inside for more ammo.

"We all knew how you felt about her in high school," Connor clarifies. "But when she came back... at first, it was all about Antonio."

"Of course it was. We thought he was our father's killer then."

"Nah. This change between you happened before you knew the truth."

"Did it?"

"Don't be obtuse," Connor says, shaking his head. Then his expression turns serious. "You love her, don't you?"

I shut my eyes for a moment. I think back to this morning, when everything was better—not fine by any stretch of the word, but good. Rose was safe. She was in my bed, sleeping, perfect.

"Yes. Fuck, yes, I love her."

"Good." Connor crosses his arms and leans against a table pushed up to the wall. "If you hadn't realized it by now, we would have needed to have a longer talk before we went off like this."

"You thought I didn't know?"

"I think you both had history, and you didn't have the best relationship for some time."

I snort. "That's an understatement."

Finn approaches, bouncing on the balls of his feet. "This must be a nice chat, but we have somewhere to be."

"Don't be impatient," Lachlan says, raising his voice from across the room. "Impatience makes you sloppy. Sloppy—"

"—gets you killed," Finn finishes. "I know."

"It's not that I'm not impatient," I remind Finn. "I just won't have her hurt. So watch your fire."

Lachlan nods, snapping a clip into his gun. "Look before you shoot. We don't know where she'll be or what we'll face. Be careful, be smart."

"Let's go," I say. "I'm done waiting. It's time to watch Dmitri burn."

CHAPTER 35



I can't remember waking up. It happens slowly. I'm aware that my head hurts, an ache that won't go away. My wrists feel sore for some reason. My entire body feels heavy, tired, and overused. It's like I've run miles and I'm still standing upright, still aching.

I try to open my eyes. Pain spikes between them and I hiss, trying to go slow. Something is shining toward my face.

When I manage to peel my eyes open, I can't see much. There are blurry, dark shapes forming before me. I try to stare hard and focus on them, but they escape me. They're all amorphous and dark. I can't see what anything is.

Nausea rises in my gut and I have to hold it back, breathing deeply and slowly as I try to stay quiet. I don't know where I am, and I don't know if someone will come if they hear me.

When I realize my hands are tied, panic shoots through me. The gut reaction makes me jerk, nausea overwhelming me. I retch, unable to control myself, my stomach cramping.

Fear thrums through me. Has it been a day? Longer? How long have I been out?

I can hear something quiet. I try to peer through the darkness, fear gripping my chest. When I manage to focus, I can see a face barely illuminated by the single lightbulb above me.

"Willow?" I breathe, shocked.

She's tied up too, her hands behind her back, her head drooping. She's crying softly.

"Willow? Willow, it's Rose. Look at me," I plead, straining against my bonds. I try to pull away from the chair I'm sitting on, but it doesn't work.

My hands are held behind me, my arms sore.

When she finally looks up, her eyes are glassy. Her head rolls a little, and I realize with a sinking feeling that she's heavily drugged.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," she whimpers. She can't find me, her eyes wandering the darkness. "God. Rose, I'm sorry—"

"Sorry? What do you mean? Willow, I'm here. Over here."

She's delirious. I can see bruises on the skin that isn't covered by her sweater. Red and purple marks mar her neck. I wonder if Dmitri choked her. Did he throw her down here when he found out she went to Aiden? How long has she been here?

I'm suddenly terrified for her. I knew she could be hurt, but it looks like he nearly killed her. Like he still might.

And if we're trapped in here together, that means I must be at Dmitri's house. He's the one who took me, the one who must've drugged me—him or his men.

What will he do to me?

"Willow, look at me," I try again, leaning forward as far as I can. "Follow my voice. Listen. It's Rose."

"I'm sorry," she whispers. "He made me. He was going to kill me."

"What did he make you do?"

"He'll still kill me. I'm so stupid," she says, her voice breaking. "So stupid..."

"No, Willow. You're not. Just tell me what you mean," I plead. "What happened?"

"He made me come. He made me go tell them, tell the Assembly it wasn't him. That everything I told Aiden... was a lie. And I did it. I said what he wanted.... I had to."

"Oh, god."

She doesn't have to say more. Even though her words are broken and soft, I understand them well enough. I know what this means.

Aiden told me yesterday that when the O'Reillys tried to blame my dad for their father's death, the Assembly denied them the opportunity for vengeance, saying there wasn't enough evidence. And now Dmitri has gotten Willow to recant her story, providing cover for himself within the Assembly.

Oh god, he'll try to use me against Aiden.

That's why he kidnapped me. He'll probably threaten to kill me, or worse, if Aiden and his brothers don't stop coming after him, don't stop

trying to warn the other Assembly members about him.

The terror I feel as I process everything that's happened chills me to the bone. It's more than fear for myself. I'm terrified for Aiden. For the baby Dmitri hopefully doesn't know about.

No. No, no, no. It can't happen like this.

I can't let Dmitri use me. I won't. I have to try, even if it's almost impossible. There must be a chance, some way for me to get out of here before Dmitri can start making demands. Before he can try to hurt me as a means to punish and control Aiden.

I pull at the binds holding me. They're attached to the wall just behind my chair, and I can feel how strong they are. Nothing helps. The more I pull, the more my shoulders ache. It's not enough to get away.

I'm captive here. Unable to get free.

Minutes keep ticking past, and with every passing second, the sick feeling in my stomach grows.

"Willow, please," I say when I finally admit that there's no way I'll break the ties around my wrists. I can see her, and unless the shadows are tricking my eyes, she's not bound as securely as I am. She's drugged, though. I don't know how much she can help when she's delirious and out of her mind.

Willow sobs quietly. She's tied to her chair, but it's not bound to the wall the way mine is. If she tipped it over, it might break. She could get free, working her bindings off around the broken chair pieces.

"Willow," I try again. "We can get out of here. Just try, okay? Listen to my voice. Come back."

"This can't be happening," she mumbles to herself. "I tried. I tried so hard, I told Aiden—"

"Yes, yes, you did. And I'm so proud of you. But we have to get out of here."

"He should have just ended it. Why didn't he end it? I told him, he should have done it."

"Willow? Listen. We can make it out. You just have to break your chair. You can help me get free, and you can help fix this. Just tilt your chair over, okay? You need to try to crack it."

She's not listening. She's still speaking in broken sentences, her tangled thoughts unraveling. I can't rely on her. The drugs and fear are too much.

I don't know what else to do. There's nothing around for me to reach, nothing to use against the ties. The basement—if that's what it is—is bare

concrete. It's cold and dark. There's only one light above me. I don't know what else to do.

Then I hear a door shut upstairs.

My stomach turns, my heart lurching in my chest.

Dmitri.

I consider pretending to be asleep, still out cold from whatever he or his men drugged me with, but I don't know what Dmitri will do if he thinks I'm asleep. I don't want him hurting Willow, either. I have to watch as he comes down. I want all the information I can get. If I can see where the stairs are, maybe I'll be able to run if I get a chance.

I can see Dmitri better after my eyes have adjusted. He comes down the stairs at the far end of the room, practically swaggering. I hope he trips.

He's angry. Furious, maybe. He takes long strides over to Willow and then I watch as his hand cuts through the air. My eyes widen, my mouth opening—but it's too late.

Dmitri's hand cracks against Willow's face so hard her head snaps to the side.

"You're a fucking disappointment," he hisses. "A useless, backstabbing cunt. Did you think you'd actually get away? Did you think he'd take you in? That he'd protect you? He's already got one bitch warming his bed. Did you want to join her?"

Willow sobs, her chest heaving. "No, n—"

"You went and told them. You fucking told them, and for what?"

His hand wraps around her neck, squeezing tight, and I can't keep my mouth shut. Not when he's hurting her.

"Hey. Stop it! Leave her alone!" I call, raising my voice. It's unsteady, but I'm loud enough to draw his attention.

Dmitri turns. I can see the anger, the dark violence in his gaze. He's beyond pissed. He's at the edge.

I was tied up here worrying about how he'd eventually hurt me, maybe even kill me—but he's already at that point. He's already that far gone.

He stalks toward me, and I clench my hands, fully prepared for him to hit me. My entire body tenses, my teeth grinding together as I try to keep the fear from showing on my face.

You can do this, I tell myself. You're stronger than him. He's just an asshole with a power complex.

He stops in front of me, and I hold his gaze. There's a flat darkness to his

eyes, making them look like a shark's. I can see myself reflected in them, no light in the dark irises.

Dmitri reaches out to hold my chin. It's a softer touch than I expected, but his gaze is cutting. I wonder if he's trying to show me just how dangerous he is, how quickly he'll turn against me. Does he think I'd try to save myself by offering him whatever he wants?

Like hell.

He turns my face, his hand cold on my skin. "You know, I'm going to enjoy breaking you."

I keep my mouth shut. I can feel anger and violence rolling off him. I don't want to risk pushing him too far. As much as I want to weather the storm, I don't want to provoke him. I have a child to protect, and the only thing standing between Dmitri and my child is me. My body. If he hurts it, that's the end.

"When I was younger, I had so many fantasies about you. I wanted to claim you as my wife. I thought you'd make the perfect toy," Dmitri muses. He turns my face like he's inspecting a horse, distant and coldly calculating. "But after Aiden took your virginity, the charm was gone."

"He didn't take it," I say, unable to hold my tongue. "I gave it to him. And I'm so fucking glad I'm married to him and not you. Because he actually cares about me, just like he did back then."

Dmitri tilts his head. There's a small, twisted smirk on his lips.

My stomach turns. What is it he knows that I don't? What is it that he's not telling me?

I don't know why he chose me back then, or why he decided it was me he had to have. I don't think I really want to know. All I need to know is that he's a terrible person, an awful man and a worse husband.

How his twisted mind picked me doesn't matter. It happened, and now I'm here. That's all.

I just have to survive him.

"You know, I can't take you as a wife," he says, drawing the words out. "But I don't mind using you like the whore you are. I have no problem with that."

I swallow bile.

Dmitri's smile softens, but the fondness in his eyes isn't comforting. It's stomach-turning. He's not smiling at me. He's smiling because he's thinking about what he'll do to me.

"In fact," he murmurs, "I think I'll enjoy it."

Everything in me is screaming to get away. I know I can't, but the wild, animal instinct for survival rises anyway. Dmitri will find out about my child one way or the other. Maybe if I manage to hurt him now, Willow will come to her senses, and she can help me fight him off.

It's an insane hope, but it spurs me. I kick at Dmitri, but he sidesteps my foot, laughing.

His laugh makes goose bumps spread over my skin, my stomach souring. He's going to smile at me this entire time. Right up until he kills me.

"Yes, I really will enjoy this," he snarls, even though he's still smiling. "I'll make you scream, you little—"

Noises erupt upstairs, cutting him off.

My breath catches, and I jerk my chin up, my neck aching.

The loud pop of gunfire filters down to the empty basement room we're in. Then shouting, followed by the sound of footsteps.

Dmitri curses. I stare at the ceiling, willing someone to come down. I want to scream, but don't want to provoke Dmitri. If he knocks me out, there's no way I can call out. No way to tell someone to save me, whoever is here.

I hope to god it's Aiden.

Dmitri darts around me. I can feel him untie me from the wall, then a burn on my wrists as he yanks me up by the rope holding my arms behind my back. He twists the length around his hand and shoves me forward, just beneath the bare lightbulb hanging from the ceiling.

I stumble a little, tired and disoriented. Dmitri yanks until I stop beneath the light. I breathe heavily, watching the staircase.

In my mind, I imagine Aiden bursting down the stairs with his men behind him. I imagine them flooding the basement, their guns drawn, someone shooting Dmitri from a distance. I imagine him hitting the ground in the blink of an eye, the danger gone all at once.

I know that won't be the reality.

Dmitri leans close to me, his mouth at my ear. I can feel it hot on my skin, and I try to squirm away, but he holds me in place.

"Is this what you want? You want him to come save you?"

I try to twist my hands out of the rope, but it's too tight. Dmitri doesn't seem to care that I'm fighting him. I can feel him looming behind me, his body close, his presence terrifying.

He leans away from my ear. His voice is low when he speaks again, but he's calm. Darkly prepared.

"He won't save you. No one will."

I hear something move, then a metallic click. My heart sinks as I feel something cold press to the back of my head.

A gun.

I squeeze my eyes shut and start praying silently. *Please*, *please let me get out of here*.

"I'll kill you before I let him have you," Dmitri says softly. And I believe him.

CHAPTER 36

Aiden

Dmitri's house sits on a slightly raised hill that borders a forest, perched on the slope as if it's about to dive off and soar over the city. It looks just like him. Black, steel, everything dark and sterile. An imitation of what he thinks intimidation looks like.

There are black sedans parked on the curved driveway, and my brothers and I meet Jamie at the edge of the property.

"Watch your corners," Lachlan says, glancing at all of us. "And watch each other's backs."

"Let's go." Jamie's eyes burn with almost as much rage as I feel as he glances toward the house.

With grim nods, we all turn and move.

Connor takes the front door. He shoots out the lock, then slams it open, his weight a massive force that blows it in. We burst in without much care for secrecy. I split to the right. I know the others will cover the rest of the house. We know what we're doing. We'll go in two groups, left and right.

Connor and Jamie are at my side as we round a corner and find two guards. Connor shoots one in the shoulder, and I take the other. The man I shot is still upright, so I lunge forward and whip my gun against the side of his head. He hits the ground in a heap as we move forward.

This is just the beginning. The bulk of Dmitri's security is probably deeper in the house, closer to where Dmitri must be.

The next corner proves me right.

I start to turn the corner when I hear a blast of gunfire, rapid and echoing. I slam against the wall, ducking away from the debris as bullets tear past me and into the wall in front of me. Connor pauses on the other side of the

doorway from me, checking his clip.

We don't have to speak. Jamie takes something from his belt and throws it through the door. I hear it detonate a second later, light flashing and debris skidding across the floor. We round the corner quickly, ducking low as we look for cover.

I can hear footsteps behind me, and I glance back to see Lachlan and Finn guarding our flanks. The other side of the house must've been empty, so they've joined us after finishing their sweep.

Connor vaults a couch in the living room, and I cover him, taking quick shots at several guards who burst into the room. Someone lunges at me over the coffee table, managing to tackle me around the waist. We go down, but I twist as I fall, taking him to the floor beneath me. I swing wildly at his temple, and he grunts, each of us grappling to get a shot in.

He tries to headbutt me, but when he misses, I grip the front of his shirt and roll us, shoving him away from me as I call out, "Finn!"

Finn fires two shots, and the guard drops like a bag of cement.

I scramble up and raise my weapon, exchanging fire with the Raven Syndicate guards, but then a voice echoes out from beyond the large door at the far end of the now destroyed living room.

"Stop!"

I freeze. A moment later, Rose steps into view. Dmitri stands behind her, a gun resting against her head.

The Raven Syndicate men freeze—those that are left standing—and turn to look at Dmitri. There are only four guards left in the room, all injured or out of breath. He's bought them time.

But I won't let him get away with this.

The sight of Rose, a gun to her head, makes bile rise in my throat. Anger floods my veins, red tinting my vision.

I'm going to destroy him.

"I'll kill her if you come any closer," Dmitri adds, his voice hard and low.

My heart thunders, but I stay frozen where I am. We're locked in a standoff with Dmitri and his men, their weapons pointed at my brothers, Jamie, and me, and ours pointed at them. A single errant shot could set off a bloodbath.

A bloodbath that could get Rose killed.

"Good," Dmitri says, smiling savagely. "I'm leaving now. Don't make a fucking move, or I'll blow her brains out. All right?"

I hold my breath. I don't trust him to keep his word. I half expect him to execute her now, then laugh as he runs.

Dmitri starts backing away, moving toward a hallway beside him. I know it leads to the side of the house, to the garage where he has an escape plan. Something roars in my chest. I can't let him get out with her. I can't let her disappear again.

Rose looks up. For the first time, she meets my eyes. I can see fear, and it spears my heart. I know how terrified she must be.

She never wanted this. Any of this. Her father only ever tried to shield her from this, and I dragged her into it. And for what? For a lie I believed, told by the one man who I never wanted to bow to?

If I could go back, I'd never let things get this fucked. I'd never hate her the way I did, never take her away from her life like I did. Maybe we never would've healed the rift between us, but at least she would have been alive.

She'd be fine now, safe, away from Dmitri instead of being held at gunpoint. She'd be happy.

And that's all I care about.

I look at Rose, and her eyes are so green, so bright. She stares back at me, and I can see the fear in her eyes change, shifting to hope.

As Dmitri pulls her along, the hope in Rose's eyes solidifies into determination. I can see it happen, and I know what it means. I've seen it before. I saw it every time she defied the powerful men in her life, every time she stood up and refused to let others dictate her fate.

My heart lurches. My finger twitches.

Rose twists. I watch her elbow shoot backward, right into Dmitri's stomach. It's awkward and imperfect, but it's enough to make him flinch. His aim wavers for a second, the barrel of the gun leaving Rose's head.

It's enough of an opening for me to take a shot.

I line it up, my finger squeezing the trigger just as my brothers fire at the guards holding us at bay. It feels like everything is moving slow, time crawling like the sweat beaded on my neck. I aim my shot above Rose's shoulder, right at Dmitri.

When it hits, the force throws Dmitri's shoulder back. It loosens his fingers enough for him to reflexively drop the gun, the clatter of it hitting the floor like thunder in my ears. Rose throws herself to the side and Dmitri is left wide open, a target ready and waiting.

I fire again, but this time, the bullet only grazes him as he turns and

sprints away.

"Fuck!" I bellow.

I can't let him escape.

As my brothers take out the remaining guards, I sprint forward, trusting them to take care of Rose. Dmitri can't be allowed to get free. He's slipped away from me too many fucking times, and I won't let it happen again.

I run, my shoes squeaking on the bloodied floor as I race after Dmitri. He left out the back door, the opposite direction he was taking Rose.

The back of Dmitri's house borders a forested area, an undeveloped plot crowded with foliage. I can't immediately see him when I burst outside, so I run toward the trees and follow the trampled earth. He must've gone into the fucking woods. I can only hope he doesn't have a helicopter or something else stashed in the trees. I can hear my own breathing in the silence as I weave between trees, the gun in my hand warm on my skin.

I slow as I go farther, glancing down at the ground. The earth here isn't as disturbed. I don't know if he's hiding or if he went another way.

"Goddammit," I curse, my head swiveling back and forth.

When Dmitri leaps out at me from behind a large tree, I'm just a fraction of a second too slow to stop him. He hits me hard, and we go down and roll a few feet, far enough to send me slamming into another tree.

Dmitri breathes heavily, his hair falling in his face as we grapple on the ground. He tries to wrest the gun from my grip, but I elbow him in the face, making blood pour from his nose. I squeeze the trigger, trying to shoot him, but he knocks my arm away, sending the bullet wide.

"I should have killed her just like I killed your bastard father," Dmitri spits. His eyes are wild, his face red and sweaty.

"You can't," I snarl. "I'd never let you."

"Really? Because you're so fucking good at protecting people? You broke her goddamn heart in high school. You broke her better than I ever could have."

"Fuck you."

I roll us over and manage to get on top of him, but when I aim the gun at his head and pull the trigger, there's nothing but a soft click.

Dmitri laughs, his teeth stained with blood. "All this for a woman? For a useless, pathetic woman? You can't protect her. You couldn't keep your father safe from me either. Callum was weak. Just like you. Just like your whore wife."

A wave of rage hits me, and I drop the weapon as my fists rain down on his face over and over. The gun sits in the grass, abandoned and unneeded, as I allow the monster inside me to burst forth. My mouth drops open in an endless, feral roar as I let blow after blow fall.

He screams at first. Tries to fight me off.

And then he stops moving at all.

Finally, when my knuckles are bloodied, split open, and bruised, I push myself off the ground and stand over the body.

It's not Dmitri anymore. Not really. I can't find anything that resembles the living man in the *thing* on the ground. There's no violence, no smug smirk, no dark eyes. No petty rage. Just an empty shell of a human, done forever.

I shake out my hand, breathing heavily. I can't reconcile the body on the ground with the monster that destroyed half my family and nearly killed Rose.

Rose.

I turn toward the house and start to jog back. My entire body is burning with exertion, but I know she's still there. I'm sure my brothers have kept her safe, but my heart still pounds dangerously. I have to see for myself that she's okay.

When I enter, I can hear voices. My brothers and Jamie. I find the rest of Dmitri's guards littered on the floor, most of them dead. There's blood and broken furniture everywhere.

Jamie looks up when I enter. He nods once, serious, then glances down at his arm. Finn is pressing something to it, a rag covered in blood.

"How bad?" I ask. My voice is hoarse.

Jamie shrugs his other shoulder. "Just grazed. Nothing bad all around."

"They're all done," Lachlan adds, waving around the room. "There weren't many here. He wasn't expecting this."

"Really?"

"I don't think he expected us to come so fast," Connor says, emerging from another room. He pushes his hair out of his face. "And I don't think he expected all of us. He probably thought it would just be you."

As if we would ever split up. As if we aren't a family, prepared to go down together.

But that's the difference between Dmitri and us. He had nothing, no one. All he had was fear. Of course, he didn't think my brothers would risk everything with me. Even as obvious as it was that they would, he didn't think they'd take the chance.

I look around the room, searching, and find Rose.

She's huddled around the corner, right near where she dove when Dmitri ran. I breathe out, and it feels like I'm letting a decade of tension leave my body. I catch her gaze and watch her eyes fill with tears, shining brightly as she looks up at me.

Reaching her in several long strides, I drop to my knees and pull her to me, wrapping my arms around her body.

I just want to feel her, her warmth and the certainty of her weight pressed against me. Rose exhales shakily against my shoulder. She shudders, her hands tight in my shirt as she holds me close.

"Aiden—"

"Shh," I whisper, quieting her. I pull back only far enough to kiss her face —her eyes, her nose, her cheeks, her mouth.

I need to reassure myself as much as her. I need to know she's in my arms, safe. Finally.

"I love you," I say, fierce and low. "I fucking love you, more than I ever thought I could."

"I love you too," Rose says, gasping through her tears. She buries her face in my shoulder and then pulls back, looking me in the eyes.

Her hands move from my back, pressing against my cheeks. She holds me in place, her eyes locked on mine, drinking everything in.

"I love you," she repeats, stronger. "I love you so much, Aiden."

I brush her hair away from her face. She has blood on her cheek from Dmitri. I wipe it away, trying to erase the marks he's made. I won't let him hurt her, or anyone else.

I kiss her again, the press of my lips both tender and fierce.

Dmitri couldn't take this away. He could never rip us apart, no matter how hard he tried. All his planning couldn't break the bond between us. No matter what he did, we're still here, still together.

He couldn't kill our love. He couldn't even scratch it.

"What happened to him?" Rose asks quietly.

I look over her shoulder, toward the doorway. I can see my brothers pause. They heard and they're listening, suddenly tuned in, waiting to know what we have to do next.

I turn my gaze away and say, "He's dead."

Rose pulls back suddenly. Her eyes are wide as she looks at me, mingled relief and fear stark in her gaze.

"What?"

"You don't have to worry about him anymore."

That much is true.

The reality is that the Assembly will have every right to take action against me. Against my brothers. They made a ruling and we disregarded it. More than that, I killed the head of another family.

There will be consequences for that.

"It's all right," I say quietly. I pull Rose to me, cocooning her small body with mine. "I had to come. There was no fucking way I wouldn't."

Rose's hands tighten in my shirt, and for a long moment, we're both silent. Then she sniffs and leans back, turning to look toward a door that leads to a descending staircase.

"Willow is down there. We have to help her."

My stomach turns. I rise to my feet and pull Rose up, keeping her close to my side as I make my way down into the basement. I hear my brothers follow, their guns still ready for whatever we might face.

There's a bare light in the basement. I can see Willow in the corner, tied to a chair. Connor walks around her and kneels to cut the rope holding her, his expression grim. Angry.

Willow is obviously drugged. She blinks, bleary and unfocused, and then her eyes land on me.

"Aiden? Connor. Rose? What?" She shakes her head, her eyes unable to lock on any of us. "Why? Why are you...all of you..."

"Willow? It's me, Rose." Rose kneels in front of her friend, carefully pulling at the rope. "Remember? We were both here. Dmitri tied us up down here."

"You left. You left me."

"I know. I'm sorry," Rose says quietly. "But I came back. We came back for you. Okay?"

I bite my tongue. Will she ever be fine? I know Dmitri wrecked her. I can't see if she'll ever be whole again, even a little. I don't know.

"Willow, I need to tell you something," I say.

Rose glances over her shoulder. There's uncertainty in her eyes. I know she's wondering if we should say anything, but I know it can't wait. Willow needs to know now.

She blinks. Somehow, through the fog, she sees something in my eyes. I can tell she knows. She can see. Her lips part, but no words come out. Whatever she's thinking doesn't have enough energy or thought to come out.

I still have to say it. I have to tell her.

"He's dead," I say. I don't sugarcoat it. She deserves more than that.

Willow swallows. I watch the pain flicker in her eyes, then the hate, then the sorrow. Maybe some part of her always clung to the ideal she had before she married Dmitri, the dream of a married life. Maybe she remembers the moments when he wasn't her captor, her abuser. I don't know.

Now, there are only a few silent tears. She's too drugged and tired for more.

I don't know what she's thinking, but I can see her jaw tense. She rises from her chair and sways for a moment. Connor gently presses a hand to her elbow, supporting her.

Willow is quiet when she finally says, "Come with me."

She turns to go up the stairs. We follow her out, Connor close at her side. Willow leads us through the halls until she reaches a back room, a library-like corner tucked away from the rest. She lowers herself onto her bruised knees slowly.

There's a hidden safe at the bottom of the bookcase near the floor, behind a framed picture she pulls out and tosses aside.

She punches in the code, and the safe door swings open with a soft beep. Willow pulls out a stack of things—papers, files, a few USB drives. She deposits them on the chair beside her and slowly gets to her feet, her painful movements growing a little more steady.

"This is it," she says.

Lachlan stares. "It's—"

"All of it. His most private business information."

Finn's eyes widen. "You mean—?"

Willow lifts a USB and turns it in her fingers, holding it up to the light. Her face is drawn too thin and worn out, but she looks almost triumphant.

Or maybe it's just relief etched in her features.

"Shady dealings," she confirms. "All the proof of his plotting against the Assembly. The truth about how he killed your father."

Willow turns the USB one more time before Connor gently stops her, his hand on hers. She looks up from the device and blinks, tears welling up again. She lets it go, and Connor takes it as she steps away.

Lachlan nods. "We have all we need, then."

"All you need," Willow echoes quietly. "All you need to show the Assembly as justification for what you did. And this time, he can't manipulate it. This time, he can't manipulate me. This time, there's only the truth."

CHAPTER 37



I stand with Aiden in the driveway of Dmitri's house, the other O'Reillys trailing out behind us. The sky is overcast, which seems to suit the events of the day. There aren't any cars passing us, just a thin two-lane road curving around the property.

"I think it's time to go home," Lachlan says. He looks out over the front lawn, his dark hair ruffled in the wind.

There's something in his eyes when he looks at Aiden. It's a reminder, I think—a reminder that there isn't much time before they have to face consequences.

Maybe it's also a reminder to stay safe.

There's a coiling guilt in my gut. I know none of this was my fault, but I can't help feeling like I was the one who made Aiden and his brothers choose. I was the one that forced them into this corner.

It's stupid. I know it's all Dmitri's fault. He chose me for some bizarre reason, and he chased me to get back at Aiden. None of this was my fault. But I still feel a little uneasy about being the reason why Aiden and his brothers risked everything.

They could lose it all.

I turn to Aiden, some confession on my tongue. I'm not sure what I want to tell him—maybe that I'm sorry, maybe that I never meant to be the reason he risked his family and life.

Aiden looks down at me. His hand hasn't left my back since he found me. He has me pulled close to him, prepared to guard against anything we might face.

"Let's go home," he says.

I blink, surprised by the tears that threaten to sting my eyes. Suddenly, going home sounds perfect.

"Okay."

Aiden guides me to his car and I watch the other brothers go to Lachlan's. I wonder what they're murmuring about. and if Jamie is okay. I wonder what they're going to do about Dmitri and his house.

Aiden starts to drive, and I sit in the passenger seat as silence fills the car. I manage to hold myself in for a few moments, but it doesn't last long.

"I'm sorry," I finally blurt.

Aiden glances at me, his brow furrowed. "What for? Rose—"

"I wish you didn't have to do this. You risked everything."

"It was worth it," he says, his voice fierce. His hand squeezes mine tightly. "I'd do it again."

I can feel something like liquid fire pouring through my veins, heating my heart. The words soothe some part of me, but worry still beats at my chest.

"Aiden... this could change everything. You could lose everything, your place at the Assembly—"

"None of that is worth anything if I don't have you," he says slowly, every word heavy with truth. "I can't live a life that means anything if you aren't at my side."

I swallow hard and let the rest of the words die before they can reach my lips. I shut my eyes and try to focus on the feeling of his hand in mine.

I love him. I love Aiden, and I feel terrible that this had to happen. But I can't help the pure joy and relief that he loves me too, loves me enough to risk everything to keep me safe. I don't think I've ever felt so secure in my life.

"I wish you didn't have to kill a man for me," I say quietly.

Aiden doesn't speak for a long moment. I almost think he won't say anything.

"He was a monster, Rose. I would have killed him either way. He left me no choice."

"I know."

I don't ask him how it happened. He cleaned his hands on a cloth one of his brothers gave him, but I saw how bloody they were when he came back inside. I know Dmitri's death wasn't quick or clean.

But maybe there's more darkness in me than I realized before, because I can't find it in myself to feel pity for the dead man.

The house comes into view after a while, and the tightness in my chest loosens a bit more. It's become home, somehow. It makes me want to melt into the very foundation when I see it. I have memories in every corner of the house now. It feels like my own.

It is.

I keep forgetting that, somehow. I'm Aiden's wife, and this place is mine just as much as it's his.

It's ours.

Aiden pulls into the garage and walks around the car to help me out. His hands are careful when he supports me. I want to tell him I'm not weak, not unable to walk by myself—but I want this connection right now. I want the safety of his arms for just a little longer.

I'm wide awake. I don't know how I could ever sleep. My head stopped spinning hours ago, the drugs Dmitri's men gave me out of my system by now.

When we get inside, Aiden stops me at the stairs with a palm against my neck. I pause to look up at him and he slowly slides an arm under my knees, lifting me up with no effort.

I can feel my face heating. I can't speak at first, my heart racing too much.

Aiden doesn't say anything, and I feel like I might break a spell if I do. I don't speak, instead letting him take me up the stairs. He walks slowly, careful and patient. He watches my face and I can't help being mesmerized by the way he looks at me.

It should be uncomfortable or awkward, being watched so intently. But I know he's reassuring himself just as much as I'm reassuring myself by looking at him.

We get to the bedroom, and Aiden gently lowers me, letting me get my bearings before he pulls his arms away. He pushes my hair back from my face, examining some cuts or scrapes I can't see.

"I'm going to take care of you," he says quietly.

I know he means now, but I also know he means forever. It makes my chest contract, my heart thumping hard against my ribs.

Aiden gently guides me to the bathroom, his hand warm in mine. I let him pull me in and start undressing me, his hands careful and slow. Part of me burns, wanting more of his touch, more of his body. But I also want this quiet intimacy.

I pull Aiden's clothes off as he stands before me. I want him with me for as long as I can have him. I know there are things to be done, Assembly business to take care of, but I'm grateful we have these few precious moments to ourselves.

Once we're naked, he turns the shower on, the water steaming within seconds. He helps me in, one hand in mine, the other at my waist. I step in and stand across from him, sighing as the hot water pours over me. It feels incredible.

After a moment, Aiden's hands pass over the scrapes on my wrists, gently sponging the thin red stripes there. Every cut is superficial, but he treats me with care. I watch him clean everything, gentle and slow, and I can feel a lump in my throat.

I almost want to cry. He's so careful with me, I can imagine him being careful with our child. I can imagine him being an incredible father, his soft smiles in the privacy of our home. I can see him being a fearsome man when he's away with business, but that armor falling away the moment he walks through the door.

I've seen both sides of him. The side that chased Dmitri down and killed him, and the side that loves me, the side that touches me like I'm precious.

I love him for all his parts. I don't think I could imagine him being any other way.

When I slide my hands up to his cheeks, he looks down at me, his eyes soft, and I can see the love in them. I can see how ready he was to do anything and everything to get me back.

I pull Aiden down and kiss him. He holds me close to him, his hands on my waist, and I can feel my body heating with the water and his touch. I kiss him slowly as he raises one of his hands to slide over my chest. It rests right on my collarbone, touching the sensitive skin there.

I can't help the whimper that escapes me when he touches me. Every cell in my body feels magnetic, like it's pulled to him.

We kiss and touch each other as we clean up, and when Aiden pulls back to turn the water off, I breathe deeply. Then he pulls a towel off its hook and wraps me in it, drying me just as carefully as he cleaned the cuts and scrapes.

I let the towel fall to the floor and follow Aiden into the bedroom. He helps me onto the bed, lowering me just as carefully as he did before.

Leaning over me, he kisses me again. It's harder and hungrier this time, even though I know he's still trying to be gentle with me.

"Please," I say, my hips pushing up against his hand. I need more.

But instead of thrusting into me, Aiden stops. The reluctance is clear in his movements, but he lets go of my hip. It's almost painful, the way he pulls back slowly and starts to get his breathing back to normal. The unreleased tension in me protests, demanding that I get him back.

"Not yet," he finally says. I can tell he's thinking about Dmitri and the Assembly.

He's thinking about how he has to make sure this is truly over, that this one last thing is taken care of. He won't allow himself to do anything until he knows.

"I have to go," Aiden says quietly. "I have to meet my brothers and deal with this. But I wanted to make sure you were taken care of first. I'll have guards watching the house, just in case. You'll be safe."

He's undressed, and I can see his cock pulsing, hard and ready for me. It would be so easy for us to give in to the need between us. But instead of settling between my legs like I know we both want, he pushes off the bed. He gazes down at me, then nods once.

"Stay like that while I'm gone."

"Like what?" I swallow hard. I know what he wants. I just want to hear him say it.

Aiden's eyes darken, one hand trailing over my leg. It makes me shiver, goosebumps rising on my skin.

"Naked. Ready. Waiting for me," he growls softly.

I nod, my heart racing. As if he can't resist, he drags one finger slowly through my folds.

"Don't touch yourself. Leave that for me," he adds. "I want you soaked. Desperate. I want you to ride that line of arousal until I get back. Until I sink into you."

I swallow hard.

"Okay," I say, my voice husky.

Biting my lower lip, I watch him dress and then stride from the room, a determined set to his shoulders. I don't know how long he'll be, how long his business with the Assembly will last. But I meant what I told him.

I can wait for Aiden.

Part of me always has.

CHAPTER 38

Aiden

All I want is to stay with Rose. As I get into my car, all I can think about is her—the way her skin is flushed pink from the hot shower, the way her nipples hardened with arousal. All I can hear is her shallow breathing, the moans in her throat as I kissed her.

I keep wanting to turn around and drive right back to my wife. She's the one I did all this for, the reason I risked everything. I should be with her right now.

But I know I have to ensure that this is all over. I have to go to the Assembly and tell them everything.

I drive up to the meeting place where my brothers are already parked. They step out of Lachlan's car when I turn my engine off and I stand with them there for a moment, in a nearly empty parking lot. The sky is worse now, not just overcast but threatening rain.

It's a fitting end to this shit show.

"How are we doing this?" I ask.

Lachlan evaluates me silently for a moment. I know he's thinking about Dmitri, how I killed him. He's thinking about the line I crossed, the line we all try never to touch. There's a way to do things, a civility to our business. There are people that do the killing when it needs to be done, when it's a last resort.

What I did is unheard of. I got my hands dirty. They're bleeding red onto the ground like a trail behind me, and if I don't do anything, that blood will make me slip and fall. It will bring us all down.

"You'll tell them what you've done," Lachlan finally says. "Then we'll show them why."

"Is that a good idea?" Finn asks, incredulous. "The second he says as much, he's dead."

"Not necessarily." Lachlan holds up a stack of folders. "We have our evidence. We can prove it."

I look at the folders. Will they really save me? Us?

I know just how stubborn the Assembly is. They didn't vote to move when we first told them about Dmitri. Willow changed her story, and without that corroboration, they couldn't see the truth, couldn't see past Dmitri's slick facade.

If they don't accept my explanation, it's not just my life at risk. It's my family. Rose.

"All right," I agree. "I'll tell them."

It's the only way.

"We'll see what they really think in those moments in between," Connor muses. "It'll be good to know who we need to look out for next."

"I'd rather know we don't have to look out for anyone now," Finn mutters. "I'd rather know Dmitri was the one causing all the problems."

"I guess we'll see," Lachlan replies. "Let's go."

As we follow him into the building, I can feel a knot of tension in my chest. It's not guilt or nerves. I know what I did was right and justified.

The tension isn't for me. It's for my brothers, for Rose. I know the reality of what could happen. Just enough votes on the wrong side, and my family could be fleeing the city before nightfall. My wife and child might never be able to come back to this place, to my hometown. I might never set foot in it again.

Or we may all end up dead.

The room is full when we arrive, minus Dmitri or anyone else from the Raven Syndicate. They're all disgruntled, probably annoyed at being called to another emergency meeting so quickly.

A few glances shoot our way, clearly irked that our family seems to be stirring up so much trouble.

I stand with my brothers and wait.

The head of the Devil's Disciples, Kade, is talking to Enzo. I wonder if Enzo is trying to organize a new alliance, since he's lost faith in our family.

The gathered members all keep talking, their glances occasionally shooting to the door. It continues for five minutes, and then the conversation starts to die down. One unanswered question lingers in the air like smoke,

clouding the atmosphere, brewing and stinging as the rest of the Assembly watch and wait.

They're all waiting for Dmitri, but he'll never arrive.

Lachlan shoots me a look and nods, and I raise my voice, my words carrying over the room.

"Dmitri is dead. I killed him."

Something shatters, invisible and silent. The uneasy emotion in the room spins into something violent, reactive. I can feel it like electricity when a storm rolls in.

Kade is the first to speak. "What the fuck?"

"This is unbelievable," Enzo snarls. He looks angry, but I can see the real emotion behind the anger—it's triumph. He was just looking for a reason to cut ties with us. "You do this and think to come here? Tell us to our faces? What kind of ego—"

"You must have known what the outcome would be," Donovan says carefully. He's staring, looking for some kind of signal.

I respect the man more than I ever have. After all we've accused him of, all that's been taken from him, he seems to have the brains to side with us. I think I know where Rose gets her strength from.

Before anyone else can speak, Lachlan leans over the table and slaps down a handful of folders.

"This is everything. We'll walk you through it," he says, his voice hard.

Connor taps one of the folders and flips it open. "Here's the folder about the Messina family. Sabotage. This is all about the most recent deals your family has had, including informants and locations. We believe it was how our warehouse deal was hit."

"What?" Enzo's neck flushes red. His lips press into a line.

Connor stares back at him. "Sabotage. Someone planned for it to fail, from within."

"I know what the word means."

"Well, now you know where to look," Connor replies evenly. "Someone in your operation was working for Dmitri. They leaked the information. All it took was one leak, and he was all over it."

Lachlan jerks his chin. "That's not all, though. Finn?"

"This one is fascinating," Finn continues. He flips open another folder and spreads the pages out. "It seems like he was starting his campaign against you, Kade. Luckily, he couldn't juggle more than three things at a time. He was a little too focused on other families to make a real effort."

"Was he, now?" Kade's eyes are dark as he looks through the file. He flips pages, his face stony. "And you came by this... where?"

"His home. Hidden away."

Kade nods. "And I suppose he has a file on everyone."

"This is unbelievable," Enzo says, his words a low growl. He glares at the pages before him, flipping through the documents.

"Of course," Lachlan agrees. "He was scheming against every single one of us. He wanted to drive wedges between us, each group, to spark open warfare."

"He wanted everything," Finn says, pointing to the other folders. "And he had a plan to get it."

I can see the anger on the men's faces. These powerful heads of families were all tricked—including us. Every single one of us was tricked by Dmitri, but that's over.

He's dead. And I don't regret it.

Kade looks across the table at me, his rough face arranged into something I think is supposed to be mild respect. Or maybe he's just satisfied that I did what I needed to when I was given the chance.

"So," he begins. "I think we can agree that the usual punishment doesn't apply here."

Killing me, he means. I should be executed for the disrespect I showed the Assembly, for going against their established rules. In any other case, I'd be interrogated and stripped of everything, and then I'd be executed. My family would pay a price too, everyone in my orbit held to account for my crime.

But that's not what's going to happen to me. Not when we have this proof.

"Dmitri was doing something unheard of," Antonio adds. He glances at Enzo. "He was going to destroy everything. We're lucky he didn't get far."

Luck. I'll let them say as much, but we all know the truth. It was my family that took the risk, my family that did the work. We're the ones that risked everything to ensure that Dmitri never succeeded in his plan.

But it's fine. We'll trade our shaky reputation for this new standing with the Assembly. They know we saved them, and that's enough. The least they will do is recognize us as equals. From here, we can work our way higher.

Kade snorts. "Destroying everything is an understatement. He wanted to

watch us devour each other."

"A vote, then," Antonio says, glancing around the room. "For whether punishment needs to be enacted."

There's a beat of silence. I'm not sure what's about to happen, but I can feel danger brewing.

If they decide I have to pay—even a little—there will be consequences. Bad ones. Ones that I don't deserve to pay for what I did.

I'll be damned if I have to pay for ensuring Dmitri suffered.

Antonio speaks, making a case for why the others should vote against punishing me. I watch the heads of the families and their seconds vote, hands in the air, murmurs exchanged. I listen and wait, prepared to run for my life, prepared to take Rose somewhere safe.

The vote is a unanimous no.

Despite my confidence in the evidence, my confidence in the Assembly wasn't as high. It's a relief to hear them say that I won't suffer for what I did, for the death of Dmitri.

I breathe deeply for the first time since storming Dmitri's house. I know I have nothing to ask forgiveness for, but there was a part of me that worried perhaps the Assembly wouldn't see what I did, what everyone in my family could see about Dmitri.

It's good to put that doubt to rest. Perhaps now the instability and tension within the Assembly will finally ease up. The animosity that was sown by Dmitri will die, and everything will return to how it's always been.

"Then that's it," Antonio says. He sounds relieved. "We know the truth now, and we know what might have happened."

"It ends neatly," Nikolai says, pinning Lachlan with a stare. "Lucky for us."

"More than luck. We were watching," Lachlan replies evenly. "We saw what he was, and when he attacked us, we did not stand for it."

"It was unfortunate that he had to die," I say. I only half mean it. "But he gave us no choice. I don't regret protecting the Assembly, or my family."

Nikolai's second looks over at us, his head tilted casually. His question is anything but.

"If he's dead, then what happened to his wife?"

Lachlan nods. "She's still alive. She provided this evidence, and she'll be under our protection."

"I'm going to marry her," Connor adds.

His answer is so sudden that I have to fight not to move at first, stopping myself from betraying how surprised I am. We didn't speak about this at all. None of us did.

Willow was Dmitri's wife. By rights, she now controls the majority of the Raven Syndicate's business holdings. Marrying her would give our family more power, and it would protect her from those who would try to gain her power.

Or people who might want retribution for Dmitri's betrayal.

Willow is a powerful part of the Raven Syndicate now, but there's no way she's well enough to handle it all. There's too much happening that she never knew about, and besides that, I don't even know if she's in the right state for it.

I wonder how the fuck this is going to go. Connor and Willow married. Willow is obviously emotionally damaged, a drug addict—she probably has no interest in marrying Connor. She may never want to marry again.

But I can see why he said what he did.

It's necessary. It's necessary for the Raven Syndicate to maintain their power and stability, and more than that, it's necessary to keep Willow safe.

Nikolai's second doesn't look too happy about that answer, though.

The Assembly members are skeptical, I know. Some of them are probably even angry that Connor put a claim on her first, but they won't say anything. We're the ones who took Dmitri down, and we're the ones who knew he was plotting in the first place. They won't challenge Connor on his claim.

Maybe they think things worked out too well for us. Maybe some people suspect us, but that doesn't matter. We have our proof, and so long as we manage the transition of power, we won't have to suffer for what happened.

Willow deserves happiness too. I just hope there's enough left of her in one piece to find it. I hope that Connor can help her move on from this, or at least be whole enough to have a life.

They might never truly be in love, or even like each other all that much, but Connor can keep her safe. I believe he wants to do it for all the right reasons. That's all that matters in the end.

And it's not like there's much of a choice.

"That's all, then," Antonio finally says. "Our business is done. I believe we all have much to attend to."

That's a fucking understatement.

We leave the Assembly meeting, walking as a tight group as we make our

way out of the building.

"You're doing this," Finn says. It doesn't sound like a question. He stares at Connor as we walk out.

Connor keeps his eyes straight ahead. "I'm doing this."

"You're sure?" Finn frowns. "You don't have to just because—"

"It's not 'just because' of anything," Connor says, his voice firm. His eyes are locked on something ahead of him, maybe some future he wants. "It's for the family. And she doesn't deserve the shit show that'll happen when this ends."

"Shit show is right," Finn mutters. "It would be hell to deal with for anyone."

"We'll have to move fast," Lachlan says. I can hear questions in his voice, but I know he realizes that Connor isn't going to back down. "Others will try to move in on Dmitri's territory. As soon as they know he's dead, it's open season."

"The Raven Syndicate will go under unless you can prop it up and join it with our family," I tell Connor. I know he probably knows this, but I want him to hear it.

An arranged marriage is harder than it seems, especially when it's about power and business.

Part of me feels bad that Connor has to do this, but he did volunteer. I know he's doing it for the family, but I also know it's going to be hell. Willow is damaged, and she needs time, but she can't get that now. She's going to be forced to marry again, only this time, it will be for her safety.

She might hate Connor for making her do this, but there's no other option.

"I'll do what it takes," Connor says firmly. "For the good of the family."

He says it with conviction, and I believe him. But I know he doesn't know what he's getting into.

"All right," I say. "If you're doing this, we'll help. You won't have to handle it alone."

CHAPTER 39



I hear the door open downstairs, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

I've been doing just what Aiden said. I've been waiting for him. But every minute felt like an hour, felt like torture.

He left me here waiting for him, and I know he partly did it to distract me from worrying about what would come of his meeting with the Assembly. He and his brothers seemed confident that it would work out, but I know there was still a risk involved.

And his strategy worked, in a way. I've stayed in bed rather than pacing the room, but the longer I wait, the more desperate I get to see him. Not just because I need him to touch me, but because I need the reassurance that everything will be all right.

That we'll all come through this alive, and that my world won't be ripped apart again.

The way Aiden touched me before he left was as if he was trying to leave a print on me, to memorize the feel of my skin beneath his fingers. It was as if he wanted to leave a trace so that I could remember him and how much he loves me.

Whatever doubts I ever had about this thing between us being real, they're gone.

We've hurt each other so much. We had a hard road, but I don't doubt whether this is right anymore—I don't doubt that he cares, and I certainly don't doubt that I care.

I need Aiden more than I've ever needed anyone.

I trust him.

I want him.

Time slows when he finally walks through the bedroom door. His eyes lock on mine, and suddenly, I can't think. My brain is a rush of static, everything replaced by the need burning between us. I can feel it roll off him like a heat wave.

I swallow, my mouth and throat dry. "How did your meeting with the Assembly go?"

He steps into the room and closes the door behind him. "It went well. They saw the evidence, so they won't hold me to account for killing Dmitri."

"Good." I lick my lips. It's hard to focus when he's looking at me the way he is. "I'm... I'm glad."

"So am I."

Aiden slowly stalks toward the bed as he speaks, and the sound of his footsteps sends a shiver up my spine. He tugs at his tie and shirt as he walks, throwing them aside as he comes closer.

"Have you been a good girl?" he asks, his voice low and smooth. "Did you wait for me?"

I nod. I can't form words. My heart races, my blood rushing beneath my skin.

Aiden pulls the covers down. I gasp as the cool air hits my body. He doesn't touch me yet, as much as my body is screaming for him.

"Show me."

My chest rises and falls as I lock eyes with him, letting my legs spread slowly. I reach down and slip my fingers inside myself, my breath hitching. Even this much feels like torture, not nearly enough. I spread myself wide, letting him see.

I'm so fucking wet, so ready for him. I'm more than ready, even—I'm two seconds from coming, two seconds from falling apart.

Aiden groans, and my heart pounds harder. Even the brief touch of my own hand has me right on the edge. My breathing is ragged. I try to control it, wrestle back control, and keep everything locked down just the way he told me to.

Aiden unbuttons his shirt slowly, never taking his gaze off me.

"Touch yourself," he murmurs. "But don't come."

I want to scream and protest. I want to beg. But I know what he wants, and as painfully close as I am, I want it too. I keep my mouth shut and press a finger against my clit, circling it slowly.

Aiden peels off his shirt, and can't stop staring at the way his arms flex. I

imagine them holding me down, strong and unyielding. He slips off his shoes and then shoves his pants down, undressing until he's completely naked in front of me.

Then he starts to stroke himself as he watches me.

"Fuck, that's hot," I breathe.

He doesn't answer, but the corners of his lips turn up just a little.

I can't stop looking at the way his hand moves, the way his muscles tense. I can see how hard he is, his cock veiny and purple, precum leaking from the tip.

"Please," I gasp, unable to stop myself. I can't hold back. It was hard enough when I was alone. With Aiden right before me, I know I can't stop myself.

He kneels on the bed, still watching me. "Not yet."

I groan, willing myself to stop, but I can't. I can't stop touching myself, can't stop imagining everything I want Aiden to do to me. "Aiden, please. I need you, god, please—"

"Keep going. I want to watch you, Rose. But *don't* come until I tell you to."

I twist against the bed, the pleasure and agony of holding back making my entire body tense. I keep feeling the rush within me, harder and faster each time, and pulling back when I want more is torture.

The tease of the impending orgasm I can never have is driving me crazy.

I can feel my legs shaking. I just want more, but Aiden doesn't say anything. I wish he would say yes. Better yet, I wish he'd turn me over and fuck me until I scream into the sheets.

"Please," I whimper again.

It's the only thing I can say. I can feel tears stinging my eyes. I feel raw and exposed, so close to bliss but holding myself back from free falling into it. My fingers work my oversensitive clit, circling and stopping, circling and stopping.

Finally, Aiden gives in, his eyes dark as they watch me.

"Do it," he grunts. "Come for me, Rose."

I don't wait. As soon as he says it, my body is already following the command, slipping over the edge immediately.

Aiden drives inside me right when I do, groaning as I squeeze him tighter than I ever could have thought possible.

I keep coming as he starts to fuck me, ramming into me, sliding perfectly.

I'm so wet that I can hear it, hear his cock slick from my body. The pleasure sparks in me like electricity as he slams into me again and again.

"Aiden," I gasp, the remnants of my orgasm fluttering through me.

But even as I start to come down from the high, my body is greedy for more. I can feel myself gripping him, pulling him in. Aiden groans as he thrusts into me. The sound of his pelvis slapping against mine drowns out every other sound, and I tilt my hips up to him and feel him hit deeper within me, the impact so hard it almost brings me to tears again.

Aiden snaps his hips, driving hard into me, and I come again. The rush almost brings me off the bed, my hips rising, my body shaking.

"Fuck! Yes!"

I cry out, and Aiden is suddenly turning me over. It's almost rough, the way I bounce on the mattress as he turns me.

I barely get my arms beneath me to hold my body up before he's reaching for something. I hear the sound of plastic snapping, and then something cool drips over my skin as he slicks me, preparing my ass. My legs shake with anticipation and I try to catch my breath, hoping I can hold myself up long enough.

Aiden slides a finger along my ass, his other hand pressing against my back. "You want this, little dove?"

"Please," I whimper, still breathing heavily from the orgasm. "Aiden, I want you. Please."

"You like being fucked like this? You're so wet, fuck—"

"Yes. I love it." I'm almost begging now. "God, I want you so much."

"God?" He chuckles darkly. "You should know by now that I'm a devil, not a god."

He slides his finger into my asshole, teasing me as he coats the tight ring of muscles with lube.

"You are a fucking devil," I groan. "So why do I love you so much?"

"Because you're an angel, and I've tempted you to sin," he teases, drawing out his words as he slowly works a second finger into my ass. He starts to move them, stretching me open, and my toes curl as I hiss out a breath.

"Good girl," he praises gruffly. "You want me to fuck you in the ass? Is that what you want?"

My legs are shaking, my whole body attuned to everything he's doing. "Yes," I whisper.

"Then beg me."

The words pour out of me at his command, as if they've just been waiting for him to give it. "Please, Aiden. Fucking *please*. I need this. I want your cock, I want you inside me—"

In a sudden smooth motion, his fingers disappear from my ass, making my words break off.

He replaces them with his cock a second later, forcing his way into my back entrance. He opened me up a little, but the sensations are still enough to nearly knock me over. All the breath is punched from my lungs, the sudden feeling of fullness making me tense and open at the same time. I want more, and I focus on the pleasure that's building inside me, letting myself loosen enough for him as he plunges inside.

I hold myself up as Aiden fucks me, his cock hitting hard as he claims me. He's slow, each slide painfully long.

Pleasure is already sparking through my veins again, and I wonder how many times he can make me come like this. I reach down to tease my clit as he slides in, circling as he goes slow.

"None of that," he says, grabbing my wrist and pulling my hand away. "Not yet."

"What?" I practically moan. "Why not? I need—"

"Not yet," he says, holding my wrist. "My girl comes when I say she can come. My *wife* comes when I tell her to."

Aiden holds my wrist, pulling my arm behind my back. He reaches for my other arm, and I feel the stretch in my shoulders, a pleasant burn that matches the maddeningly slow push of his cock inside me.

My pussy throbs, my entire body pulsing with need. I have to touch myself, crave the feeling of it as he fucks my ass, but I can't. Aiden holds me in place, his pace still slow. He starts to go faster slowly, barely anything at first, and then harder.

Soon, he's slapping hard against me, his cock filling me roughly with each thrust. I moan as he keeps me trapped in place, fucking me harder, pushing me to the edge where pleasure and pain are indistinguishable.

"Please," I beg, twisting in his grip. "Please, Aiden, let me—"

"Do it. Touch yourself. Make yourself come, baby."

As he speaks, Aiden releases one of my hands, and I slide it between my legs immediately. I can feel my clit spasm against my fingers, and I moan again, shaking with need. I wish he could fuck my ass and my pussy at the

same time. I want more from him, want him everywhere. I want him to fill me up so much I can't think of anything else.

Maybe Aiden knows what I want. He pulls out and turns me over suddenly, flipping me onto my back. The sudden change of orientation makes me gasp, and then my back hits the bed as he pushes my hands away. He hooks my legs over his shoulders and shoves his way back inside.

Staring down at me as he fucks me, he pushes his fingers into my mouth.

It's not the same hand he used to prep my ass, but I can taste my arousal on his fingertips. I pant as I slide my tongue over his fingers, sucking on them as he holds my gaze. I can see the desire in his eyes, the darkness there as he watches me.

Then Aiden pulls his hand away and sinks his fingers into my pussy. I tense up, crying out as he starts to finger me. His hand moves impossibly fast as he slams into me, my ass full as he fucks me.

I can barely focus, my eyes threatening to roll back in pleasure as he thrusts harder. I'm panting on the bed, fingers digging into the sheets.

"That's right," he groans. "These both belong to me. They always fucking will. You take me so well, little dove. So fucking greedy for me."

When he curls his fingers, I finally come, tensing around his cock in my ass and the thick digits he has inside my pussy. I scream out, the orgasm hitting like a brick wall, harder than anything I've ever felt. It's rough and primal, just as hard as the sex we're having.

Aiden finishes with me, shouting as he slams his shaft deep inside me, filling me up with his release.

In the aftermath, he pulls me into his arms. His cock is still inside me, still twitching as we both let the pleasure slowly recede.

"I love you," he whispers against my neck. His breath is hot, his mouth closing over my skin. I can feel him suck it, feel his teeth scrape.

I shiver at the sensation and say, "I love you."

I can feel it in every part of my heart and soul. It's truer than anything I've said to him before.

We had a rough journey to get here, one I thought at one point would never end. I was so sure that we would never get over the wounds of our past, never reach anything real. I thought it was doomed from the beginning.

All the things we've faced, the lies and misunderstandings, have all threatened to kill what we have. I didn't know if our love could survive it, much less whether *we'd* survive. There were times we could have died.

Times when we could have been separated forever.

That's all over now. It's over, and we're still together. We will be for the rest of our lives.

Both exactly where we're supposed to be.

Epilogue

Sparks flash before my eyes, blinding white spots dancing in my vision as Aiden's cock hits just the right spot.

"Fuck," I groan, my legs shaking. I'm not sure how much longer I'll last.

The kitchen counter is cold, my breasts pressed against the marble. Every move makes a sound as my skin slips against it. I try to hold on to something, but all I can do is press my palms against the hard surface.

Ever since Aiden found out I was pregnant—ever since he almost lost me—he hasn't held anything back. He makes me breakfast, offering me whatever I want even though cravings haven't set in yet. He's been protective too, vetting all his guards twice and adding extra ones during the times I'm home alone.

He's been waiting on me hand and foot, practically, making sure I'm always comfortable and safe. Always close to him.

He's been hungry as hell for me too. I catch him watching me when I reach for a glass, watching my shirt rise up a little when I stretch. He watches me with dark eyes when I pull my hair up, or roll my shoulders when they're tense.

With the way I feel about him and the way he feels about me, all it takes is a little touch, a look. Anything small can set us both off.

That's how we ended up naked in the kitchen, Aiden pressing me against the counter as he fucks me from behind.

I have one leg up, the other barely planted on the floor. My hips are pulled up for him, his hands on my ass as he slides his cock into my wet pussy. I'm tight for him, pulling him in as my walls clench.

Aiden plays with my clit as he fucks me, switching from fast to slow

strokes. I can't keep up, can't establish a rhythm. It's maddeningly uneven but perfect, leaving me so close to the edge one second and too far the next.

"Aiden, please," I groan.

He slows, and I groan again, pressing my forehead against the counter. He laughs, the rumbling sound going straight to my clit.

"What do you want, little dove?"

"Please. I want you to fuck me harder." I breathe raggedly, reaching back for him. "Faster."

"I don't know. Doesn't sound like you're sure," he says, pushing in harder when he says *sure*.

I gasp, my voice catching in my throat. I groan again in frustration, my arms shaking as I push myself up a little. I can feel him teasing my clit, rubbing slowly, then faster.

"Fuck me harder," I finally say, my voice more firm. "And after you make me come, I want you to fuck my ass. You can do whatever you want to me."

Aiden laughs, but it sounds darkly promising. "Is that so? You're feeling brave today, aren't you?"

He moves faster though, playing with my clit as he fucks me. His cock slides in and out of me perfectly. I'm so wet that there's no resistance at all, despite his massive size.

Aiden's hand slides along my back, and I press against him, heat building low in my belly.

"That feels good," I pant out. "Right there. Oh—"

On the counter beside me, my phone rings.

I blink, glancing over at it. For a fleeting moment, I wonder what it could be, but that thought leaves quickly. I don't really care right now.

But Aiden grins, his tone devilish as he stops thrusting. "Answer it."

I look over my shoulder, my brow furrowed as my cheeks heat. "What?"

"Answer it. If you can," he adds, his voice dropping as he challenges me.

He's got to be fucking kidding. How the hell am I supposed to answer my phone like this? I sound like I just ran a marathon, my voice breathless and shaky.

But Aiden arches a brow, daring. I know he's being playful, half joking—but I don't want to back down. He likes pushing my buttons, and I like pushing his, and there's a competitiveness between us that's led to some of my most mind blowing orgasms.

So I stare back at him and reach for my phone.

"Hello?"

Aiden grinds against me as I answer the call, and I have to stop the end of the word from becoming a moan. I bite my tongue and glare at him, but the heat in my gut is tantalizing. I want to hang up and give in, but instead, I drag in oxygen through my nose as someone speaks on the other end of the call.

"Hi, is this Rose O'Reilly?"

"Yes, that's me."

Aiden slides out halfway and presses slowly back inside, and I bite my lip, almost drawing blood.

"Wonderful. Hello, Rose. I'm Danielle James, and I'm calling from the Smith Gallery in Boston."

"Oh! Um, hi."

"I'm calling today because we have an opening for an assistant to our curator, and we think you'd be a great fit."

My eyes widen, and I try to grab the edge of the counter. Aiden is still moving, still teasing me with his hand as he slowly slips in and out of me. I have to use all my control to stop myself from moaning.

"I—I'd be thrilled to meet you, then," I say, stammering as Aiden thrusts hard into me. I take a second to swallow back the pleasure before I speak. "I'd love to hear about the opportunity."

Aiden's cock pulses inside me, and I blink, trying to center myself. The woman is speaking again, and I have to focus.

"Fantastic. Well, let me talk to the director, and I'll send you an email so we can set up an interview."

"That would be great, thank you."

"Sure thing. Is this the best number I can reach you at?"

"It is," I say, cutting off the end of my sentence when Aiden thrusts into me again.

He's making this impossible. I pray that the woman is almost done.

"Great. We'll be in touch soon," she says.

"Thank you so much," I tell her. "It was good to hear from you. I'll talk to you soon!"

I hang up, and Aiden pulls back and slams into me. I gasp, finally letting myself cry out as loudly as I want. He chuckles darkly, pulling out long enough to turn me and lift me up onto the counter, lining my thighs up on either side of his body.

"Did you do this?" I ask before he can slide back inside. My heart is pounding, both from the impending orgasm and from excitement about the phone call.

His eyebrows rise, but he shrugs. "I didn't do much."

"Aiden."

"You're more than qualified," he says. "You'll be great at it. And I've already made sure you'll have lots of maternity leave."

I laugh once, short and breathless. "I can't believe you."

I pull him to me and kiss him. I'm giddy from the news, overwhelmed by the opportunity and the love I feel for this man, for what he did for me. I know he did it because he understands that I want this more than anything else, that it's always been my dream.

Aiden runs a hand along my thigh and slips into me again. I sigh, breathy and content, and let him pull me closer. He fills me completely, hard and sure.

"You did pretty well keeping your shit together on the phone," he growls, heat and amusement gleaming in his eyes. "I think I need to do a better job of making you fall apart for me."

I gasp when Aiden pulls my hips toward him, driving into me. He thrusts a few times, until I'm slick and panting. I can feel tension building in me again, my muscles straining and everything in me waiting for more.

I hold on to his shoulders as he fucks me, his cock slamming into me and making me clench around him. I dig my nails into his skin as he groans, his hand sliding across my lower back.

"Fuck, Rose. God, you're tight."

I gasp when he hits just the right spot, sparking a wave of pleasure inside me. Aiden pulls my legs farther up, over his shoulders. I let my body fall back onto the counter, the marble cool against my skin. I barely hit the countertop before he starts to move again, fucking me like he's trying to prove a point.

I can feel my orgasm building, feel the pleasure growing inside me. I hold on to Aiden's arms as he starts to move faster, groaning as I tighten around him.

When it finally hits me, I cry out and arch my back off the counter. I tighten around Aiden as he comes too, filling me with heat as I shake. The orgasm rolls through me, making every muscle in my body tense and release.

I breathe heavily once I get my bearings again, blinking as I watch Aiden

pull back. When he slides out of me, it feels like a loss. He grins, and I slowly push myself up.

I don't know if I can walk. My legs are so shaky. Aiden grins as he helps me off the counter, his arms strong. He lifts me with ease and lets my feet hit the ground, a towel ready in his hand. He smooths it over my body as I catch my breath.

"That live up to your expectations?"

"More than that," I say, laughing. I push my hair away from my face, combing my fingers through it.

Aiden's smile is more fond than mischievous this time. He takes a strand of hair from my face and tucks it behind my ear, his hand careful. "You flatter me, wife."

I smile and rest my hands against his chest as he holds my hips, standing before me at ease and happy. This is happier than I've ever been, and I can't believe I'm here with him now. This was everything I used to dream of, everything I thought I'd never have.

"Husband," I say, enjoying the word on my tongue. "No flattery. Just the truth."

Aiden leans down to kiss me, slow and soft, but before we can get started on round two, his phone rings. He pulls back, sighing, and I laugh.

"Maybe I should blow you while you're on the phone. It would only be fair."

Aiden smirks, reaching across the counter for his phone. He doesn't seem to hate the idea at all. "You think so?"

I slide to the ground, kneeling on the towel I dropped, and look up at him. "I think so."

His eyes flash, something dark and ravenous in them. I let him lean back against the counter as I slide my hands along his thighs, waiting. I won't touch him until he's on the phone.

"Hello?"

He answers the phone, and I smile as I hear the muffled sound of the voice on the other end. I'm pretty sure it's one of his brothers.

I start to move my hand up his leg, closer to his cock. I can't wait to see how quickly I can get him hard. I'm ready to tease him as much as I can, just at the right time.

This will be fun.

Before I can do anything, I see his expression change. The playfulness in

Aiden's eyes drains away, going from amused to cold. There's something sharp in his features, something that isn't desire.

I freeze, my hands pausing on his legs. I don't know what's going on, but I know it's bad.

Aiden nods and I slowly get to my feet, waiting, my hand on his arm. My mind races with possibilities. Is it retribution for Dmitri? Maybe the Assembly has changed their minds? Or one of his brothers is sick? Injured?

The call ends after a few more words. Aiden hangs up, his jaw tense, and shakes his head as he looks at me.

"That was Connor. Willow is gone."

Epilogue Two

It's cold outside.

I took one of his jackets. I knew I'd need it. Boston is chilly this time of year. It's getting even colder now, the sun falling toward the horizon.

The side streets are empty. The chill feels even more present here, where the buildings make a wind tunnel. I pull the jacket tighter. I wish it didn't smell like him, like earthy pine and some spice I can't place.

I could wish for a lot of things, but wishing never got me far.

Wishing isn't going to save me from him.

Connor.

I keep looking over my shoulder, expecting someone behind me, but I don't see anyone. I don't see *him*.

I have a pretty good knowledge of how mafia men keep their houses secure. I learned well when Dmitri had me. That second year with him, I tried to escape once.

But I was stupid back then. I didn't know how to live on my own, much less survive after attempting to escape. I was caught within hours, brought right back to Dmitri. He wasn't happy. But I learned from that attempt, and it taught me where to look.

I knew where to look for openings in the security when I decided I had to leave Connor's house. I was smart.

But now that I'm free, where the hell am I supposed to go?

Everyone wants me for something. I know that. They all want to use me, now that my husband is dead. *Dmitri*, I remind myself. His name. He made me call him only "husband." He liked how it made me sound, subservient and less than him.

Now that he's dead, I should use his name as much as I can.

I cross another street, huddling deeper into the oversized jacket. I stick my hands in the pockets and feel what little cash I have on me. It's not much. I only took what I had, what I could grab before I left.

This is crazy. It's dangerous, but I can't just stay with Connor. I hug myself and try to bite back tears.

I dip my left hand into my pocket, far down into the bumpy seam. There's a handful of pills, little ovals I'm budgeting. I grab one and push it into my mouth, palm flat against my lips. I'm so used to the action that by now, I don't really notice the burn in my throat or the way the pill sticks.

I'm too focused on what I know is coming.

Someone is going to come for me. Someone will punish me, eventually. If I don't keep going, keep trying to stay away, the world I left will catch up with me. It will find me and make me pay.

So, I can't stop.

I just have to keep surviving. I have to stay alive, free, until I figure a way out of this mess.

I cut across a street, looking at the lamp on the other side. I tell myself I just have to make it there, right below the yellow light.

I hear a shout.

"Hey! Watch where you're going!"

My heart contracts painfully in my chest. I can feel it climb up to my throat, threatening to jump right out. I curl my hand into my jacket and walk faster. I don't think the man recognizes me. He was just yelling at me for jaywalking, but being called out to makes my pulse roar.

How long can I stay hidden?

Where can I even go where I'll be safe?

I don't know if anything is safe. I can't imagine Boston will ever be safe for me. But I don't know how far they'll chase me.

I have to figure something out. Something that's not Connor.

He said he would marry me.

I can't even comprehend it. He's an O'Reilly. He helped kill my husband. Kill Dmitri. He stormed the house when I was tied up in the basement after they took down some of Dmitri's men.

He was the one that helped cut the rope that bound me.

I barely remember much about that day. I remember Dmitri drugging me. It wasn't pretty. He liked to make things bad when he could, liked to make

me wish I had never been born. He was more than just a bastard, just a bad husband. He was a monster. He liked making people suffer. He liked making *me* suffer.

So I've tried to block out a lot of that day. Part of me doesn't want to relive those moments with Dmitri, his abuse, his horror.

But I can remember the O'Reilly brothers. I remember Aiden, and the way he held Rose close to him. God, I hope she's happy. She seemed happy at her wedding. She probably *was* happy before Dmitri made me wreck everything for her.

The other brothers were there the day Dmitri died. They all sort of blended together to me—or at least, most of them did.

Not Connor.

For some reason, I remember his eyes. They're brown, soft. I feel like there's so much in them. When he helped me out of the basement, there was anger in their depths, but there was also sadness. Like he was sorry I was there in the first place.

It makes no sense. He doesn't even know me.

I've seen him sometimes at gatherings where Assembly members were. I thought he was handsome, charming. The kind of man I hoped Dmitri would be, before I married him. Before I realized he was a psychopath.

Dmitri made my skin crawl.

Connor was always different. I have fragmented memories of him, especially at the gala where I first met Rose. I saw him talking to Violet, that girl who's friends with the O'Reilly family. He was smiling. He seemed to stay on the edges of the group, though, like he didn't really belong.

I felt like we were a little alike when I saw him. But that wasn't true.

It isn't.

He's free, and I'm not. He's always had a family. I've only had the right to be sold off, and then isolated. But I saw Connor at that gala and I imagined I was Violet. I imagined I was a happy woman, enjoying myself and talking to a handsome man.

That will never happen.

I take another side street, avoiding another dirty puddle. God, it's so sad it's almost funny. How far have I fallen to get to this point?

I had happiness, once. I had dreams. I was going to do things.

Then my father gave me to Dmitri, and my life ended. Dmitri was vicious and brutal, and he never even tried to hide it. He was bad from the beginning,

although I pretended for a while that maybe I could change him.

But the more I tried to be a good wife, the more I tried to appease him, the worse it was.

Dmitri didn't give a shit about me. He wanted me for my virginity, and once he'd used me, all I was good for was a fuck, if he even used me for that. Mostly, he just liked to use me as a punching bag or an ashtray.

Would Connor do that?

My heart tells me no, but how can I trust it? I don't know a thing about Connor anyway, besides his brothers and the way I saw him from afar. For all I know, he's not as charming as he seems. Maybe he's a monster too.

But he would be a prettier monster than Dmitri.

I don't know if that's all I can ask for from life at this point, but I don't want to give in. I don't want to settle for the lesser of two evils. I'd rather run and try to live first. I have to try, at least. I have to hope for more.

Maybe Connor is handsome, but it doesn't matter anymore. It doesn't matter how he looks, or that he and his brothers freed me from my nightmare of a marriage, because I'm not truly free. Not now.

I was already trapped in a marriage once. It nearly destroyed me.

I won't let myself be trapped again.

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